

# The Greatest School On Earth?

Headteacher **Gary Spracklen** shows how the principles of climate, creativity and collaboration help his school aspire to be the Greatest School on Earth.

I love my job, I love inspiring children to learn. I love leading a school that makes a real difference and I love sharing my work with others around the world. All of this pales into insignificance though when I think of my own children and the love I have for them. I'm not the perfect Dad (I don't think anyone is) but I am always touched when one of my own children (I have three in my little tribe) tell me that I'm "The Greatest Dad on Earth"!

I realise that not every child has the opportunity or reason to say those words to their father, however, surely it's a world we should aspire to? After all, who wants to have the Second-Greatest Dad on Earth? In the same way, should we not aspire for all our children to be in the "Greatest School On Earth"? A place and space where children are proud to be, in environments that enable and inspire better learning for all?

My name is Gary Spracklen and I am Headteacher at The Greatest School On Earth! I'm also Innovation Director at the Association for Learning Environments—UK and Europe and a member of the Department for Education's ETAG (Education Technology Action Group).

I have experience leading highly progressive programmes of innovation in learning which has seen schools adopt a stage-not-age, all-through approach to learning and teaching.

In 2013, I led the first large-scale 1:1 deployment of Google Chromebooks in Europe, building on a strong vision to see technology transform learning. I've had an interest in technology since a young age and it was while I was an NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) that I developed a reputation for my drive, enthusiasm and the innovative use of technology to both challenge and support all children to reach their full potential. It was as a result of my work using iPads with children with physical disabilities that I won the South West Digital Educator Award in 2012.

Through my involvement in working on several new build school projects and most recently being the lead educator on a £24M refurbishment programme, I've come to realise that technology alone is just one strand in developing the right environment for learning for today's children.







For me, a well-rounded educational experience for every child doesn't fall on the shoulders of the school, teachers and staff alone. If we believed it did, we would be neglecting the fact that much of a child's life and education occurs outside the classroom. What happens before the school day starts and after it ends can be just as important and impactful in the lives of our children as what happens during the traditional school day.

This is why community engagement and involvement in schools is such an important facet of the educational process. As Headteacher of The Prince of Wales School, the support and enthusiasm for the school and what it stands for from our parent and carer community really does matter!

We are a fully inclusive mainstream First School with a wide range of experience of successfully meeting the needs of children with significant barriers to their learning. We have a resourced provision for children with physical disabilities, mainly cerebral palsy. Our staff are trained and positive about including children with serious medical conditions, children with learning difficulties and a variety of syndromes within an inclusive mainstream environment. The school has an ethos that welcomes all learners and seeks to inspire everyone to learn. This is an ethos and culture embraced by not only our children and staff but our whole school community who believe it's important to "make a difference".

In 2018, as a community, we began a journey of understanding how learning environments could have a positive impact on learning. The project began with the refurbishment of our Reception

(aged 4 and 5 years) Class Learning Space in January 2018. The space had become tired over many years and was not supporting the style of independent learning we wanted to foster for our young people. With a limited budget we set about making changes but when funds ran short we turned to our community for help.

### The response was phenomenal!

Over night, because we reached out, we had parents, carers and grandparents turning up to lend a hand. The project quickly grew and soon showed that when a community works together, great things can happen in the lives of our children.

Goffee and Jones (2013) proposed 6 characteristics for "The Best Workplace on Earth" -

- Let people be themselves
- Unleash the flow of information
- Magnify people's strengths
- Stand for more than shareholder value (more than an "Outstanding" Ofsted rating)
- Show how daily work makes sense
- Have rules people can believe in

At The Prince of Wales School, through our community project to understand how learning environments could have a positive impact on learning, we saw all six of these characteristics present!

County Advisor, Sharon Peel, who had visited the space before the makeover wrote in her second visit report (post makeover):

*"Since the last visit there has been a considerable change in the reception class learning environment. Parents and other members of the community joined the school staff in completely renovating the classroom and turning it into a calm, ordered environment with stimulating resources that are well organised and easily accessed by children. This new enabling environment fully supports children to play and explore, be active learners and be creative and critical thinkers. It's a great achievement that the school, parents and community should be proud of."*

– Sharon Peel, 2018

After such success in one space, we couldn't just stop there! We quickly realised the new space was having such an impact that we need the same for all our children.

The ambition of the whole community was reflected in the school's Governing Body who for the first time in nearly twenty-five years changed the school vision, so it now read:

*"We intend to be an outstanding school. Our children grow into confident, enthusiastic and happy learners who develop their abilities and talents to the full and achieve their very best. With the support of our local community, all of our children are offered a wide range of high quality learning experiences in learning environments that are safe, exciting and fit for purpose. Our children are fully engage in the next stage of their education."*

### So where are we now?

Well, to date, we have created five re-designed learning spaces in just under a year. Each space has been made possible through community involvement and extensive community engagement.

We've tweaked our approach to match the needs of the learners involved. We've also involved them too in the design and delivery of the spaces.

While each space as it's own unique feature, each space is built around the same three founding principles of **Climate**, **Creativity** and **Collaboration**.

**CLIMATE: LIGHT** – We've consciously made our spaces light and bright by removing curtains, cleaning the windows and making sure all the paper is off the windows. We've invoked a "glass means glass" protocol. We know that children learn best when the light levels (lux) are high. We will seek to monitor these levels in the future.

**CLIMATE: NEUTRAL COLOURS** – Similar to the Reggio Emilia approach, we've utilised neutral colours as part of our design. We believe neutral colours provide a calming influence to the children (and adults) using the learning space.

**CLIMATE: NATURAL RESOURCES** – Again, following the Reggio Emilia approach, we've used extensive natural resources in our design. We believe these provide similar benefits to the neutral colours used and compliment the aesthetics of the spaces. The removal of plastics also promotes our "Eco-Schools" ethos.

**CLIMATE: SOFT FURNISHING** – Soft furnishings provide a comfortable place to sit or to curl up with a classic text. The approach provides a variety on seating which gives learners (and teachers) a choice.





**CREATIVITY: SINKS** - Two sinks, both with hot water supplies, have been added to each learning space. Sinks have high-quality fittings and have been deliberately installed with no draining board to avoid clutter. Setting the two sinks at different heights allows easy access for both adults and children.

**COLLABORATION: TIERED SEATING** - Tiered seating allows people to gather closer together in a smaller space. This is great for quick instruction and ensures a greater focus on the speaker with less distance between the speaker and the person sat in the back row.



**CREATIVITY: VINYL** - All learning spaces now have large vinyl flooring areas to support more “messy learning.” Wood effect vinyl has been used to support the theme of natural resources and colourings.





**COLLABORATION: WRITABLE SURFACES –**

Writeable surfaces are everywhere within our new learning spaces. The surfaces have all been designed to be accessible and written on by all children and adults in the space. They provide a public gallery of work in progress.

As a community, we are proud to be creating a place and spaces where our children are proud to be. In the The Greatest School On Earth, learning environments enable and inspire better learning for all.

We cannot wait to see where our journey takes our community next!

