



THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SCHOOLS BLOG



My school has closed for the holidays. Where there had been a lively, noisy, flesh and blood community, there are now just empty buildings, fields and playgrounds. Even the picturesque dusting of powdery snow cannot disguise the fact that a school without its pupils is a lonely place, apparently bereft of life and purpose. Of course, works and repairs continue, at least for a few more days, and many staff are still meeting with parents or completing the various unfinished tasks of the term. However, at a time when the governors and I are putting our minds to the next stage of building at King's, this wintry emptiness is a reminder that even schools with the biggest swimming pools and the most expensive ICT suites are by no means certain to be the places where children are happiest or best taught.

The end of term is a time for reports. I wrote mine last week on the Upper Sixth and was amazed not just by the amount of hard work they had all managed, but the warmth of comments on their sport, music, drama, and community service. What really struck me was how much a good school is preparing its pupils not just for academia, but for the enjoyment and fulfilment of the rest of their lives. Surely at every school, every child should have the chance to learn how to perform on a stage, appreciate music, or play rugby, football or cricket, for example, even at the most basic level?

What would the end of term report be on UK schools generally? Well, whether or not they are helping produce future sportsmen and women, or great actors, or musicians, they do not seem to be teaching particularly well. "Could do better" would be positively polite for the end of year report, given that UK pupils are now rated 28th out of 30 in world rankings of mathematical aptitude. This puts our sons and daughters below those lucky enough to be taught maths in — say — Finland, Iceland,

the Slovak Republic or Slovenia. UK pupils scored over 100 points less than their Chinese counterparts at the top of the table.

But as teachers we always try to find a positive comment even for our most feckless pupils. There must be some good news for the UK in the international school rankings, produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development? We know we're hopeless at Maths, but surely in a nation that prides itself on its global language, its literary heritage and perhaps most applicably here, its sense of irony, we are top of the arts tree? Sadly not. In reading, we actually had our biggest fall. We came 25th, dropping from a lacklustre 17th in the last survey three years ago: almost every one of the 30 countries surveyed now has a more literate population of school children than we do. It is true, we came above average in science teaching, but the irony here is that at 16+, the number of UK pupils pursuing science is dangerously low. And all of this after a decade of mammoth and as it now turns out quite unaffordable investment in "education, education, education".

Just as new buildings do not in themselves make children succeed, so record government spending has never addressed the real problems facing our pupils. Michael Gove is right to place a new emphasis not on money, but on rigour. Now is the time to make a few resolutions for 2011. Higher standards can be demanded at GCSE and A level. Get rid of endless bite-sized and witless modules, with re-takes on demand, and ever more banal syllabuses based on leaden assessment criteria rather than real knowledge. Vocational teaching must be given a new sense of pride and purpose, and a full extra-curricular life needs to be encouraged in all schools, not remain the preserve of the few.

We're very good at demonising children in this country — now let's try inspiring them