

Education Matters in Salford – A tale of one city

In his Tale of Two Cities, Dickens placed “the spring of hope” next to “the winter of despair.” In our time, the city of Salford is telling a tale of new life and progress in education that follows an earlier era, in which several schools were placed in special measures, while other schools were underachieving. David King, Director of the City Light Trust in Salford, gives his perspective on this gradual change in relation to the Christian community, which has adopted a long-term approach to working and praying for the transformation of the city.

“Prayer is of fundamental significance in our strategy for the city of Salford,” he says. He explains that the Trust has held quarterly city-wide prayer meetings for numerous years in which they pray, among other things, for education. This led to their first Week of Prayer in 2004, an initiative that has been held annually ever since.

“Our prayers focused on local schools, high schools in particular. The Christian community adopted several local high schools in prayer. Moreover, we prayed for the staff, school governors, and local authority. We prayed in its head offices and in the Salford Council chambers. Our prayer walks passed all the high schools, praying success, blessing, and encouragement on the schools.

We don’t want our young people to be restricted. Our desire is that they all fulfill their God given destiny and education is a vital part of that.”

He adds that it is important to add knowledge to faith so that our prayers are well informed. In Salford, every local authority has developed its own action plan based on the ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda of the UK government. The action plans have five focal points: Being Healthy; Staying Safe; Enjoying and Achieving; Making a Positive Contribution; and, Achieving Economic Wellbeing. Each of these aims connects with the good news of Scripture and constitutes a key cornerstone for every child’s life.

“We gave the believers a copy of the Salford City Council brochure and asked them to put it in their Bible so that we can pray consistently and knowledgeably,” he says.

“On the basis of our prayers, we became more attentive to needs and opportunities. There was, for example, a real need for people to become school governors and we have seen an increase in the number of Christians who have engaged in this way.

“This coincided with a change in the Christian mindset concerning our responsibilities. Where we understood the idea of working in Sunday schools or after school clubs, more Christians started to recognize that engagement with the local school is similarly a part of our discipleship.”

Peter Wilson is Chair of Governors at The Albion High School in Salford. The school was placed in special measures in September 2004, and the governing body was assessed as ‘unsatisfactory’. More recently, the school came out of special measures and the governing body was assessed positively.

Peter says: “Being Chair of Governors is part of my Christian life and citizenship. We are meant to be the salt and light in society. Governors both support and challenge the school, which is a tremendous opportunity to help create a place where each child can flourish, not merely in academic terms but as a whole person. Schools are meant to be happy places where each child receives the best support and education available.

“Building relationships is vital. Governors act as ‘critical friends’ of the school. As Chair, I am someone who walks alongside the head and functions as an important sounding board, endeavouring to provide wisdom and support in prayer. I also come in contact with officers of the local authority and Children’s Services.

“A recent OFSTED report mentioned that school governors are the largest voluntary body in the UK. There are still 60,000 places open. I have been a governor for seventeen years at this wonderful school, situated in a deprived and challenging part of the city of Salford. It is a vital way Christians can contribute to the wellbeing of staff and children and help create healthy and happy school communities.

“This year, the school achieved its best ever GCSE results. Another highlight for me was when, at our results day in 2006, a disabled pupil went to the Head and his deputies and thanked them – along with all his teachers – for everything that had been done for him. His personal results were very good indeed and I knew that what had been done for him epitomised what the staff of the school do for all its students”.

David King adds that it is vital to connect with every age range.

“Several churches facilitate toddler groups and nurseries, which means our connection predates the start of the school era at the age of three,” he says.

“We are looking to facilitate a connection in this transitioning which we hope to follow through from primary to high school, another key moment in a child’s life. A good transitioning is vital in order to prevent children dropping out of the school system later. Education concerns all-age learning, and we aim to connect with the structures, be it pre-school, primary, colleges, Sixth Form or universities.”

He adds that another positive development concerns the bridging initiatives that build links between the local church and local school.

“The Bridge project, for example, employs a schools worker who is involved with lessons, assemblies, after school clubs, and arranging visits to the schools,” he says.

Pop Connection connects primary schools with their local communities. This is done by creating an ‘enjoy and achieve’ project by recording its very own pop music CD which is then launched at a big community concert at a local church. Thus, the school, church and community groups celebrate together the achievements of the children and develop stronger working relationships. Everyone can be involved, grandparents, parents, friends or teachers.

“We represent Christ in the community and by taking an interest in, and engaging with, the local school we bring a measure of well being into the classroom”, according to Dave.

“Over the last few years, we have seen five GCSE’s at A-C grade move from 38 percent to 68 percent. While Salford ranked tenth of the twelve Greater Manchester boroughs, we are currently third, and none of the high schools are in special measures any longer. We honor all the hard work of the staff and we thank God for the incredible progress.

“Not only have we seen the grades rise, we see attendance level rise across the city, and, significantly, we see the aspiration rise. In primary education there are good reports as well. In 2007, The Deans School in Swinton topped the primary school league in England. The Manchester Evening News reported at the time: ‘Scores achieved by 11-year-old pupils in English, maths and science exceeded targets and nearly all of them reached levels normally expected of children aged 14. Staff put the success down to traditional teaching methods, old-fashioned hard work and a

willingness to 'pick and choose' from government policies'.¹ Furthermore, the GCSE results this year at a school for children with behavioural problems were the best set of results for them so far. Each child deserves the best education, whether they are the most troubled child or the most academically gifted child.

"We have a long-term view to build the Kingdom of God in the city. Our engagement with, and prayer for, education is part of an overall strategy that includes business, media, health, housing, and family. Praying for the family undergirds our involvement in education and will be a main focus this year. In order to see continual growth in education, we realize that we need to see further change in family and community life.

"It is important that we recognize opportunities and play our part. The development of Mediacity:UK, for example, is an open door for the input of Christian professionals in creating and delivering a media diploma. Every Christian working in education needs to feel fully released and supported in their work. Not only are we keen that each child fulfills his or her destiny, but the city of Salford also has a God given destiny. Whereas we were known in previous generations as a poor city, our destiny is to be prosperous, beautiful and vibrant. Being prosperous concerns our total well-being; finance, health, housing, education, the emotional and physical aspects of life. The Bible uses the word '*shalom*'. So we continue to seek the welfare of the city and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare we will find our welfare." (Jer. 29:5-7)

¹www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/education/s/1027264_salford_school_tops_league