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Insider's guide to the latest developments
in the independent schools sector



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To book your place please contact enquiries@navigatorlaw.co.uk or 03333 2400 308.



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We are again delighted to be sponsoring this Business Insider Independent Schools Supplement.

Navigator has had a close affinity with the independent schools sector since our inception in 2011 and we have been delivering independent school-specific solutions in employment law, health & safety and HR since 2012. As we start 2020, the significant financial challenges facing independent schools do not seem to have abated.

As stated in a previous article, we don't have to search too far back to uncover the closure of independent schools in Scotland. Keil School in 2000, Rannoch School in 2002, St Margarets School for Girls in 2010, The Hamilton School in Aberdeen in 2014 (admittedly under different circumstances), Beaconsfield in 2018 and Craigholme in 2019. That is six independent schools in less than nineteen years; one every three or so years. Of the most recent closures, Craigholme's demise and eventual closure was partially postponed through a short spell as part of the Kelvinside stable but Beaconsfield's very rapid decline was dramatic to all in the sector.

One only has to read the well thought through posts by John Edward at SCIS and more concerningly, the ill-informed responses, to understand that the landscape for independent schools remains very challenging. Therefore, it may be likely that the next couple of years will yield one or two more unfortunate closures. Perhaps, one or two schools merge or some smaller schools are subsumed into larger more financially viable institutions. It may have been the case that the sector was operating with excess capacity and what is happening just now is simply a recalibration. What is clear is that schools will have to fight hard for their potential markets; both paying parents as well as existing and prospective staff.

However, to finish on a positive note, those survivors are likely to be fitter, stronger and better able to deal with the challenges of the next decade.

“Changes are adding to the financial pressures on schools as implications of the Barclay Review are teased out”

WELCOME to Scottish Business Insider's first Independent Schools Supplement of 2020.

This is published at a time when the sector in Scotland is still facing challenges, particularly on the regulatory front.

A series of changes are adding to the financial pressures on schools as the implications of policy introduced after the Barclay Review are teased out.

In this issue we cover in some depth the schools' case about the wider contribution they make to the communities in which they are based and wider society.

Many who work and support the schools will hope that 2020 is the year when governments begin to see things differently and recognise that wider contribution in their policies. One such

contribution that is little thought about is on health and wellbeing in a society which has a growing battle against obesity (page 10).

We have also asked leading figures in and around independent schools to gaze into their crystal ball and predict what lies ahead and how the schools can best equip themselves for the changes to come. (page 8).

As with offices and other workplaces, schools are looking more carefully at the environment of their buildings and how that helps to encourage learning (page 13).

We hope you enjoy this issue and we would be delighted to hear any feedback on it.



businessinsider

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OUR SCHOOLS BENEFIT ALL.. NOT JUST A PRIVILEGED FEW

THE GOVERNMENT should realise how important a contribution that Scotland's independent schools make, according to Dorothy MacGinty, headmistress at Kilgraston School in Perthshire.

"There are many attractions to living in Scotland – career opportunities, friendly people, outdoor pursuits, history and excellent education," she says.

"Much of that exceptional tutoring is to be found in our independent schools, which cater for more than 30,000 UK and international pupils and generate more than £300m a year for the Scottish economy.

"But the Government still wishes to threaten the revenue stream by reducing the independent sector's business rate tax relief"

An 80 per cent loss of rate subsidy as of April – the result of the government-commissioned Barclay Review recommendations – would leave many private schools unable to share facilities and staff without cost at a time when extra-curricular provision is at a premium.

This could result in unaffordable fee increases – especially worrying for those receiving bursaries.

"The loss of even one pupil in 30 from the independent sector would cost the Scottish taxpayer more than the rates increase proposed by the bill," adds MacGinty. "Private schools are not bastions of privilege. They are community organisations that affect all"

Jonathan Anderson, headmaster at Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh, agrees: "It has been said that the independent school sector needs to do more to justify its charitable status but I think there are a couple of things we need to remember. Independent schools

have supported their local communities for decades – whether that's through boosting local employment, sharing their facilities with the public or offering bursaries."

Strathallan School near Perth, for example, has given away more than £7m in bursaries in the last five years and around 20 per cent of the school roll comprises pupils in receipt of bursary support.

Business rate relief is not the only financial concern, however. Amongst other spending, the absorption of a teachers' pension

The loss of even one pupil in 30 from the independent school sector would cost the Scottish taxpayer more than the rates increase proposed

Dorothy MacGinty of Kilgraston School

contribution increase is expected to cost each school hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Dave Roberts, business support director and independent schools advisor at accountants Chiene + Tait, has seen a spike in requests for advice about mitigating shortfalls in income and future planning.

He says: "Lots of schools are already having to cut costs to ensure they can continue to operate effectively. Should independent schools ever lose their charitable status it would make the future financially unviable for many within the sector."

Gareth McKnight, managing director at

Navigator Employment Law, has witnessed high senior management turnover in Scotland's private schools in the last 18 months - many involving unplanned, short-term appointments.

Noting this trend, McKnight and his team have partnered with the Scottish Council for Independent Schools' recruitment and selection steering group to offer support.

He says: "The main out-turn will be clear guidance for the sector on how to run successful recruitment campaigns. Short-stay new employees can be financially expensive and can inflict significant senior management time costs."

Sustainability is increasingly relevant to the independent school sector. Dollar Academy in Stirlingshire has made it a particular focus for the year ahead, aiming to futureproof the school while preparing pupils for the modern workplace.

Rector Ian Munro says: "We need to engage and educate our organisation about sustainability, from issues connected to our climate to those that deal with poverty and inequality. We also need to ensure education is future smart and that we are equipping pupils with the skills and competencies needed to succeed in years to come.

"We are hosting our first UK summit tackling sustainability and education, inviting delegates to discuss how schools across Europe can address the climate crisis.

"Organised in partnership with the University of Cambridge and designed for school leaders, policy makers, politicians and business leaders, the central theme is 'disrupting education for a sustainable future.'" ■



IN BRIEF

Academy's in line for award hat-trick

THE GLASGOW Academy has been recognised in the 2020 TES (formerly known as the Times Educational Supplement) Independent School Awards shortlist.

Founded in 1845 and regarded as the oldest continuously fully independent school in the city, it is in the running for Prep School of the Year, Senior School of the Year and Marketing Campaign of the Year.

Rector Matthew Pearce said: "It is a terrific achievement and a well-deserved recognition for the hard work, commitment and sense of teamwork amongst our pupils, staff and wider school community."

The winners will be revealed at a ceremony in London in February.



St Columba's deputy head Antonia Berry

Machine learning

FOLLOWING the appointment of a virtual headteacher in Aberdeenshire state schools, private educators are questioning whether the classroom may eventually become completely virtual.

The role was created to develop the local council's corporate parenting plan.

At St Columba's School, deputy rector Antonia Berry said: "There is little doubt that the internet has changed the way in which we teach. But the teacher's job is so much more complicated than simply delivering knowledge.

"A really effective teacher knows the pupils in his or her classroom, understands what motivates them, knows the right level and kind of encouragement that is required, can address particular weaknesses, challenge, support and nurture. This cannot be achieved 'in the cloud'.

"Incredible things can be achieved with the digital resources now available – that is, if they are placed in the hands of an effective teacher."



Pupils at Kilgraston will hear from business women

Future women leaders inspired

KILGRASTON School in Perth has announced speakers for its 2020 Women and Business lecture programme, aimed at students making their subject choices and beyond.

Pupils will hear from a procurator fiscal and – due to the popularity of STEM subjects at the school – Professor Kim Dale, associate dean at the University of Dundee's School of Life Sciences. A professor of photodermatology and a consultant dermatologist will also visit.

Kilgraston's head Dorothy MacGinty is a strong ambassador for the role of women in the workplace.

She said: "For pupils to hear from women at the very top of their specialist field is, I firmly believe, a rare and invaluable opportunity. It may well change the course of a young life," she says.

During 2019, students



Kilgraston head Dorothy MacGinty

heard from a local entrepreneur, Daily Telegraph columnist Judith Woods and two accountants from UK

tax specialist Saffery Champness, which subsequently signed up several Kilgraston pupils for work experience. ■

For pupils to hear from women at the top of their specialist field is a rare and invaluable opportunity which may well change the course of a young life



Kilgraston will host Women and Business lectures

IN BRIEF

Bricks of the trade



Pupils learn from ROVOP team

TEAMS FROM Aberdeen's St Margaret's School for Girls are aiming high in the FIRST LEGO League with the help of mentors from global subsea robotics company ROVOP.

The international competition – an alliance between not-for-profit FIRST and the LEGO Group – encourages students to apply STEM subjects to solve a real-world problem using the world-famous toy blocks.

David Lamont, CEO at ROVOP, says: "The inaugural LEGO League aims to encourage diversity in the robotics industry, getting youngsters involved in STEM subjects at school age. ROVOP recognises that the development of young talent is vital for the future of the robotics industry and we are delighted to be involved in this fantastic initiative."

St Margaret's hit the northern heights

ST MARGARET'S School for Girls in Aberdeen has been revealed as the Scottish Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Sunday Times Schools Guide. The authoritative publication, Parent Power, ranks the highest-achieving schools across the UK, according to recent exam results.

More than 90 per cent of St. Margaret's Higher and Advanced Higher entries secured an A or B while in National 5s, 69 per cent of papers got A grades.

Parent Power editor Alastair McCall said: "St Margaret's triumph is proof that biggest is not always best. Its academic fortunes have been transformed in recent years to stand where they are today."

Anna Tomlinson, head teacher at St Margaret's School for Girls, added: "It's about individuals doing as well as they can and us finding out the best way to support them to do that."



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Gareth McKnight

Managing Director, Navigator Law

"I believe that the future for the sector as a whole is positive. I am a father and I hold the type of education afforded by these schools in very high regard. I think they are offering something more than a simple business transaction.

"However, they are in the main all multi-million-pound businesses. Therefore having a robust plan, putting the right people in place and providing the right training and development to those that show a keenness are all essential for futureproofing. Often – with some fine tuning along the way – the rest will take care of itself.

"We are witnessing Scottish schools attempt to align their next three, five and seven – and in one case 10 – year plans. In a bid to support them, we ran a financial futureproofing conference for independent schools last spring. Its success only stoked the fire and in autumn we ran more in-depth sessions on particular issues, such as fit-for-purpose staffing structures, changing pension schemes and changing pay structures. We are delighted to be repeating them in early 2020."

Ali Kinge

Headmistress, Ardvreck School

"There is no doubt that the greatest challenge to the boarding independent school sector is the uncertainty over Brexit and the impact upon EU pupils coming to study in the UK.

"I am confident that there will be no restriction of movement for study. The independent sector will continue to play a significant role in supporting the UK and, in our case, Scotland's semi-rural economy."

Alex Hems

Head, St George's School for Girls

"We know that the working world of the future might look quite different. We cannot predict exactly what that will mean for the students of today but employers are clear that what they want to see is creativity, flexibility and the ability to collaborate.

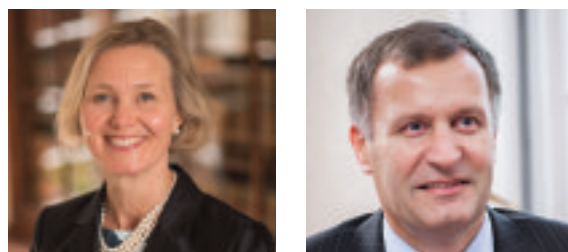
"We aim to cultivate these attributes in our girls at every stage in their school career. Our 'yes she can' approach, embodied in the abundance of strong female role models and the range of opportunities, helps inspire every girl to find the path that is right for her.

"We hosted 200 young people for the St George's Model United Nations conference. This event, led by our senior girls, was a great opportunity for younger ones to get involved as well, learning and soaking up the atmosphere.

"In addition, many students have taken part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, Young Enterprise, debating, Combined Cadet Force, productions and concerts. In all of these areas of school life, the leaders and role models

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What does the future hold for Scotland's independent schools – as educational establishments and as businesses? Here are the views of key players, from parents and teachers to business advisers



Clockwise from top left: Gareth McKnight, Ali Kinge, Dave Roberts, Jonathan Anderson, Matthew Pearce and Alex Hems

are all girls. The message is 'yes she can', at every turn."

Dave Roberts

Business Support Director and Independent School Adviser, Chiene + Tait

"We are seeing a trend for independent schools to act more like a business with an updated business plan and long-term financial forecasts to prepare for any major overhauls or changes.

"Another area of focus should be on school boards – traditionally many of these have consisted primarily of academics and parents. But we are now seeing more business people and others from a mixed background share their experiences and knowledge.

"That can only be a positive development for futureproofing the sector."

Matthew Pearce

Rector, The Glasgow Academy

"It's more difficult now than ever to predict what the future will hold but one thing that is clear is that global citizenship is a key element in the modern world.

"That is why we are part of a group working on establishing an international network of schools where we can share best practice from around the globe. As well as opening further opportunities for our pupils, broadening our horizons in this way will strengthen our academic institution for years to come.

"In the last 12 months we have facilitated visits from staff and pupils from America, Australia, China, Hong Kong, Sweden and India. With the last two we have developed strong relationships that have led to working together to explore big questions in education – particularly in terms of how we best support learning and wellbeing at school and at home."

Jonathan Anderson

Headmaster, Merchiston Castle

"We recognise the rapid advances in technology that will ultimately change the career prospects of our pupils. What we are focusing on is ensuring that the boys develop core skills and competencies that can be applied to a range of different scenarios in the workplace. For example, we promote creativity and imagination in STEM subjects that will aid their adaptability when faced with new challenges as technology advances.

"Developing our international portfolio is important to ensure that Merchiston as a business continues to thrive. In 2018 we opened our first overseas institute in Shenzhen. Built for 1,200 pupils, this was a significant step in exploring international relationships and has already had a positive impact by welcoming additional income. In turn, this has increased the number of bursaries we can offer and strengthened academic resources."



Kelvinside is encouraging pupils to view challenges differently

NU VISION IS A MODEL FOR MODERN SCHOOLS

AIMING to keep up with a fast-paced jobs market and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs, the UK's first full-time innovation school opened in October – and already more than 50 students have selected the new subject option.

In partnership with Boston-based innovation school NuVu, Glasgow's Kelvinside Academy launched the NuVu education model in its 2017 summer schools. Combining traditional STEM subjects with creativity, art, design, presentation, networking, negotiation and collaboration, the immersive yet flexible programme of learning is now fully embedded in the Kelvinside curriculum.

David Miller, director of the NuVu innovation school, believes it is a beacon for what schools of the future could look like. He said: "The education system hasn't changed in more than 40 years but the world has. I believe the new innovation school will resolve a huge tension in education – everyone knows the model has to change but until now, there's been no viable alternative. We believe this powerful learning model could and should become mainstream and we hope the innovation school will serve as a case study for government and policy makers

The passion is in the process, not the final product. This is so different from conventional learning where all the weight is on the result

David Miller, director of NuVu Innovation school

of what can be achieved."

As well as demonstrating what a new national curriculum could look like, Miller claims his school could provide a solution to teacher shortages. Here, pupils learn by doing and use industry-standard tools to make their visions a reality. So, instead of being taught passively by a teacher, industry and academic experts are on hand as mentors to help them find their own way through the process.

Miller continues: "The current system intensifies the idea that people leave school as a success or a failure and for some it can take many years to recover from this binary view. Our model encourages a growth mindset. There are always ways to improve."

The process is based on an architectural design studio, says Miller. "The children are given a loosely framed challenge at the start of a two-week sprint," he explains.

"They will then go on to ideate, sketch, prototype, and iterate, making design decisions and leveraging a whole range of technical, design and meta-skills until they reach their final finessed prototype. The passion is in the process, not the final product.

"This is so different from conventional learning where all weight is placed on the result rather than how the pupil got there – which is in fact the interesting part."

"Another fascinating aspect of NuVu is the moral and ethical dimension to each challenge. Pupils are given the chance to work on projects that have a real-world impact," he adds. "When learning has a real purpose, amazing things happen."

The wheels are in motion to get nearby schools involved in Kelvinside's unique learning environment, whilst the possibility of NuVu hubs in local authorities across the UK is being explored. The model will be used for teacher training throughout Scotland and in corporate teambuilding experiences.

"The design, technical and meta-skills being developed and enhanced in NuVu are a huge differentiator for students when making applications to universities – and are exactly what a range of Scottish businesses and academics are telling us they need," says Miller. "This is just the beginning, but the momentum is with us." ■



KEEP YOUR BRAIN ON THE BALL

CURRENTLY many pupils are sitting mock exams or have already received results and – according to new evidence – physical activity could significantly boost their success rates. In other words, the more a student moves, the better they will revise.

The growing evidence linking physical activity and academic performance suggests both immediate and long-term benefits. Almost instantly after engaging in an activity, children are better able to concentrate on classroom tasks. Meanwhile, research from the University of Granada in Spain says youngsters who exercise at least three nights per week have more grey matter in areas of the brain linked to reading and verbal communication.

This neuroscientific evidence has sparked significant interest at a co-educational private school in Moray well-known for its outdoor focus. Gordonstoun School has pioneered a new course, Active Revision. Running every Easter, it intersperses study with physical activity and 'brain food' to boost performance.

Sessions in English, language, mathematics and science run alongside activities that demand movement, skill and coordination – yoga, wall climbing, tennis, hiking and bushcraft, for example – to stimulate other

A healthy body and mind that is well rested and well fed can support your brain better than one that is exhausted

Gordonstoun governor Dr Eve Poole

areas of the brain. And it appears to work – 60 per cent of 2019 students achieved two grades higher than their mock exams, with the majority of the remainder achieving one grade higher. In addition, parents commented on an improvement in the general wellbeing of their children.

"Studying is only one part of exam success," explains Active Revision course director Kate Gibson.

"We know from neuroscience that exercise speeds up brain functioning. If you've been out for a run your reading speed and comprehension goes up by 20 per cent. You have to attack revision from all angles and make sure your whole body contributes.

"A healthy body and mind that is well-rested, well-fed and fit can support your brain through the tough times ahead much better than one that is exhausted and lacking in

nutrients." Dr Eve Poole, chair of Gordonstoun's board of governors, adds: "Interspersing study with exercise helps encourage reflection, which speeds up learning by promoting synaptic connections in the brain. And perhaps most importantly, exercise is a stress-buster when the pressure of revision gets too much."

At The Glasgow Academy, rector Matthew Pearce believes that learning and wellbeing are closely linked. He says: "If we don't help young people recognise the importance of their mental and physical health, develop positive attitudes to wellbeing and sustainable approaches to looking after themselves, this simply becomes a barrier to their learning.

"The key is to ensure that every pupil at The Academy develops a positive attitude towards fitness and health which they can carry throughout their lifetime."

As such, all pupils are involved in timetabled physical activity and annual health week programmes while the school's catering provision is regularly reviewed – it recently returned to providing full-fat milk after consultation on the benefits of its 'good fat', for example.

On the whole, however, Pearce believes having options when it comes to food



teaches children how to choose wisely. He explains: "Many items, such as high-sugar confectionery, were removed from our tuck shop a few years ago but after discussions with pupil representatives a limited range has returned, available on a restricted basis."

"This has worked well and allows pupils to form the foundations for making healthy decisions."

Likewise, students have the opportunity to exercise – often with their teachers – in the school's purpose-built gym.

Pearce says: "Pupils can come in any morning before classes and see some of our teachers working out in the fitness suite, which sends a strong positive message about the benefits of exercise at all stages in life."

On the south side of Glasgow, the situation is similar. Hutchesons' Grammar School's impressive new gym has been well-received by staff and students alike.

Senior depute rector Mike Martin says: "Our gyms are busy from 7am with squad fitness sessions and at lunchtime and after school there are spin classes."

"Here you will often find the bursar and other members of staff working alongside pupils, all supporting each other and enjoying exercising."

"Teachers are role models, whether we like it or not, and how we behave has an influence on those we teach. We are fortunate that many of our staff from all subject areas are involved in supporting and delivering sport during the week."

They also promote healthy living through teaching. "We touch upon these issues regularly in class – subjects such as human geography, modern studies, business, economics and history, as well as biology, PE and PSHE [Personal, Social and Health Education] sessions," says Martin.

Merchiston, Scotland's only all-boys independent boarding school, takes this idea a step further with a life skills class.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS AT FETTES COLLEGE

"ONLY HAPPY students learn and we focus on the mental and physical wellbeing of all our students through our rigorous, responsive and varied PSE programme whilst nurturing a strong, welcoming and inclusive community," says depute head and head of pastoral care at Fettes Carolyn Harrison.

Focusing on the food philosophy, Harrison explains why the school was commended nationally for its commitment to healthy eating.

MAKING HEALTHY CHOICES EARLY: We adopt a 'taste it, don't waste it' approach – ask for a sample of a dish, see if you like it and maybe order it next time. Younger pupils have their trays checked to confirm good choices whilst sitting in class groups alongside teachers fosters great table manners and a healthy, social attitude.

LITTLE CHANGES: Our salad bar is 50 per cent 'naked' so has no oils, mayonnaise or dressings. There is only one sodium source to reduce salt intake and no cream. But flavour is never compromised. We use lemon, garlic,

chilli and fresh herbs in food while cucumber, mint and lemon are added to fresh drinking water.

HEALTHY PLANET: Knowing where what we eat comes from is vital to understanding the global impact of food production so we use local suppliers for our dairy, bakery, fruit, vegetables, fish and meat.

WASTE AWARE: The key message is 'only take what you can manage' and we highlight the responsibility of minimising waste. Waste-aware weeks collate lunch food leftovers into house-specific food waste bins and the house with the emptiest bin wins.

LABELLING: Health benefits of each dish are clearly labelled so students learn to make balanced choices. Large chalkboard menus show all allergens and serving staff are briefed on individual needs to subtly assist, whether that is an allergy, religious food requirement, vegetarianism or veganism.

FEEDBACK: Student satisfaction is fundamental. Food committee meetings with pupils mean we can check our meals are exceeding pupil expectations.

Director of sport Rory McCann explains: "Whilst we encourage pupils to partake in up to six hours of exercise per week, the Merchiston philosophy is rooted in far more than just the day-to-day delivery of PE and activities."

"The life skills programme explores many topics including wellbeing, the media and body image, coping with pressure, healthy eating, attitude and mindset, and building resilience. Equipping the boys with such knowledge is crucial to ensuring they have a healthy mindset, which is just as important as physical fitness."

"Our goal is to encourage boys to adopt these behaviours as lifelong habits and inspire them to embrace a healthy lifestyle. This philosophy is echoed across the school and we have developed an Initiatives and Philosophy in Sport handbook that underpins everything we do to promote

this." At St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh – one of the few schools with an NHS Scotland Healthy Living Plus Award for its commitment to healthy eating – education around living well starts early.

Head of school Alex Hems said: "The nursery children have regular adventures in our on-site Fantastical Forest where they often help to prepare then eat a healthy snack and we have a Secret Garden, complete with a fort and muddy kitchen."

"Our outdoor learning programme includes planting and growing vegetables that can be eaten to help them understand where food comes from. They also bake and cook to acquire a taste for 'natural' food that is not processed."

"We believe there is a connection between a healthy diet and the ability to feel and perform better and the nutritional value in the food offering is an important element of the school ethos." ■



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CHILDREN SHOULD BE INSPIRED BY WHAT IS ALL AROUND THEM

THE ENVIRONMENT in which children learn is crucial to how they absorb and retain information," says Niamh Waldron, head of juniors at Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh.

"We are lucky to have a range of diverse indoor and outdoor spaces equipped to help students foster creativity and encourage a new way of thinking."

At The Glasgow Academy, which blends traditional 150-year-old buildings with modern spaces, rector Matthew Pearce agrees.

"The way children learn today is not the same as 20 or 30 years ago," he says. "Today is much more about collaboration, which means an emphasis on multi-use spaces where groups can meet and work."

Pearce has seen first-hand the impact of world-class facilities on the learning process, most notably in the school's Saunders Centre Science & Technology Building.

The 37,000 sq ft space, which secured the RIAS Andrew Doolan Best Building in

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What better way to learn about shape than to make a kite and go fly it? A spring day stimulates poetry, a rainy day lends itself to science

Alex Hems of St George's School

Scotland Award, is said to have directly contributed to boosted attainment in all three sciences.

"The building has enabled us to bring all the sciences together and to have dedicated Advanced Higher research laboratories for each science where younger children see the research that older pupils are undertaking," Pearce explains.

But this is a space that does something for everyone. He adds: "The Saunders Centre has transformed the way we deliver education, providing inspiring facilities for generations

of pupils. At its heart is a 175-seat multi-purpose auditorium. There is an extensive hospitality/food technology suite – our older children can now cater to restaurant standards and we have the facilities to do so."

Talking of whom, current students played a key role in the design.

Pearce says: "Our pupils' wishes are embodied in the building's spaciousness, flexibility, extensive use of glass, and study and social/networking areas. This governed the design of the front of the building."

Also boasting a state-of-the-art teaching facility and a firm, student-focused approach is St Columba's School in the idyllic village of Kilmacolm, Renfrewshire.

Depute rector Antonia Berry says: "Above all, put the pupil at the centre of any design decisions. Consider how they learn today and how the physical environment, if poorly designed, can become an obstacle to learning."

Berry, whose new teaching facility comes complete with a high-tech carbon dioxide

monitoring system, acknowledges the substantial investment and risk involved with a redesign, as well as the sheer hard work. But she encourages other schools to follow in St Columba's footsteps: "Open your mind to what is possible architecturally. Seek advice; look at other educational institutions."

At Glasgow's Kelvinside Academy international infrastructure group Balfour Beatty recently built the NuVu innovation school, a £2.5m learning hub.

David Miller, director of the innovation school, said: "Our school feels more like a blend of a start-up environment, an incubator space and a co-working area – far removed from the conventional learning environment. This is part of the building's intent. Our young people are treated like adults on their learning journey, not spoon fed, and never directed to the 'right' solution."

Each level of the building is unique and – unlike traditional classrooms – designed with collaboration and creativity at the forefront.

Miller explains: "It's a three-storey glass cube. The ground floor is a fabrication studio where pupils get to grips with heavy workshop equipment, such as laser cutters and 3D printers. We wanted to have a lovely open space for the middle floor, so we've made it into a performance studio with the hope that the building will become as much a cultural hub as it is a space for learning."

"The top floor is home to our digital studio, which is for light fabrication prototyping and digital-based projects like electronic game design, augmented reality and creating podcasts."

Architecture aside, the environment for learning is evolving beyond the school walls.

Alex Hems, head at St George's School for Girls, says: "Using the outdoors as a more diverse and dynamic classroom for a task that could otherwise be done indoors has more impact."

"A maths lesson created merely with chalk and the playground surface covers textbook work in a stimulating and active way. What better way to learn about shape than to make a kite and go fly it? A gorgeous spring afternoon provides the stimulus for creative haiku poetry and a rainy day lends itself to various aspects of science."

At Merchiston, Waldron agrees. "We promote teaching traditional classroom lessons outside throughout the year as we have recognised the positive impacts it is reported to have, which include improved behaviour and increased engagement," he says.

"It is also a great way for teachers to use their imagination and deliver lessons in an engaging format."

"Recently we hosted a full school day outside where, for example, boys took part in an outdoor percussion session instead of a traditional music lesson and weekly library time was replaced with an outdoor creative storytelling session. Throughout 2020 we're hoping to continue this approach to learning." ■

WHY A WELL-DESIGNED, WELL-MAINTAINED TEACHING SPACE CAN MAKE A LIFE-CHANGING DIFFERENCE - BY ANTONIA BERRY, DEPUTE RECTOR OF ST COLUMBA'S SCHOOL

I RECALL sitting at the back of my maths classroom, swinging on my cracked plastic tub chair paying little heed to the trigonometry demonstration on the grubby whiteboard. The room was like all others in the school – fit for purpose, just.

It could house 30 or so desks; the décor was tired but passable; a couple of roof tiles had slipped out of place and a collection of posters displaying 'motivational' quotes about the value of hard work were stuck to the walls with Blu Tack. The room was stuffy and I struggled to think.

A couple of decades on and I am depute rector of St Columba's School. I am watching the impact a well-designed, well-maintained teaching space has on the concentration, behaviour and learning of young people – and wondering why those of years gone by failed to recognise this.

In the independent sector, the maintenance of school buildings – many listed – can be an anchor around the board of governors' neck – a black hole into which money is sunk with few visible benefits to pupils.

Committing to spending millions on new buildings can be a tough sell to the parents and a challenging negotiation with the locals plus a long and time-consuming planning process.

For many, it is a risk simply not worth taking. But for those with a vision and courage, the reward for pupils and teachers can be immeasurable.

It is nearly three years since St Columba's opened its state-of-the-art teaching facility, the Girdwood Building, which houses English, languages and the guidance suite. The end result is truly exquisite.

Two dilapidated detached Victorian villas were sympathetically restored, painted in brilliant white

with fringe details, such as bargeboards and door surrounds. The two buildings – mirrored almost exactly – are connected by sandy-coloured open brickwork and walls of glass. To the rear of each, a collection of classrooms project backwards. From above, the shape is one of a giant angular horse shoe, softened by a green roof incorporating five types of moss.

Inside, the overwhelming effect is one of space and light. Each classroom has a teaching wall, which conceals speakers, cabling and books, while a carbon dioxide monitoring system keeps the teacher informed of air quality during lessons. Ventilation can be controlled by opening the motorised high clerestory windows and light is managed through a versatile black-out blind system and dimmer switches. Some classrooms share an acoustic wall that can be set back to create one larger teaching or event space.

Each faculty is colour coded and the designs of desks, bathrooms and public spaces have been heavily influenced by the pupils.

Talking of whom, what about their verdict overall? Well, almost everyone commented on the positive impact on their concentration levels and many said the reallocation of space made the school feel much more cohesive. There has also been talk of a positive change in the staff and pupil relationship.

In terms of academic achievement, it is difficult to establish a causal link between exam results and the effect of our new building. Perhaps the fact that English and languages were two of the highest achieving faculties this year is just coincidence. Or perhaps the quality of the teaching and learning experience has been directly influenced by this extraordinary building design...



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