

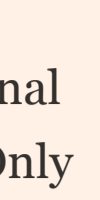
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Brett Wigdortz fights to improve the life chances of the UK's poorer pupils

The social entrepreneur on defying low expectations of poorer children

Miranda Green NOVEMBER 3, 2015



For a crusader, Brett Wigdortz is on the mild-mannered side. But the chief executive of [Teach First](#) is still, after 13 years at the helm, fired up by his organisation's mission: to improve the life chances of children from poor backgrounds by putting first-rate teachers into their schools.

"Everyone in Britain has to see educational disadvantage as a crisis," he demands. Only a third of 16-year-olds from the UK's most deprived households achieve the minimum five grades at C or above regarded as the international benchmark for success in public exams (GCSEs). Mr Wigdortz describes the particular and general failures of the system to help them do better as "huge tragedies".

"This is an individual tragedy for the young people involved and a national tragedy that we are losing 40 to 50 per cent of our kids, who aren't really going to be employable."



Tackling a tragedy: Brett Wigdortz in his central London office

Mr Wigdortz has been motivated since 2001 by how the decks are stacked against poor pupils. The then McKinsey consultant was put on a pro bono project on how to break the link between poverty in London and low attainment at school. He came up with the idea of creating a social enterprise to raise the quality and prestige of teaching in the most challenging state schools.

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Six months' leave from the consultancy to turn his plan into reality turned into a long-term commitment, dual citizenship for the New Jersey-born Mr Wigdortz, and a place among the most respected educational pioneers in the world.

Teach First began recruiting top-performing graduates from the most prestigious universities to teach in London's low-income areas. Each young teacher undertook to spend two years in the most difficult classrooms in the country, in exchange for a tempting menu of mentoring, support and contacts with the elite employers who sponsored the organisation.

This September, the programme reached the last outlying schools in England and Wales to become nationwide. It is the largest graduate recruiter in the UK and "Teach Firsters" have taught more than 1m pupils.

Through partners at Teach for All, co-founded by Mr Wigdortz and the head of the US scheme Teach for America seven years ago, this same approach is targeting educational inequalities across the world.

Global comparisons sometimes leave him amused at the fatalism that can afflict even the most reform-minded partner. "I've been in over 20 countries, and in every one someone in government or somewhere says: 'You don't understand, this place is unique — very different — and here are the reasons why it won't work...'" Everyone has their own excuses.

Examples of pedagogical brilliance around the world stand out. On a recent trip to India he watched a young Teach for India graduate in Mumbai hold the attention of 106 pupils in a dirt-floor room, tailoring simultaneous lessons for several ability groups. "One of the best lessons I've ever seen."

“**He is often left amused by the fatalism that can afflict even the most reform-minded partner**

But Teach First's approach, based on high-quality teaching and defying low expectations, can only scale up to meet the world's education challenges, he says, if governments lose their obsession with "structures and systems" and instead focus on recruiting, training and supporting the right people.

In countries that consistently score well in international education rankings — Finland and Singapore, for example — teaching is a prestige occupation. And while money has not been poured into large salaries, these champion systems lavish spending on professional development to prevent the exodus that is hitting the profession elsewhere.

"If governments just focused on getting the best teachers and the best leaders, then these people themselves could innovate," argues Mr Wigdortz.

As a social entrepreneur, Mr Wigdortz happily embraced endorsement and grants from government ministers — but he guards his organisation's independence carefully. Politicians, however well-intentioned, are captive to a short-term mindset, he says.

"Ministers move on every few months," he complains, adding that in more authoritarian, centralised states such as China and Singapore, it is easier for schools to avoid being buffeted by change. In democracies, he believes those facing voters must strive for cross-party agreement. "If you look at the best education systems, one political party on their own can't do it."

"There is no perfect system," says Mr Wigdortz, "and education has historically not been good at sharing best practice." But learning from other systems could be crucial in the next few years, because so many problems are common to all — and interventions come too late for some children.

The shortage of teachers in maths and science subjects is a global crisis. "Is there a technological solution we haven't looked at yet?" he wonders.

Other nations with recruitment and retention problems could learn from at least one Teach First innovation — the organisation has changed the tone of its advertising after psychological research by the UK government found applicants responded better to the idea of taking on a tough challenge, rather than to appeals to their social conscience. And money, he warns, may become a barrier for some top graduates now that private sector salaries, kept in check since the financial crash in 2008, are rising.

In general, Teach First's recruits get their rewards from the work and the children, he says — 63 per cent stay for at least three years and the majority stay involved in education. This is in spite of Teach Firsters who emerge from the first tough few months with hair-raising anecdotes.

As for the man at the vanguard of this movement, he seems wary of the idea that only an American faced with class-bound English schools could have done it. But he admits that a reformer needs "naïve optimism" that can infect others.

"Maybe sometimes being a bit of an outsider and being a bit naïve helps people to see what is possible."

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