

# Making a difference

Exploring the role of boarding staff

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## 1

### Introduction

The chances are that you are reading this paper because you are already involved in boarding and are, therefore, fully aware of the benefits that a boarding education affords.

In 2016, there were more than 75,000 boarders at over 550 state and boarding schools in the UK and overseas – clearly these schools are making a difference or these young people simply wouldn't be there. In recent years, several studies have also revealed the benefits of a boarding education, giving some more reliable evidence to the anecdotal comments that the sector has had to rely on in the past.

## 2

## The evidence of impact

In 2014 there was high praise for the benefits of state boarding when a survey<sup>1</sup> completed by the former State Boarding Schools' Association – SBSA - (now State Boarding Forum – SBF) revealed that 93% of parents said that their children were happy boarding and 95% would recommend their child's school or boarding to others. In a survey<sup>2</sup> conducted by the BSA in 2016, parents highlighted what they thought their children were gaining from boarding and the two words which were cited most frequently were 'confidence' and 'independence', two attributes vital to young people to allow them to be able to cope in the competitive world of university and work.

The Association of Boarding Schools in America<sup>3</sup> (TABS) surveyed more than 1,000 boarding school students and alumni in 2016 and compared them to public school students and private day students. Again, the results suggested that boarding school students are better prepared for college and that they make better progress in their careers, with the study showing that the benefits of having attended boarding school extended well into adult life. 50% of boarders earned advanced degrees, as compared to 36% of private day school alumni and 21% of public school graduates. By the end of their careers, 52% of boarding school alumni had achieved top positions, as compared to 39% of private day school graduates and 27% of public school graduates. Boarding school alumni said in remarkable numbers that they enjoyed their experience at school, and, in fact, an overwhelming number - 90% - reported that they would repeat it and that the school they attended offered much more than just the experience in the classroom and created friendships that often lasted a lifetime.

In identifying the benefits of boarding, Tim Holgate collected together the combined experience of staff working most closely with our boarders at the annual conference for Housemasters and Housemistresses in 2007. Delegates were asked to analyse and evaluate the benefits of the boarding experience and the impact that it had had on their children in their care. The role of the Housemaster or Mistress (HM) was deemed as crucial in creating the appropriate ethos and motivating boarders to respond positively to the many initiatives and opportunities provided within the House and school.

This paper aims to build on their collective wisdom by drawing those strands, discussed a decade ago, together with a discussion about the crucial ingredients required for each individual boarder in the House to thrive. It will look at the ways in which a boarding House can make a difference to the life of a young person and the practical strategies that everyone involved in that House can develop and employ to facilitate that.

## 3

## Values, culture and ethos

In the modern business era, we frequently hear the terms "core values" and "culture" and they have become integrated in our everyday language. In the same way that core values support a company's vision and reflect what the company values, so do the values set within a boarding House. They are the essence of a House's identity and engender a sense of belonging or team, community and a framework for discussions – particularly those of a disciplinary nature. They also show others what the House is "about"; a well-run and popular House will have a strong sense of identity borne about by the HM's vision. The pupils might call it the "House vibe"; it is the emotional side of the House which is dynamic and reactive to those within it. When a team is collectively working together under the same set of values, that sense of purpose exudes a positive vibe and creates a House that everyone wants to be a part of.

For a new HM, changing the values and therefore the culture and ethos of a House can be a challenge and may need patience. In his article *Aligning Action and Values*, Jim Collins<sup>4</sup> discussed that "values cannot be 'set'; you discover them". Involve senior pupils to begin with (particularly prefects who should be well respected by the rest of the House), ascertaining the values that they would like to see (gently guiding them if necessary!) and then involve the whole House so that a sense of common ownership is achieved. It is also important to remember that a House is a living organism and changes yearly as a new cohort of students arrive; don't be afraid to revisit House values with your leadership team on an annual basis – not to radically change them but to ensure that the incoming pupils are on side and are ready to live out those values too.

It is vitally important that all House staff feel ownership over the House values and ethos too; involving them in writing the annual development plans, asking them for ideas, being clear about the fact that they should be modelling the core values and expectations that you have of the pupils is key to ensuring success as well as engendering excellent relationships between pupils and staff.

The key to a successful strong House identity and sense of purpose within the House is, of course, the HM themselves. This is a role which requires personal integrity and self-awareness. It involves leading by example and creating a culture of respect in all interactions - with staff and pupils. HMs need to live out the core values of the House every minute of every day; "don't wait for people to be friendly, show them how."

## 4

**Leadership**

Leaders set the direction by helping others see what might lie ahead and rising to any challenges that might be faced. They will see everyone's potential and inspire those around them. In the previous paragraph the importance of leading by example – a trait of a true leader – was discussed. Followers (pupils and staff) *will* learn about acceptable behavior through observation. But is it possible to demonstrate strong leadership whilst also being compassionate and caring – two elements which are vital when working with young people?

Recent research into leadership suggests that not only can strong leaders be compassionate and caring, it is, in fact, vital that they are. (5Avolio, B. Walumbwa, F. W. and Weber, T. J. 2009) Through extending compassion and care to those in their boarding Houses, leaders can enhance performance because all humans function best when they are loving, affiliative, caring and feel loved and valued.

Leadership in a boarding House will most likely come in two forms: by staff and by senior pupils. Ensure that your senior pupils know what leadership looks like; some will need help to begin with as it will not come naturally to them. It is naïve to think that you can give a title of 'Head of House' to a pupil at the end of their sixth year and when they return after a six-week summer break, they are expected to have gained all of the skills, charisma and confidence of a 'leader'.

Training, examples of positive leadership and regular meetings with an HM are vital to ensuring a cohesive and strong pupil leadership team. Pupil leaders should feel fully supported always if they are to fulfil their own potential and the expectations of those around them. Leadership opportunities should be given to all pupils in the House and if a task is set, they should be asked to report back on their progress. Something as simple as organising a year group outing or a social event can be a good place to start.

Key aspects of boarding leadership which will enable pupils in that environment to thrive include:

- Fairness and consistency;
- Communication – ensuring decisions are understood and clearly explained to pupils, staff and parents and using the right type of communication depending on the situation;
- Encouraging others to voice their opinions and create an environment whereby others feel safe to speak up and share their perspective; inspire keen House staff who might be interested in pastoral work by suggesting career paths, giving them a small amount of responsibility or by asking their advice;
- Challenging others – encourage pupils to stretch themselves and step outside of their comfort zone by providing a safe environment for them to do so, but reassuring them if they don't quite make their goal. Knowing your staff and pupils well will enable you to help them understand their own capabilities. Make the boarding House a "learning environment" where learning means personal growth, not exam results;
- Admitting your mistakes – this will encourage others to admit theirs as well, facilitating a much more open environment;
- Reward and praise – some will like public approval (in a House assembly, for example), whereas others will prefer a more understated squeeze on their shoulder and some kind words. Acknowledge successes, particularly the smaller achievements, so that everyone knows they are valued. Attend concerts, plays and sports matches so that you are able to know what is happening in the House or in a tutor group;
- Asking for regular feedback – create trust by asking House staff, pupils and parents for their feedback on your leadership or on an initiative that has been introduced. Learn from their responses and openly share your thoughts with them;
- Being positive in your outlook and look like you are enjoying the role – this might sound obvious but your teams and the students in your House need to know that you love being their leader. It is acknowledged that there will always be some tough times in such a role but if, at the heart of it, you are not loving being a leader you will not be able to create an environment which will facilitate the growth and happiness of the young people who have been entrusted in your care.

## 5

**Relationships**

*"You should be honest, direct, informative and continue to establish and nurture a relationship with parents and pupil."*

Chris Seal, Deputy Head, Millfield School<sup>6</sup>

Without doubt, the most important ingredient for a successful House and creating/engendering a community where young people can flourish is relationships. As Roger Catchpole from YoungMinds reminds us, "positive relationships promote well-being within children and young adults"<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, they are more likely to develop self-confidence, resilience and positive views about themselves when they are involved in a respected, safe and secure environment where their achievements and contributions are valued and celebrated. Consistent, secure, responsive, and respectful relationships with caring adults are vital to our boarders.

Through trusting relationships – with adults and their peers - children learn about their world and their place in it. Where a young person does not have a secure relationship at home, the boarding environment can be an even more important place for them as they can then develop the security and independence required beyond school. Strong relationships in the boarding House mean that young people are more likely to participate in their learning and extra-curricular activities<sup>8</sup>, thus having a very positive boarding experience indeed.

It should be ensured that each pupil in a House has an adult that they are able to relate to; a tutor, matron, Housekeeper, HM, or teacher that they can form a strong and positive relationship with. All staff should be encouraged to genuinely believe in the young people they are working with, highlighting the positive aspects of their *behaviour* – even when it might be difficult to see! Staff should address behaviour, not the individual's personality and have conversations with young people if they have done something wrong rather than always reaching for a punishment book. Use of restorative techniques can be highly effective in the boarding environment and have been proven to stop the offence from happening again.

The House team will comprise of a diverse group of people, all of whom will bring their own experiences and expertise to the boarding House. A key aspect of their role will be identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the House staff team, thereby unlocking potential.

Having a relationship with a pupil is vital to this. Relationships are built on shared experiences. House staff should spend time speaking to boarders when they are on duty, not tucked away in an office marking; they should be encouraged to take their group out for a meal or activity to see them outside of school; they should find out what makes each pupil "tick" – a shared interest in sport or music always gives a talking point; they should – where possible – support pupils in their endeavors by watching them in a concert, a play or a match. The effect this will have on a young person is unparalleled – particularly for overseas pupils whose parents will not be able to attend such events.

Staff should take time to notice when something needs to be praised and rewarded and should also encourage them to be individuals, seeking their own path through life rather than following the crowd. These are simple things but are often the things that House staff put to the bottom of their list of things to do. The HM should take responsibility to ensure that all their staff are actively engaged in the House and supporting the pupils in the best way that they can.

6

## Relationships with parents

*“There is no doubt that it is an enormous responsibility looking after other people’s children and in the process, you will have formed a partnership with the parents to whom you are indeed accountable.”*

Liz Best, former Senior Housemistress, Wycombe Abbey School<sup>8</sup>

A careful balance needs to be struck between making them feel involved in the boarding environment whilst also allowing staff to get on with their roles. Parents need to trust and have faith in the individuals they have charged with the care of their child. Communications need to be appropriate and timely especially in the age of mobile phone communication when children can rapidly contact their parents with a splurge of emotion. Sensitive issues need to be dealt with face to face and not over email. If the whole team works to the mantra of ‘nothing should ever come as a surprise to a parent’, you cannot go far wrong. Parents should be involved from the moment that they have enrolled into a House remembering that positive comments from prospective parents and current parents will be the best publicity that the House – and the school – will get. Working with parents (and guardians) should and can be as rewarding as the relationships that are built with the young people in the House.

The relationships forged between the boarders will make their entire educational experience. Plenty of opportunities for these relationships to develop naturally between peers of the same age and between age groups should be given. Vertical tutor groups or House families work particularly well and inter-House competitions will also give ample opportunity for older and younger pupils to work side by side. Younger pupils are also afforded an opportunity to learn by experience and observation from a variety of role models as they evolve through a hierarchical system. Boarding provides a unique opportunity for friends to become more akin to siblings as shared experiences and challenges make relationships stronger and more cohesive.

Relationships built on trust, respect, integrity and consistency are crucial in the boarding environment. Given the right atmosphere - where *all* model positive emotions, encourage one another and allow others to express themselves without judgement or prejudice - the capacity for individual and social development will know no bounds and individuals will be allowed to realise their potential.

7

## Realising potential through a holistic education

When all the strands mentioned above are woven together, our young boarders have the support and background ingredients required for them to thrive. Through an ever-burgeoning feeling of self, boarders will have the confidence to be independent in their thoughts and actions and will challenge themselves to try new activities. They will demonstrate self-discipline and motivation, and critically, a curiosity which will allow them to thrive in all areas: culturally, spiritually, intellectually, physically and socially.

Boarding schools can genuinely provide a holistic education i.e. a focus on the ‘whole child’, but individual Houses should also ensure that opportunities are given for young people to be reflective and appreciate the awe and wonder of what is around them. They need to nurture the inquisitive and champion the interesting; engender an environment where pupils are captivated by knowledge and the world around them, not just for the sake of an examination question.

The School’s PSHE or Wellbeing programmes should be supported. If you do not teach the course yourself, find out what the pupils learn in their lessons or talks. Theme House assemblies around a topic that might be being covered so that the young people understand the relevance of what they have learned and can apply it to everyday life in the House.

Character education programmes can also be explored (such as those described by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University<sup>9</sup>) and apply some of the concepts to activities within the House.

There is no better environment for a young person to develop their moral compass; living in close proximity with others where they have to share their space, often with individuals who they might not ordinarily choose to be friends with, means boarders develop their social intelligence through the consequences of behaviour and action. Approaches to discipline should be adopted which encourage an understanding of others and where young people can learn to appreciate the viewpoint of others, to listen and to value them. Boarding Houses that get it right don’t just have a long list of rules; the pupils get it right simply because they want to.

8

## Continuity and pastoral care

Children’s growth is continuous; it therefore follows that their educational experiences must also be continuous so that a thread of meaning runs through their experience at school forming a coherent and whole experience. Repeated changes of school can sometimes hinder academic and social progress in a young person, with a lack of opportunity to develop the deeper relationships already discussed in this paper.

Boarding allows continuity within pastoral care, teaching and the extra-curricular. Knowledge that can be built up around a pupil can be invaluable to that individual’s success. Bearing this in mind, aim for continuity of care within the House as well. An HM might not have any say in who works in the House and staff departures can be unpredictable.

Thought should always be given to the roles of tutors and also – if you are an HM – your own career. Enter the role with the intention to commit at least five years to this privileged vocation; to do any less is unfair on the staff and the young people. This is crucial not only for their well-being but also your professional fulfilment; any less would mean that you would never reap the rewards for your hard work in the early days and miss the opportunity to see those young people leave your House ready to face the outside world. A moment which for the boarders, and you, is priceless.

Service to others is a long tradition in boarding schools. A school which excels at service allows ample opportunity for the young people to participate in the community, volunteering across a wide range of local or international projects. A service project organised within a House can be even more powerful. Teamwork and cooperation are developed, as well as a heightened sense of well-being from knowing that you are helping others. If a boarding House allows its pupils to interact and socialise with individuals from different backgrounds – religious, ethnic or socio-economic – they are being given the opportunity to understand that *everyone* has their own strengths and weaknesses and all should be listened to; a vital skill if those young people are to go forward and contribute positively to their own communities in later life.

It is also important to consider the cultural aspects of a House. This should not just be about providing an opportunity for a young people to participate in the annual House music or art competition but also encouraging an appreciation of heritage and diversity. Boarders can be helped to recognise this through opportunities to participate in cultural experiences, for example, celebrating Chinese New Year, Yom Kippur or Thanksgiving, or contributing to a mock general election. Encourage pupils to watch and appreciate others taking part; drama productions, concerts, live debates all provide occasions for individuals to enrich their lives and develop interests which may remain with them for the rest of their lives.

Jean Piaget wrote: *‘The principal goal of education is to create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done.’*<sup>10</sup> Your boarding House should aim to bring out all the capabilities and sensitivities of the pupils, allowing them to live purposefully, creatively and morally in today’s complex world.

## A balancing act

Finally, in 2007 delegates debated whether boarding structures and routines sometimes impede the growth and development of autonomy raising the important questions:

- Is there a risk that boarders may become over dependent on academic support?
- Do they become sufficiently street-wise in such an over protective environment?
- Are they over-occupied and over-organised with no time to chill?

Pupils need to make decisions for themselves and make mistakes, to learn from experience. House staff need to balance considerations for safety against the need for pupils to take risks, be creative and use their initiative. Boundaries and rules contribute to the stability of an environment but some individuals will always find these challenging. Extra-curricular programmes and activities (school wide and within the House) should provide ample time for reflection and down-time for young people.

Throughout this paper and within the conference delegates' discussions in 2007, it is clear

that the environment and conditions provided by staff are crucial in allowing our boarders to flourish. It is important to recognise that boarding is an intense experience and to acknowledge that there can be a danger that, in providing too many comforts, structures and organisation, boarding may encourage dependence, stifle individuality and limit the essential opportunity to make responsible choices and decisions. At all times, it is crucial that those working within the boarding House recognise the important interplay between the young person's growing physical, social and emotional maturity and the need to provide a supportive and stable framework for the blossoming of potential and the development of independence.

Finally, it must be remembered that some young people will reject all that is presented to them, usually because of a prior life experience which has shaped their mistrust in individuals and has given them a cynical caginess about life. For these individuals, the House (just like their family) is the one place where they can take bad decisions and make mistakes in order to learn and to come to the realisation that others do believe in them – however frustrating and painful that may be. And for some, it may only be years down the line that they recognise the difference that your House, your ethos, philosophy and values made to their lives.

## References

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