

THE BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR ALL SCHOOL LEADERS

## CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

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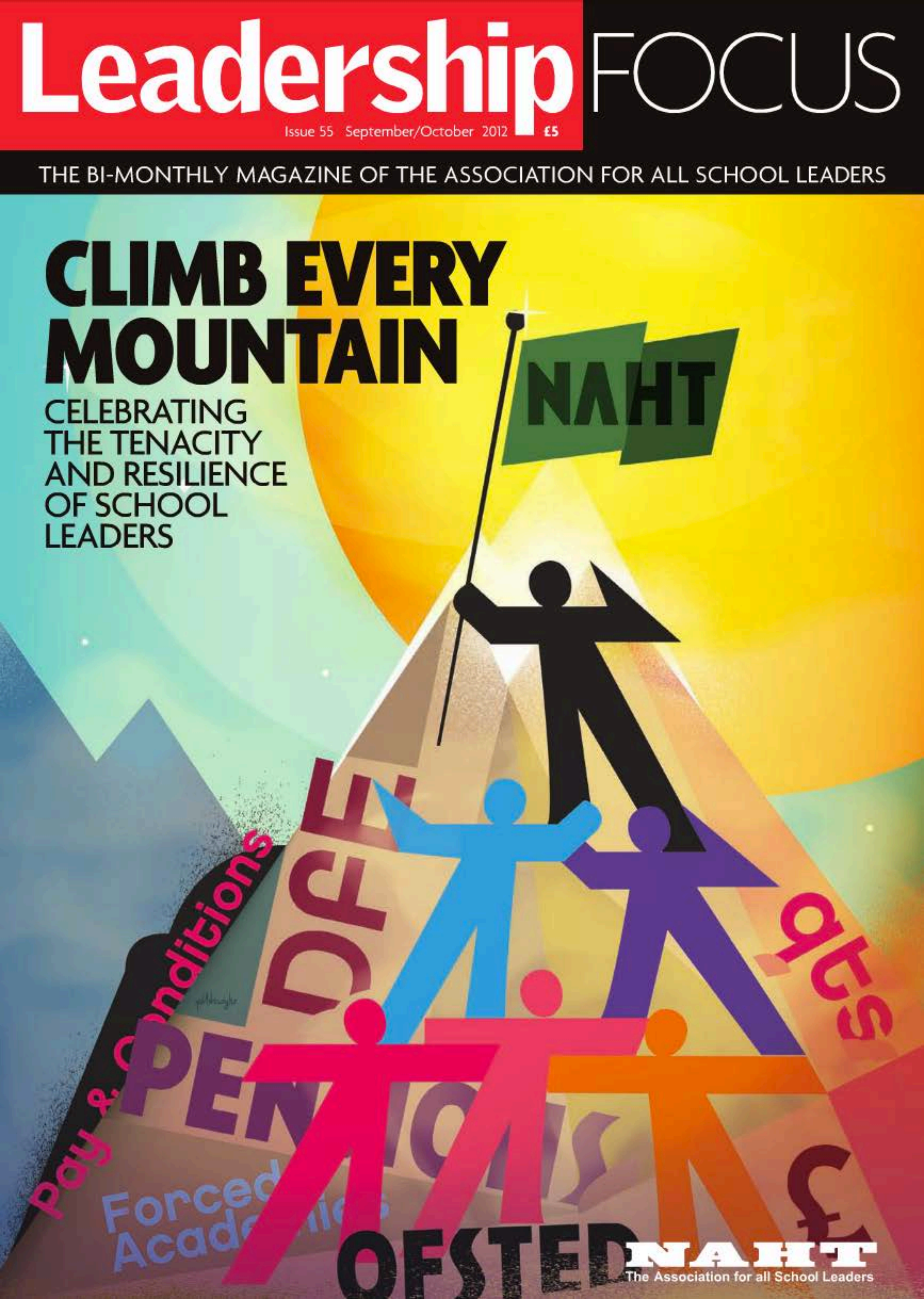
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# Leading by example

Head teacher Carolyn Barker has put student achievement at the heart of her plans at Barbara Priestman School in Sunderland. **Steve Smethurst** reports

**E**arlier this year we asked *LF* readers to point us in the direction of inspirational school leaders. One of the first names to reach our ears was that of Carolyn Barker, head at Barbara Priestman School in Sunderland.

Carolyn, who was appointed head teacher at the special school in January 2008, was nominated by the school's business manager, Karen Raine. As befits an experienced business manager, Karen sent us 18 good reasons (see page 36), as to why Carolyn should be featured. She also told us: "Carolyn leads by example. She empowers staff and students alike to be forward thinking and innovative, making the school the success it is. I firmly believe that she is an inspiration to many, both within and out of school."

Barbara Priestman is Carolyn's first headship and although she has a background in special education, she had previously been a deputy head in the mainstream part of the Education Village in Darlington, a federated primary, secondary and special school all on one site.

During her four years of headship, Carolyn has seen the school's remit change and it now has more than 120 students, aged 11-19 years, who have an autistic spectrum disorder or other complex learning needs. Before, the school had taken children as young as three, but had suffered from a falling roll as students with physical disabilities moved to mainstream schools.

When she first arrived at the school she says she was left "quite surprised" by an Ofsted report that found there was improvement required in what she describes as "some fairly fundamental areas", even though it judged the school to be good overall. "The one that really struck me as strange was about using assessment in order to pitch teaching correctly," she says. Furthermore, within her first two months, as part of the new school-improvement partner arrangement, the school

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35 ▶



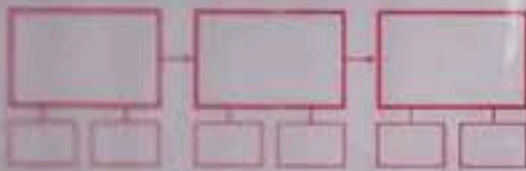


DEFINING IN CONTEXT



Circle Map

SEQUENCING



Flow Map

SEEING ANALOGIES



Bridge Map

CLASSIFY



COMPARING &

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was put into category two by the local authority because there was no data.

“As a new head I had no ability to assess how well the school was doing in terms of performance because of the lack of data. My school was actually described by the local authority as being ‘like a warm bath’. People were very interested in the welfare of our students, but not hugely focused on attainment and achievement.”

While her job interview with the governors had given Carolyn an inkling of what was to come, it was that first term in school that crystallised her vision for what needed to be done at Barbara Priestman.

Her overriding priority was to improve achievement. “You could say that everything I’ve done has been around that. It is about trying to make sure that everything we do has an impact on student achievement and attainment. So whether that’s the café we’ve built which gives students work experience and builds their confidence or whether it’s becoming a ‘thinking school’ that enables them to be more independent in the classroom, it’s all about that one thing.”

Carolyn says she was determined to turn her students into independent learners and stop any ‘spoon feeding’. The thinking school idea was something that she fell upon when researching critical thinking courses. As a result, the school started to work with the University of Exeter.

Carolyn explains: “Thinking school material tends to be visual so it suits our students’ learning styles, although there is a selection of thinking tools from which you can choose. We use a range of these, from Dave Hyerle’s thinking maps to De Bono’s thinking hats. We also use dramatic enquiry, philosophy for children and personal learning and thinking skills, so these things come together for the same outcome.”

She says that students take easily to talking about using their green hat, doing creative thinking or even saying: “I am going to use a double-bubble map or a bridge map to show what I am thinking.”

She says that it helps them to communicate in a structured way. “We used to talk to students and ask: ‘What do you think about this?’ You would usually get a standard ‘I don’t know’, but now they will talk quite ably about their thoughts, because they have had time to process them and, as they can see their thoughts visually, it gives them structure and allows them to communicate more effectively.”

One of the outcomes that Carolyn has seen is that more students are progressing to catering or agricultural college after working at the school – for example in the café or the forest school.

“Our latest round of internships involves taking over the school meals service (alongside a chef), the idea being they will do their NVQ2 and then get out into the industry and be very employable young people when they leave.”

Carolyn gives much of the credit for the turnaround at the school to the strength of her leadership team and wider leadership across the school. “In the beginning I had the ideas and got people to implement them. Now all staff contribute to the school visioning through research projects, leadership roles and performance management.”

Her latest Ofsted inspection came in March and the subsequent report informed Carolyn that her school was good across the board with outstanding in leadership and

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### KAREN MEANS BUSINESS

Karen Raine joined Barbara Priestman School in 1997 in an administrative position and by the time Carolyn arrived in 2008, she had outgrown the role and was determined to become a school business manager – even if it meant moving to a different school. Fortunately, Carolyn liked what she saw and invited her on to the leadership team.

Karen now has a raft of qualifications, including a BA in business management.

She is clearly revelling in the role. “Previously, when I worked in the office, I managed the budget but I didn’t see the impact of it. Staff would ask for funding and I’d assess the proposal from a business point of view. Now I’m part of the leadership team I see where everything fits together.”

Karen has been instrumental in setting up initiatives such as the forest school and the café and is delighted by their impact. “Over the past two years we have had a student each year who has completed an internship in the café where, among other things, they have developed money skills, completed their basic food-hygiene qualification, they have learned how to deal with customers and the confidence that it has given them is amazing.”

She also pays tribute to the rest of the leadership team: “Because of the wealth of experience we have we can bounce ideas off each other. We are all open enough to say if we don’t agree with something and to talk through how something will work and how it can progress. The team is established enough that we can challenge each other.”



## SEN LEADERSHIP

management. When *LF* suggests that this is something to be proud of, it receives short shrift.

"We wanted outstanding across the board," says Carolyn, clearly still annoyed. "But they are looking for sustained outstanding outcomes, and the report basically said we are on the verge of it but it needs to be embedded further."

It would seem to be merely a matter of time before Carolyn achieves her objectives. But massive change is coming. The school converted to an academy on 1 August, forming part of the Ascent Academies Trust, which initially comprises two former secondary special schools within a multi-academy trust, with the addition of a further two secondary special schools in the near future.

Carolyn explains that trust membership will be open to mainstream schools and it will have a trading arm offering such things as bespoke SEN training, student placements, multi-disciplinary team advice and support – even leadership support for heads, deputies and Sencos.

"It was an easy decision for us," says Carolyn. "We want a clear vision for SEN and coordinated responses to SEN students across the city, which we felt was lacking in the local authority, mainly due to the huge staffing changes that have taken place. I have been here only four years, but there have been at least three changes of personnel in terms of leading SEN, so there hasn't been a strong vision or plans for the future. That is something we felt we could take forward very strongly as a group of four schools.

"It also gives us the flexibility and freedom to start looking at further opportunities and career progression for staff. We have a strong team of support staff and this will give us the opportunity to recognise the quality of the contribution they make to the school."

For Karen too, this means a huge change. "Carolyn and I have just been talking about what the implications are and it is quite exciting but frightening at the same time. For example, we're going to build a new sixth-form block and make some substantial extensions to the existing build as our numbers have increased by 50 per cent over the past four years. We're also looking at FE provision and supported living for 19 to 25-year-olds as a key area for development."

It seems that to be an inspirational school leader you can never stand still. If you ask Carolyn for the secret of her success, she says: "I suppose it was getting people with the right experience, because when you are building a team you want people who are fundamentally brilliant at teaching and learning. In terms of leadership, we have created a team that is able to set high expectations and challenge underperformance in an ethos of high-quality training and staff development. Barbara Priestman is definitely a learning environment for all and we have a large number of staff involved in further education and research.

"We also have a strong induction process; it's quite rigorous in terms of the amount of training and support. We are clear with new staff about our expectations as a school."

As Karen noted in her initial summary – it's all to do with being forward thinking, innovative, empowering and inspiring in equal measure. That, and leading by example. **LF**

• Do you work with an inspiring school leader?

Let us know at [naht@redactive.co.uk](mailto:naht@redactive.co.uk)

### THE 18-POINT SUMMARY

- 1. Increased leadership capacity** – senior leadership team increased from four to six (including a business manager); also a middle leadership team of three. Leadership development through the use of the Insights Discovery Programme.
- 2. Specialist school** – became a Technology College, creating links with other schools and partnerships.
- 3. Forest school** – developed on nearby waste land; staff were trained and a manager appointed to look after the school and animals, and teach students about horticulture and animal care.
- 4. Assertive discipline** – was introduced, focusing on positive behaviours and empowering students to take responsibility for their own actions.
- 5. Thinking maps/thinking hats** – visual tools were introduced to enable students to process methods of thinking.
- 6. Thinking School** – became the first special school to become a Thinking School, through the University of Exeter.
- 7. Opening Minds** – introduced in KS3 to encourage creativity and innovation within the curriculum.
- 8. Dramatic enquiry** – working with Cap-a-Pie through Creative Partnerships to develop innovative learning experiences; production of DVDs sampling students' skills and knowledge.
- 9. Connecting Classrooms** – developed through the British Council, leads a partnership of four schools in Sunderland to link with a school in India.
- 10. P4C** – implementing Philosophy for Children across all age ranges.
- 11. International primary curriculum** – recently introduced to develop learning experiences in KS3.
- 12. Increased attainment** – increase in the number and levels of courses on offer to older students; increase in number of 5 A\*-C GCSE passes from 0 per cent in 2008 to 55 per cent in 2011.
- 13. School café** – the facility was built and a manager appointed; work experience opportunities offered.
- 14. Internships** – offer of student internship within school reception, also links to student journalism.
- 15. Performance management** – introduced for all staff, with a focus on development.
- 16. Train the trainers** – a number of staff, including Learning Support Assistants, are trained as trainers for areas such as assertive discipline, thinking maps and training new members of staff.
- 17. Career progression** – implementation of middle-leaders' tier; SBM achieved BA (Hons); admin staff working towards degree and NVQ qualifications; opportunities for Learning Support Assistants.
- 18. Investors in People** – obtained the gold award.