



TAKING A STAND

It is critical that schools teach students to fight injustice – just as these independent settings are doing

WORDS: *Kate Jones*

Recent times have seen the power of the student voice in UK schools brought to the fore. Since the advent of the school strike for climate movement in 2018, originated by teen environmental activist Greta Thunberg, pupils around the world have walked out of school in order to attend environmental protests, including many around the UK. Additionally, following the tragic death of George Floyd and amid the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that followed, the pressing issue of racism in UK independent schools came

to head last year when nearly 200 current and former students signed a letter to the Independent Schools Council (which represents the majority of private schools in the UK) detailing the racism they have experienced and calling for change.

It is clear that the UK education sector has a way to go when it comes to tackling the inequalities and wrongs present within it, and the student population will undoubtedly continue to play a key role in holding the sector to account. It is therefore encouraging when examples emerge of schools in the south

west that are working to develop students' knowledge of these issues, as well as supporting those who speak out about the different forms of injustice in the world in which they live.

PROTECTING STUDENTS' RIGHTS

Teign School, an 11–18 academy school north of Newton Abbot in Devon, is a shining example of a school in the south west of England which encourages its students to work to tackle societal issues. In December last year, it achieved silver accreditation for the UK Committee for UNICEF's

Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA), which recognises UK schools' achievements in putting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into practice within their learning environments and beyond. Silver: Rights Aware is the second stage of the award, with accreditation at this level given to schools that display good progress towards embedding the rights of children within their practice, policy and ethos.

According to the school's RRSA assessor, pupils from Teign School who were interviewed for silver accreditation "understood that rights are universal and unconditional and that current issues such as climate change, natural disasters, the refugee crisis and COVID-19 all impact on young people's access to their rights around the world." Students at the school learn about rights through lessons, assemblies and tutor time, with rights having additionally been explored in the context of Black Lives Matter discussions. "Students feel included and described how no one should be discriminated against," the assessor said. "They felt that teachers teach in a way that is inclusive and events in school such as Diversity Week and celebrating Rainbow Laces Day make sure that everyone feels welcome and included."

Teign's other student leadership opportunities include mental



Photos: The Gryphon School

Above:
The Gryphon School pupils presenting donated books and board games to Indian charity Asha

Below:
The Gryphon School pupils planting in the school grounds

health ambassador roles, teaching and learning representative positions and the Amnesty International group, which campaigns on human rights issues and encourages pupils to get involved in initiatives like its Write for Rights campaign. Changes at the academy school which students have been responsible for include improved recycling, as well as uniform-alteration. According to the assessor, the school's RRSA lead commented during the assessment that one of the award's biggest effects included pupils

having a tangible sense that they would stand up for rights.

The Gryphon School, a Church of England nursery and secondary school (with academy status) for pupils aged 11 to 18 in Sherborne, Dorset, is another school in the south west encouraging its students to take a stand against injustice. As well as being a UNICEF Rights Respecting School, it is working to rewild its grounds with Operation Future Hope, a Swanage-based organisation whose vision concerns informing, mobilising and inspiring the

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upcoming generation 'to become the guardians of biodiversity and protectors of the whole community of life on Earth'. A student eco-enrichment group has been involved in this process: in October, the group planted a new bank of wildflowers which will bring more wildlife to the school grounds.

Last year's harvest appeal generated a huge response from students and staff, with hundreds of food items being given to two local foodbanks. Meanwhile, 85 shoeboxes of gifts were sent to poor and marginalised individuals in Bulgaria ahead



Photos: The Gryphon School



Photo: Queen's College

of Christmas 2020, with the school also encouraging people to donate coats and pyjamas to Dorset Council's campaign to 'keep children cosy' over the festive season. Along with students from two other local schools, Gryphon pupils have also raised nearly £2,000 for Asha, an Indian charity which helps around 700,000 people in over 90 Delhi slum colonies. Students from The Gryphon were also due to volunteer in the slums with the charity back in October.

A RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES

Independent schools are also helping students to find their voice and speak out about the things that matter to them. At Queen's College – a day and boarding school for children aged from three months to 18 years in Taunton, Somerset – extra-curricular provision is helping to educate pupils about a range of important issues. The school's Model United Nations club discusses a range of themes, from the rights of the LGBT

Above:
Queen's College students at an MUN conference

community to the political situations in different nations, and the group also works with Citizens UK, which enables the school to participate in its local community through active campaigning on local matters. Debating and current affairs clubs help students learn about topical issues, while the school's Films for Action group allows for discussion of themes arising from films from the digital library of the same name (whose aim is 'to provide citizens with the knowledge and perspectives essential to creating

Below:
Dr Preetpal Bachra and students at Bryanston School



Photo: Bryanston School

a more beautiful, just, sustainable and democratic society').

The school's International Student Group celebrates the cultural diversity of the Queen's College community by organising events to mark international festivals and traditions, welcoming all students who possess an active interest in learning about different cultures. A Sign and Sing club performs a range of popular music in sign language, while an antiracism group provides a platform to discuss aspects of modern racism, reflect on self-behaviour and discuss what can be done to address the issue of racism in wider society. The school's Sustainability Club also offers the opportunity to learn and talk about sustainability concerns, with these including water waste, energy use and conservation.

Bryanston School – an independent boarding and day school in Dorset for pupils aged 13 to 18 – is currently developing a taught programme to encourage pupils to identify injustice, as well as to help them

decide how to be proactive with regard to causes (should they want to do this). “The Year 9 Autumn Programme is split into three parts: ‘My World’, ‘Our World’ and ‘The Future World.’” says Dr Preetpal Bachra, head of pupil development at the school, adding that issues covered include identity, prejudice, persecution, international conflict and media coverage. The school’s history department has also recently introduced changes to the curriculum for first-year pupils, with a focus placed on the history behind rights and the struggle to achieve them. “Starting with the corruption that existed in the 1800s, pupils explore a range of turning points within the chronology of Britain and its Empire,” says Tom Strongman, subject head.

Additionally, Bryanston’s Green Committee is organised in a manner which lets students drive both its agenda and activities. Last year, pupils organised a whole-school litter pick, created their first environmental newsletter and met their local MP to raise



Avenue of trees at Canford School

Photo: Canford School



Black History Month at Canford School

Photo: Canford School

environmental concerns. This year, the group has been involved in bringing together different Dorset schools to create a pupil-led organisation to share environmental challenges and solutions. Looking ahead, it hopes to organise an annual conference, as well as increase the amount of schools involved.

STAYING ACTIVE

At Canford School – an independent boarding and day school for pupils aged 13 to 18 near the town of Wimborne Minster, events for Black History Month were brought into a single programme on the wish of pupil leaders, with these including activities in lessons and displays. The history department also ran a Black History of Dorset

workshop, in which pupils investigated the county’s black history by using archives and courses. “In 2020, we have seen issues of race and the problematic legacy of institutional racism come to dominate the headlines,” says headmaster Ben Vessey on Canford’s website. “These events have provoked a great deal of frank and honest reflection across society at large and at Canford. As a school community, we must always be looking to listen, learn and improve our understanding of the world around us so that we can engage with those issues in an informed and constructive

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manner, and thus make a positive difference to our world.”

The school also wants to become a greener place to work and live in, and each year chooses two Sixth Form students to lead on initiatives regarding this. Recently, one of the students netted Canford an Eco-Schools Silver Award for improvements related to energy, food waste and recycling at the school. This year’s chosen pupils hope to build on the former leader’s success.

Schools educate the adults of the future, and it is therefore vitally important that they teach and encourage pupils to speak out against the injustice that they see in the world. Though it is evident that work remains to be done, it is heartening to see that there are an increasing number of schools doing this within the UK education sector. ■

A matter of law

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) lays out the rights of children and young people with regard to freedom of expression. Article 12 of the convention (which 196 countries, including the UK, were party to as of September) states that all

children have the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters impacting them, as well as to have their views considered and taken seriously. Meanwhile, Article 13 states that all children must be free to express their opinions and thoughts. Article 15, which covers

freedom of association, also notes that each child has the right to meet with other children and to join organisations and groups, provided this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. **To read the UNCRC in full, visit unicef.org.uk.**