

## **Building Schools of Co-operation**

Headteachers, trustees and governors from co-operative schools across the country heard about the opportunities co-operative schools can offer in these times of educational uncertainty from fellow teachers, an academic, a member of local government and international co-operators at the third co-operative schools conference.

The conference on 2 November in New Century Hall, Manchester, which had the title Building Schools of Co-operation, also allowed delegates from both existing and prospective co-operative schools to share experiences of setting up and running co-operative schools through talks, discussion and workshops.

Addressing the growing network of co-operative schools, which now stands at 108 trusts, Co-operative College Principal and Chief Executive Mervyn Wilson spoke of the achievements of co-operative schools, which have expanded three fold over the past twelve months, as well as the opportunities to grow further:

“We have travelled an astonishing distance in the past couple of years but we are at the tip of the iceberg of what we can collectively achieve together in the next four or five years. We have confidence in co-operative possibilities. We can build a co-operative education sector and work together to mainstream co-operative education. Ethics in enterprise seemed very radical three years ago, but not after the global economic crisis.

“The major political parties are competing about who is the most co-operative. We need to work out how we maintain public sector values in a completely changing type of economy and how we maintain links with our communities. You are the pioneers in this. There is enormous potential to link with the global co-operative sector...this gives co-operative schools something none of the other chains of schools can do.”

Kieran McDermott, Assistant Director of Children’s Services at Manchester City Council, considered the opportunities for co-operative schools to work with local authorities, asking “How do we enable our schools to support each other and work together?” and concluding “It isn’t top down. It’s the localism and bottom up approach that’s so important about the co-operative movement. Communities can improve themselves”.

Academic Keri Facer, Professor of Education at Manchester Metropolitan University, also offered her support for co-operative schools in a talk entitled ‘Why co-operative schools must work’, acknowledging that “there are a lot of people waiting see whether co-operative education will offer a new model for the new century”.

She spoke of the environmental, technological, economical and demographic challenges facing society, and the potential for schools to be spaces for social change, saying:

“I believe that co-operative and mutual approaches are the only option we have if we want our students and the communities we are building to have secure and long-term futures. We need to make young people believe they can act on and change the world and connect with one another. The work you’re engaged in is critically important.”

Kathy Leaver, Principal of the recently opened Co-operative Academy of Manchester, showed drawings illustrating how the academy, with its large learning spaces and open plan classrooms, is literally built around co-operation and Sarah Jones, Vice Principal of Lipson Community College in Plymouth, also described ‘co-operation in action’ in her school:

“If you visited five or six years ago it would have looked like other inner city schools, with students sometimes occupied but not very engaged. What we have changed is our total commitment to the co-operative values. We have embedded a co-operative pedagogy. The progressive attainment gap has closed by 27 per cent and we’ve had three outstanding Ofsteds. Families are engaged and we’ve seen our results go through the roof but we haven’t changed our children, our staff or our leadership team.”

She described how the school’s specialist guilds system and Young Co-operatives, which range from enterprises based around performing arts and hairdressing to a big band and a catering co-operative, have raised the often low aspirations of students attending the school:

“It’s raised their attainment right across the curriculum and helped them understand what employment might be like. It’s made them employable. They’re becoming proper young citizens in our community and it’s making a real difference.”

As well as networking with likeminded schools, delegates were reminded that they are part of a global co-operative movement by presentations from co-operative educational institutions in Portugal and France.

Mags Bradbury, National Projects Manager for the Co-operative Group, who was chairing the conference, explained: “We’re not here just in England working on our own. There are co-operative schools in France, Sweden, Portugal, Spain and Africa. We are part of a global movement.”

Stéphane Calella from the OCCE French National Network talked about “educational practices based on the values and principles of co-operation”, which are available to students from nursery to university. He shared information on nationwide projects such as gardening schemes and eco-co-operatives, as well as programmes relating to theatre, media, literature and raising the profile of co-operatives.

Fernando Martinho from epESaJMS, Portugal told delegates about networks of co-operatives both in Portugal and Portuguese speaking countries, as well as the professional courses offered by a range of Portuguese co-operatives.

The conference closed with a report from the interim board of the Schools Co-operative Society, the nationwide network of co-operative schools.