



Tim Wilbur

Why we have to be aware of vulnerable schools

On two occasions this summer, Gabbitas has been contacted to come to the aid of parents who have had schools close around them. This is incredibly distressing for all those involved as they seek to stabilise their children's educational progression, often at very short notice too.

To be fair, all things, including schools, have life cycles. Schools that close do so for a reason. Largely, they close for financial reasons, but these are often brought on by deep underlying causes that many of the schools do not see a way to address. This is also not myopia, it is a genuine lack awareness in what can be a very 'closed' industry. The Independent Schools Council's Census and Annual Report suggests that there are several downturns within the sector at the moment, although the general prognostications for independent education remain strong.

Current issues relate obviously to possible implications of Brexit, the decline in catchment in the regions, the continuing trickle from single-sex to co-educational schools, amongst others.

One of the major issues Gabbitas is currently researching is what makes a school vulnerable? Where is the tipping point at which a relatively successful school suddenly - and it is often suddenly - becomes vulnerable to market caprice? The current research involves collecting and processing vast amounts of data. This information is sifted by region to try to isolate specific rather than

generalised information. The sector that would seem the most vulnerable and under the microscope now is junior education (ages 3-13) and specifically in the regions. Two such areas, the South-West and the North, have lost ten and five such schools respectively in the last decade.

The purpose of the exercise is obviously to provide help to schools and thus reduce parental anxiety. With the information collected, it will be possible to create a tool-kit for schools to self-evaluate their positions. This will involve the creation of a benchmarking document showing the necessary Key Performance Indicators to run a successful school. These KPIs will cover all aspects of academic, financial and pastoral concerns. They will also provide in-depth analysis of issues relating to admissions, discounting and stakeholder satisfaction, etc. So far, we have identified 46 measurable areas to provide an efficient health-check. We

certainly cannot afford to lose any more independent schools through lack of awareness as to how and when their situations become vulnerable. Many of these schools remain crucial, particularly to rural communities already under pressure for many other reasons.

We cannot afford to lose any more independent schools



In an industry based on confidence, it is hard for schools to admit to falling rolls, financial difficulty or the growing cost of compliance. However, help is always at hand to provide sector knowledge and possible solutions. **SR**

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