

# How I went from Tony Blair's adviser to free school head

Peter Hyman chronicles the first year of School 21, from the panic of opening day to the formation of rules by the pupils themselves, a week blighted by power cuts – and an exultant end of term

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'If we trust young people more, they will rise to any challenge thrown at them': Peter Hyman and pupils at School 21 in Stratford. Photograph: Richard Saker for the Observer

I am on my hands and knees in what passes for our playground. It is Sunday evening and tomorrow at 8.30 our first ever children will enter the school. The contractors who promised to complete the installation of our temporary classrooms and clean up, are nowhere to be seen. I am alone. I should feel excitement that 18 months of relentless planning is about to become a reality; that I am embarking on my first year of headship. Instead I am close to panic.

We have discovered in the last 24 hours that our phone lines will not be working in time. The fire alarm system is at best patchy. Outside pipework is not cased in, so students could easily destroy it. There is no gas in the science lab. Litter covers the entrance and pathway to the school. Squatters in the building next to our entrance are coming in and out at all times of day and night. There is a constant stench of urine – possibly from the squatters, more likely from our "specialist temporary building" contractors (who allowed their portable loos to overflow so that excrement swamped the playground and then filled bottles with urine and threw them over the fence). The council bins outside are overflowing. The sign for the front gate saying "School 21" has not been attached, so how will students find our temporary entrance? Perhaps the most serious immediate risk to student life-chances is that the metal hoarding around our playground will blow over in the wind and crush someone. Surely it's impossible to open the school on time tomorrow?

I have a list of our 258 pre-opening items printed out in front of me, ranging from first aid to fire marshals, catering to staff contracts, statutory policies on

grievances, bullying, whistle-blowing, parental complaints, ICT plans for hardware and software, curriculum maps, behaviour systems and timetable. But I'm starting with the job that I can do something about right now – scrabbling around on the floor, picking up three-inch nails and cigarette butts so that the new four-year-olds will have somewhere safe to play at break.

I never imagined it would be quite like this. I knew it would be tough; I was prepared to work all hours. But I didn't realise the extent to which we'd be left, as a small team, to sort out everything, even many of the large items that came under the remit of the government's technical advisers. We started with just three people, three people who wanted to change the way we did education. We had no financial backer and were not part of an education chain or religious group. Our goal: [to open a 4-to-18 mixed school](#) with 75 children in each year group, but starting with 150 children: 75 in three reception classes and 75 in year 7. Then each year the school would build up 150 children at a time.

[Ed Fidoe](#), who himself had gone to a small all-through school, had worked as a consultant for many education organisations, and was convinced that we needed a revolution in the curriculum and pedagogy of [schools](#) if students were to come out with the flexible minds needed to succeed. Having spent several years as a theatre producer and actor, he had a strong sense of the sheer hard work of creating something from scratch and an infectious belief that anything is possible. Probing but always polite, he was determined to be as radical as possible, and was calm in taking the lead on the nightmarish capital building project and IT programme that threw up new stresses on an almost daily basis. He now runs the school's founding charity, which aims to take what we learn at School 21 to other parts of the education system.

[Oli de Botton](#) was in the first cohort of [Teach First](#), the scheme designed to get top graduates into teaching. Clever and thoughtful, he rose to be an assistant head and head of sixth form before working for an education trust where he was involved in setting up new schools and developing new thinking on effective teaching. His mission was for closing the achievement gap between rich and poor, and providing a rigorous education that helped all children find their strengths. He led the development of our innovative curriculum, and had that rare quality of combining strategic insight with great operational attention to detail, and as deputy headteacher worked tirelessly to translate vision into reality.



Peter Hyman with Tony Blair.

I was working as a deputy headteacher at Greenford high school, an outstanding secondary in west [London](#) led by an inspirational headteacher, Mathew Cramer. I

had left politics, where I had been a strategist to [Tony Blair](#), between 1994 and 2003, and worked my way up from a teaching assistant. I left politics because I wanted something more, to be able to translate vision into reality, to do something where the difference could be felt and touched. What I enjoyed most in politics was what I enjoyed most in education, thinking about ideas, wrestling with the big arguments – what made a great school? What kind of person do we want coming out of schools at 18?

My upbringing has had a big influence on me. My mother, a clinical psychologist, was a refugee to this country, and so I have deep inside me a desire to make the immigrant experience a successful one. My father was a book publisher, and I grew up valuing the importance of language, realising that one of the greatest inequalities in society is between the literate and illiterate worlds.

I trained as a history teacher and enjoyed learning the craft of teaching, believing strongly that it is the power of classroom practice that makes great schools. I was also determined to prove that it was possible to provide a rich, creative, stimulating education in an area facing many challenges. Stratford – now famous for hosting the Olympics, and part of a huge regeneration project – is in Newham, one of the most deprived boroughs in the country. It is also the most ethnically diverse part of the country, and has the largest number of children under one.

I was to become overall head of the school and focus on the secondary school, with a primary specialist to lead the primary school. What brought the three of us – Ed, Oli and myself – together was an idea, an imperative: to change the school experience so that young people are prepared properly for success in the 21st century. We all believed, along with a growing number of people, that the current model of education, particularly secondary schools, was outdated, having been designed in the 19th century and barely changed – a factory style of education, with students treated in batches, too often told to conform rather than given the chance to grow, shoved out at the end with a few qualifications but without the tools to succeed. This affects students in areas like Newham disproportionately. To thrive, not just survive in the 21st century, students will need to leave school with a toolkit they can deploy in different situations to achieve their goals.

So school has to change, and teaching has to change too. We have to deliberately provide students with an array of challenges, experiences and situations that build up this toolkit, sharpens each tool, refines each skill and develops greater knowledge and understanding of key concepts and ideas: how to talk, explain, analyse, persuade in a range of contexts; how to choose the right behaviour or conduct – formal, informal, serious, amusing, emotional, analytical; how to develop academic skills – essay-writing, reading and comprehending difficult texts, analysing data; how to develop those personal attributes – what people sometimes call character education – that give a young person the self-belief, resilience and social awareness to lead, to function in a team, to take risks, to be flexible. All these things that will be the qualities needed in the 21st century.

To achieve this there has to be some fundamental structural change: schools should be smaller, on a human scale, so that every child is known, and every child feels they have an adult who cares deeply about them. More schools should be all-through from 4-to-18 so that the complete learning journey can be planned for, without messy transitions, most damagingly at 11.

A strong vision, with an unshakable belief in what you are doing, is the only way of overcoming the many setbacks and frustrations of creating a school. The

process of setting up a free school is: first to submit a large document to the Department for Education, spelling out the vision and operational details. This is accompanied by a business plan. Second, there is an interview with government officials to probe the submission. Third, you are given some capital for the school and some help finding a site. You are also given money for your planning year to set up the school. Then you are left to get on with it, with some technical help of varying quality, for example on how to build a school, or how to procure IT. Funding is per pupil, and is the same as other state schools.

It's Monday morning. The first year 7 students arrive for one of the most momentous days of their short lives: big school. The looks on their faces says it all – somewhere between the awe of seeing a rainbow and the nervous energy of the scariest fairground ride. They shuffle through the gate in their immaculate, specially designed uniforms, three-day-old haircuts, oversized backpacks contorting their spines, tentatively extending their hands to meet my own brisk handshake. The decision to have clip-on ties, favoured for police officers, sneered at by those who believe "children should learn to do ties up from an early age", is already paying off, with not a single tie out of place. After a very early start and a lot of making-do-and-mending, the school is functioning, and we have managed to open on time, providing temporary solutions for all the "teething problems".



Pupils build trust at their new school last September. Photograph: Richard Saker for the Observer

One of my personal commitments from the start was to make a home visit to every secondary pupil (our primary head did the same for the primary pupils). We visited tower blocks, terraced houses and residential complexes, determined to build a partnership with families and to set out our expectations. We met families who had been here for generations, and others who'd arrived in the last year. Parents struggling to make ends meet, with more than half of children requiring free school meals; families with fathers no longer at home; families with many mouths to feed and several young children to support. Sometimes it took a few minutes to let me in, there were so many locks on the doors. Often a huge TV screen was blaring out, and I'd ask politely for it to be turned down. One father lifted up his T-shirt to show me the scars from being whipped at school in Africa, and implied it was OK for me to do the same. In several homes I was offered delicious food. Many parents showed me their child's primary school report with pride. All of them signed the home-school contract I put in front of them, enthusiastically pledging to do all they could to ensure that this was a genuine three-way partnership between school, child and parents.

So I recognise the faces coming through the front gate from a huge number of backgrounds: Bengali, Somali, Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Latvian, Lithuanian, European, Algerian, Nigerian, Afro-Caribbean.

Our first ever school assembly needs to be something special. This is the moment we start to write the first paragraph of the first page of the first chapter of the history of the school. I think of schools like Eton, weighed down by hundreds of years of history, schools that have bred prime ministers, great sportsmen and women, schools with the names of head boys engraved on wooden plinths in the grand entrance lobbies, where assemblies have probably been carried out in more or less the same way for the past 400 years. Schools where children know as soon as they drive through the immense grounds (room on the playing fields for at least a dozen new schools), or walk through the pillared hallways, that success is more or less assured, a university place beckons, a career in the City is a shoo-in.

Looking around the assembly hall at the 75 Newham faces, I realise that every minute of every day at School 21 is precious; it is the chance for those with zero privilege to thrive, for the school with zero history to make its mark. This is a blank canvas. No traditions, no routines, no ethos. No track record, no Ofsted report, no set of exam results. How we speak to students, how our assemblies run, our expectations of students, our curriculum, will all, like individual leaves on a tree, make the school into the rich, layered, dynamic place that will transform their prospects.

I want to do assemblies differently from the usual formula of "sit them in rows and bore them". And with only 75 students in each year group, it's possible. I ask our secondary students to stand tall and poised in a circle, and pass a thread between their hands so that everyone is holding the string. The thread is lowered to the floor, and I ask students to step inside. I tell them: "This circle is a place where I want you all to find your voice. This year is about you finding your voice. To grow as young people academically but also emotionally, to find out what you are passionate about, to discover how you can make a difference to the world."

I explain the six attributes we have agonised over in the planning of the school, each one of them to be woven into the school day: grit (or wellbeing, the ability to bounce back); professionalism (to know what it takes to do something well); expertise (to gain the knowledge and ability to think in a range of disciplines); eloquence (speaking and thinking in a sophisticated way); spark (the ability to think laterally and generate new ideas); and craftsmanship (the techniques for redrafting and improving work until it is beautiful).

The temptation in a new school is to come in with a blueprint and hand it down to staff and students. But I knew that, long term, this would not work. I wanted students to create their own school rules. I felt that if you trusted students with this symbolic and hugely important task then they would rise to it. More than that, they would be more likely to stick to the rules. I posed the questions to our 11-year-olds: how should we treat each other at School 21? How should we become a strong and successful community? This is what they said we should all strive to do:

- Make everyone feel welcome.
- Look out for each other.
- Never discriminate against someone.
- Own up to things.
- Be true to our words.
- Show manners.
- Respect the environment, property and others.
- Show zero tolerance of bullying or unkindness.

- Always put in our best work and do our best in lessons.
- Not talk back to teachers.
- Persevere.
- Be ambassadors for School 21.

I typed up their ideas, and put them on every classroom door. School rules: designed by students. And every time one of those rules is broken there is an immense power in saying: we are holding you to your own commitments.

At the heart of these assemblies and coaching time (where one teacher works with just 12 students for several hours a week) are key elements of our ethos: eloquence and wellbeing. Eloquent and purposeful, exploratory talk should be at the heart of good lessons because it results in deeper thinking. Young people need to be able to talk in a range of settings and styles, using a wide vocabulary with fluency. It's top of every employer list. Yet in an average lesson, teachers do 90% of any talking, with individual children saying an average of four words in a typical lesson. We have now embarked on an exciting project with Cambridge University, working with world expert [Neil Mercer](#), backed by an Education Endowment Foundation grant to develop the speaking skills of all children. The confidence to speak comes from an inner strength. How do we make our children confident about who they are; knowledgeable about their strengths and how they build on them? Kind to others and able to form meaningful relationships? Resilience is key to all of this, so that when things go wrong, students bounce back. If there is one thing we have learned, and I believe all schools need to learn, it is that character education needs to be taught painstakingly, sensitively and systematically.

It is miraculous that there are any students coming through the door at all. We needed parents to put us down as one of their secondary choices – the biggest decision of their child's life so far – by the 31 October deadline, when we had no official approval, no site to build on and no staff appointed. We were not even in the Newham brochure of secondary schools, nor on the website. We had no school prospectus, not least because we had no children to put in the prospectus, no office to work out of and no staff other than the three of us to organise everything. We had tiny sums from government to do a marketing campaign. On top of that, I still had a more than full-time job as a deputy head in west London, 90 minutes away from Stratford.

The majority of parents had no idea we existed, and we had no idea how to communicate with them. For our primary parents the task would prove even harder with many unaware that their child was due to go to school at four, and many unreachable as they weren't using nurseries. I didn't underestimate the huge gamble they would be taking to go for a school that effectively did not exist over one with a 100-year track record. The one thing we had on our side was the need for places in Newham – a huge bulge in the population that meant 20,000 primary places were needed immediately, and this would feed through to secondary. Many local secondaries would also have been reassured by the fact that our funding was the same as every other state school, and we had chosen to have the same admissions policy as all Newham schools. It is also one of the reasons why Newham council and the mayor, Sir Robin Wales, were so supportive of our plans and were willing to let us refurbish an old secondary school in the heart of Stratford.

The 31 October deadline was fast approaching, and there was still no confirmation from the government that our school was going ahead, so we had to gamble and act as if we already had approval. The only thing to do was to have an open day to which we could invite people. But how could we build an audience? I was convinced we needed something big, bold and ballsy. It was time for guerrilla tactics. Under cover of darkness Ed and I went round the centre of Stratford carrying huge banners in our school colours of purple and turquoise, telling people about our open day. On railings outside train stations and the shopping centre we attached them with much difficulty. We were not caught. The headlines I had feared – "New head arrested in town centre" – never materialised. It was a good 36 hours before I got the call. "We're from Newham highways department. We have impounded your banners. Only the mayor and the council can advertise on the highway. Next time you will be prosecuted. Please come and collect the banners."

That 36 hours proved crucial. People must have seen the banners: 300 turned up at our open evening. They streamed through the doors with their children, eager to find out more and work out if they lived near enough to get their children in. We ended up getting well past 75 first choices. And this year, with no advertising, just through word of mouth we had 600 applications for our 75 secondary school places.

For the open evening we had no teachers of our own; we had to cajole those we knew at nearby schools to help out. Recruiting the best staff is the most important task of any headteacher. Our selection process was rigorous. Each candidate was asked to teach and then reflect on their lesson, undertake a written task to test both literacy skills and the ideas they had for 21st-century education. There was a group task to see how well they collaborated, and a panel interview. All of this took place over two full days. Our first key appointment was our primary headteacher. In [James Dawson](#) we found someone with more than 10 years' experience in Newham schools, a great teacher and literacy specialist, who was excellent at establishing the systems of a new school, and with a real charm in dealing with parents.

Teachers in the 21st century need to be subject specialists, project designers, English language teachers, coaches, mentors, pedagogues. They need to be able to teach the whole child and care about their wellbeing. The reception teachers focused on the basics in the morning, with all reception children learning to read and write with real rigour, and having a chance to explore and to work on projects in the afternoon. Harnessing the benefit of subject specialists from the secondary school, reception children then benefited from high quality Spanish, drama, PE, dance and music lessons.

Secondary teachers were setting up brand new departments, delivering high-quality lessons day in, day out, attending strategic meetings and helping to shape the school, while also providing after-school clubs in dance, sports, science, art, drama, and learning new ways of teaching. Most of all, they were working together in ways that don't normally happen. The team spirit among the staff, teachers and support staff (who heroically took on every conceivable task to make the school run smoothly), and the willingness to adapt to the short-term demands and pace of setting up a new school have been extraordinary.

Our school is built around great stories and great storytelling, making the English language come alive. One magical point in the year was when we took the

book *Wonder* by RJ Palacio, a brilliant novel about a boy with a facial disfigurement who struggles with school life, and used it to teach and discuss issues around bullying. The teachers at one planning meeting suggested that all of them do a reading of the first few chapters using a drama technique called "ghost reading", where someone starts and anyone can take over the reading at any point. One teacher started to read in this way – all the teachers whatever their subject, joining in – then students stood up spontaneously and took over the reading, acting out characters, bringing the book and the issues alive.



Pupils at the school relax with books.

Too much of what goes on in schools is bitty and ephemeral. So we made many of our lessons longer, workshop style, so that students could go into more depth. We wanted, in the words of [Ron Berger](#), an American teacher and advocate of project-based learning, students to create "beautiful work", and the way to do this is to give them something meaningful to do. We asked our 11-year-olds to complete a project that might normally be reserved for sixth-formers – only we don't have any yet: to design a classroom in our new building. Working in teams over several weeks, they first learnt about the history of education, the concepts behind education and the skills of an architect. They then wrote essays justifying their ideas for the new classroom; provided a budget, using a variety of maths skills; created an inventory of furniture, lighting and other items; producing a 3D scale model of their classroom and a 2D computer-generated picture. Finally they had to work on a pitch to a panel that included myself and the actual architects of the new building. We were stunned by the quality of what was produced. By challenging the students, getting them to craft and redraft their ideas, providing a real audience and purpose for their work, and giving them the right knowledge and tools to achieve it, we helped them to excel and stay motivated throughout. It made me realise once more that if we trust young people more, they will rise to any challenge thrown at them.

The whole year was a juggling act. I had been a deputy head for several years but this was my first headship. Nothing had prepared me for the level of challenge. It was harder than anything I had yet faced in schools or working in politics. When writing speeches or helping to shape political strategy at No 10, I had no concept of how challenging it really was to make things happen on the ground. Now I was attempting to shape and implement a vision, build a strong staff culture among a new team, and deal with an immense weight of operational detail, including a multi-million pound building project.

One week was particularly memorable: the generator went down several times, causing the portable classrooms to lose all power, meaning no computers, no hot school dinners, lessons in the semi-darkness. A student left suddenly, with no time to say goodbye to the new friends he had made, because his mother had

been threatened by a relative, and the police had to rehouse her and her son in another part of the country. Then a parent turned up in tears, demanding immediate answers to the rude messages she had found on her son's phone. I spent a lot of the next week, along with my deputy, confiscating phones, reading the BlackBerry BBM messages and dealing with the three culprits.

You would not go through the process we have gone through over the last two years unless you wanted to make a difference to children's lives. I believe that the vast majority of people who want to set up new schools are doing so for the right reasons and should be supported. Social entrepreneurs are the lifeblood of a strong society. It looks as if east London will soon have a specialist science college, a new music school, a school to help looked-after children and a new [university technology college](#). That diversity and choice for parents must be a good thing. In allocating limited funding for new schools, the government should prioritise innovation, areas of need and places of deprivation. The whole accountability framework for all schools, including academies and [free schools](#), needs urgent review. Schools, like ours, should not be accountable to Whitehall, which has no expertise in running schools. The current government should learn from past mistakes and not expand the programme too quickly in pursuit of arbitrary targets, and, above all else, not overclaim for free schools. Like any other type of school, some will be a great success, others won't.

There has been huge controversy in the past year around education, the curriculum, exam systems, teaching. The point that should be made by all political parties is that, if we want a world-class education system, we've got to get behind those who offer fresh thinking on tackling under-achievement, new ideas for mending our broken exam system, and a curriculum that is rich, relevant and exciting, that develops the whole child – academically, socially and emotionally.

One of the last events of the year was a day for each secondary student to present their best work from the year to their parents, their coach and a governor. We found this was a far more productive way of doing parents' evenings. Instead of parent and child being talked at by the teachers, this was the students taking control of their own learning and being challenged on it. It was also a chance for the students to reflect on how far they had come during the year, with each one of them having performed a five-minute speech on a passion, produced a play in a day with a professional theatre company, and contributed to a major science fair.

The students spent time selecting the pieces they wanted to talk about – dissertations about books they had studied, history essays, self-portraits, halloween masks, poetry, scale models – and designed an online portfolio in which they described their thinking. Each of the 75 secondary children chose one piece of their best work to go into an anthology, which we published. We subjected all students to practice cross-examinations so that they could answer challenging questions. Our chair of governors, John King, an outstanding head for 20 years, who had been an incredible support to the school throughout the year, sat in on several of the presentations and said he had rarely seen such poise, eloquence and thoughtfulness from 11- and 12-year-olds.

One girl, whom he subjected to a lot of searching questions – a girl who had been monosyllabic at the start of the year – said with great confidence: "At primary school I thought I was nothing. I now think I can do anything."

That is the reason I was scrabbling in the playground, picking up nails. I believe that we are part of a growing movement of teachers out there who know our schools must change, who know the current system leaves so much untapped potential, who believe that it is possible to create a school experience that has a life and a depth and an emotional power that leaves our children wanting more, not less.

On the last day of the school year, following a stunning drama production and an emotional graduation assembly, one boy sat on a chair outside my office. He was not in trouble. He just didn't want to go home. He didn't want to wait six weeks for the next day of school.