

## OPENING A NEW 'FREE' SCHOOL

### TOP TEN TIPS

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Short of commissioning a nuclear power station, opening a new school is one of the most involved, complicated and demanding challenges around. I should know – I led the team that has opened one of only two parent promoted schools in this country.

The danger is that it is easy to slip into the mindset that all one has to do is find a building, tart it up a bit and recruit a head and some teachers. The rest will follow.

Wrong.

Opening a new school is really numerous different projects – requiring very different skills – all rolled into one:

- Design
- Planning
- Build/refurbish
- Legal
- Accounting and finance
- Recruitment
- IT
- Logistics
- Purchasing/sourcing
- Governance
- Community relations
- Marketing
- Oh yes - and education

**So the first Top Tip is:**

**Organise the project and your people into specialist teams.**

Divide and conquer! But make sure that each team is well briefed not just on their specialist area but also how it joins up with the rest of the teams and the project as a whole. The lead member of each team needs to report back to the trust/governors regularly and all the key decisions should be ratified by the trust/governors.

## Top Tip 2

**Get the right skills within your volunteer body.**

You need to make sure you have the right skills within your trust/governing body to cover all the areas listed above.

Whilst you may be outsourcing some of these, you still need the expert knowledge to keep a check on the sub contractors (for that is what they are) to ensure they are doing not only the best job but following the requirements you have asked them to achieve.

Ultimately you and the trust/governing body are responsible. You cannot delegate responsibility.

## Top Tip 3

**When outsourcing, make sure you get people highly skilled in their field but also with the appropriate education experience.**

Getting the 'best' architect may not mean much if they are simply the most high profile but with no real experience in designing schools. Ask some of the first Academies about this – many have award winning buildings that simply do not work as a school...

## Top Tip 4

**Do not underestimate just how long it will take in absolute terms and the time the volunteer group will have to dedicate to make it happen.**

Opening a new school is hugely demanding of the volunteer trust members and governors. So people have to be willing to devote the time. The last thing you want is for people to fall by the wayside just when the project needs them more than ever.

## Top Tip 5

**Do not underestimate how much non-government money it will need to achieve real excellence.**

Traditionally, state funding usually provides the bread and butter but not the jam. With the extreme budget constraints in the present economic and political climate, this is likely to be truer than ever.

You will want to open an excellent school in all respects – and, no matter what the government says, you will need to raise additional funds to achieve this...

### Top Tip 6

**Get external support & advice for the board of trustees/ governors – to be on your side and give you honest and best advice.**

Specialist advisors who are experienced and knowledgeable but not involved in the actual project implementation work (like, for example, *Strategic Consulting for Schools!*) can offer you an objective input that can be invaluable.

Remember, sub contractors are all there to make a profit from you so there may be some divergence in objectives!

### Top Tip 7

**Appointing the Head is the most important decision you will make**

The right Head will be the difference between success and failure of your new school. You also need to appoint the Head as early as possible so they are involved in the design of the premises, the curriculum and policies.

And make sure the Head is fully onboard with your ethos – not just agreeing with it to get the job...

### Top Tip 8

**Engage with the other schools in the area**

Ultimately you will need to get on with the other primary and secondary schools in your area, even though you are funded differently and are not part of the local authority 'family' of schools.

Primary schools are of particular importance since they will be the main feeders to your school if you are a secondary school.

So start to talk to them – they also will have lots of valuable information that may help you.

### Top Tip 9

**Engage with the broader local community**

You are going to have to live with your neighbours – and you will need them to be supportive of your new school which may well cause concern in terms of the impact on local traffic, public transport and nuisance from the builders and, dare I suggest, your students when they arrive.

So ensure you have a robust community relations plan in place that will help minimise objections to your plans. Regular and honest communication is the key.

## Top Tip 10

### **Keep sight of your original ethos and objectives**

It is critical once you become embroiled in the mountain of detail involved in creating your new school that every so often you check that you are still adhering to your original vision in terms of ethos and objectives.

It is easy to be diverted by others with their own agendas!

Keep aiming for the excellence that originally inspired you and only compromise when reality demands (usually due to money issues!).

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