

The One Type of Leader Who Can Turn Around a Failing School

by Alex Hill, Liz Mellon, Ben Laker, and Jules Goddard

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The strength of a nation's economy and the vitality of its society depend on the quality of its schools. So why does the UK still lag behind its peers, despite investing more than them? The 2012 OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study showed the UK invested the 8th largest amount out of 34 OECD countries, but only came 19th in mathematics, 14th in science and 16th in reading.

To try to answer this question, we studied the changes made by 411 leaders of UK academies. Our findings suggest that it's because we're appointing, rewarding, and recognizing the wrong leaders. (A UK academy is a publicly funded school or group of schools. One school can acquire others to form a group, which shares resources, making investment easier and cuts less painful. Academies have devolved decision-making powers enabling them to bypass local government.) We interviewed these 411 leaders, as well as those who work for them, analyzed their education, background, and experience and recorded their actions and impact using 64 investment variables and 24 performance measures over seven years.

We found five types of leaders, but only one that was truly effective. We also found that the most effective leaders were the least well-known, least rewarded, and least recognized; although they did a great job, the results took time to show, allowing them to be overlooked. Yet they were the only ones who built a school where exam results continued to improve long after they'd left. If more of them can be identified, developed, and appointed, we believe the whole education system will improve.

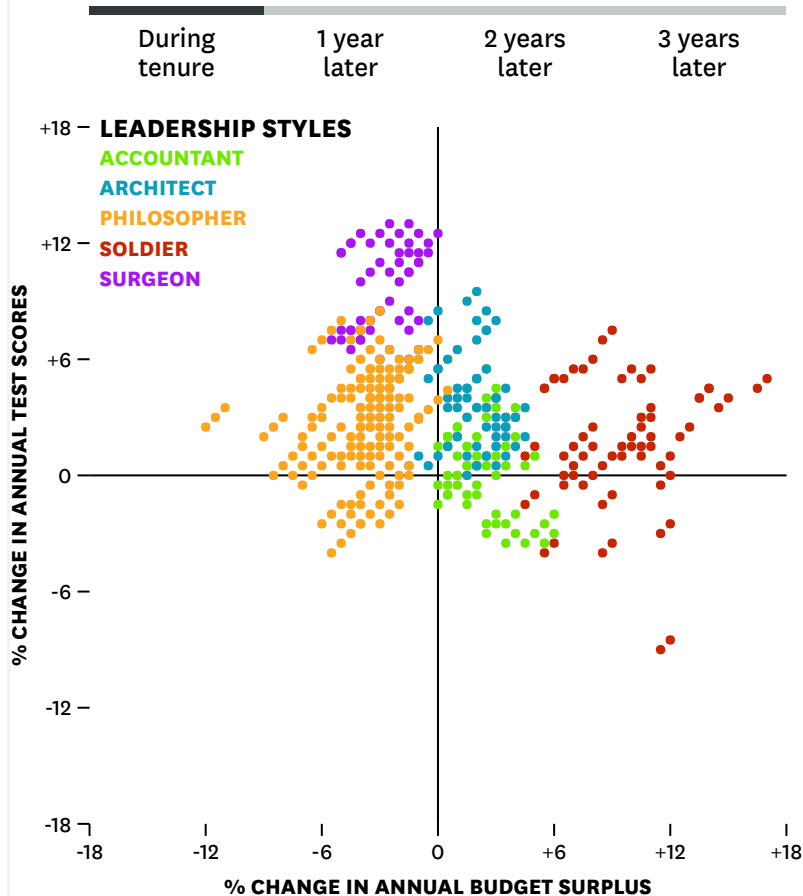
Five Types of Leader

Studying such a large number of leaders who all faced similar challenges with similar options in organizations that are regulated, measured, and documented in the same way enabled us to directly compare what they did, why they did it, and the impact they had. We also analyzed their backgrounds, values, behaviors, actions, and impact both during their tenure (typically two to three years) and in the three years after they left.

School Leaders Affect Test Scores and Budgets Even After They Leave

Five styles of leadership show different results, with “architects” outperforming the others. See how this plays out for former UK academy heads over a three-year period.

PLAY ANIMATION



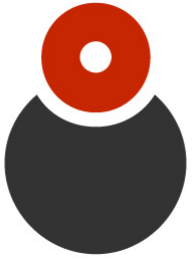
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We found leaders who talk a good game, but have no impact; leaders who make everything look great while they’re there, but everything falls apart after they leave; and leaders who improve the schools’ long-term financial performance, but exam results stay the same. And then there is the rarer, far more effective leader, who quietly redesigns the school and transforms the community it serves.

The Five Types in Detail

Surgeons cut and redirect, focusing on test scores.



The first group of leaders we call surgeons. They are both decisive and incisive. They quickly identify what's not working and redirect resources to the most pressing problem – how to improve this year's exam results. By background, they are usually Physical Education or Religious Studies teachers (85% in our study) who have a high profile, both inside and outside their school. They believe schools fail because students are not performing and, if they remove the poor performers and make the rest work harder, then performance will improve. “We can't help everyone”, one Surgeon explained.

They've always enjoyed winning and strongly believe that you win if you're fit, train hard, and have the right attitude. They often arrive with a reputation for being able to turn around a school quickly, as they've done this many times before in their career. They're tough, disciplined leaders who believe that their job is to get the school back in shape fast with new rules and hard work. They focus on investing in the oldest students as these students are the ones about to take their exams; from a Surgeon's perspective, these students' exam scores are an immediate problem - and they haven't got time to look at anything else. To quickly boost exam scores, they typically remove poor performing students, cut out non-essential activities, move the best teachers to the final year, reduce class sizes, and increase revision (e.g., test prep).

Unsurprisingly, examination results improve dramatically in the one or two years they're at the school (although revenue falls as they remove poor performing students). However, these examination results don't last. After the Surgeon leaves, exam scores fall back to where they started, mainly because younger students have been ignored and underresourced for the previous two years. It's impossible to close this gap, no matter how hard everyone tries. Some parents claim it's because the new leader isn't strong or decisive like the old one, but the teachers know it's the result of two years of cuts without any investment. In the meantime, buoyed up by an undeserved reputation, the Surgeon has moved on to their next patient.

Soldiers trim and tighten, focusing on the bottom line.



Soldiers like efficiency and order. They hate waste and believe schools get into trouble because they're fat, lazy, and wasting public money. By background they are normally Information Technology or Chemistry teachers (95% in our study), who have often moved out of the classroom to manage support staff early in their career. They tend to see running a school as similar to managing a large IT project and believe if they focus on costs and deadlines, the rest will take care of itself.

They're tenacious, cost-cutting, and task-focused leaders who believe they need to trim back every ounce of fat and make people work harder. "If you cut resources, people have to change!" one Soldier said. They typically cut support staff and non-essential activities, automate processes, and start using cheaper suppliers. This sends a shock wave through the school, as staff are told they're lucky to have a job and need to start working harder. Soldiers usually have a high profile inside their schools, but are less well known in the general public because they're so internally focused and because they don't increase test scores.

Financial performance quickly improves as costs fall, but exam results remain the same and morale dips as staff fear for their jobs. However, as soon as the Soldier departs, costs bounce back to where they were. Teachers and support staff are exhausted and demotivated from working in a climate of fear and uncertainty and the cuts that were made are too deep to sustain. Investment can't be delayed any longer and new staff is recruited so the school can start to breathe again. As the Soldier moves on to their next mission, the processes they leave behind start to loosen and costs increase.

Accountants invest and grow, focusing on the top line.



Accountants try to grow their schools out of trouble. They are resourceful, systematic, and revenue-focused leaders who frequently taught Mathematics (78% in our study), so they have a good head for figures and a good sense of where extra revenue can be found. They believe schools get into trouble because they're small and weak. "If we're bigger, we'll be stronger" as one Accountant said. They invest to increase revenue and make the school stronger.

They are creative financiers who immediately look for new revenue sources, such as acquiring a primary school or developing non-teaching offerings using the school's facilities for out-of-hours gym memberships, meetings, and conferences. They improve the school's long-term financial performance and let teachers work out where to spend the extra resources.

Revenue increases dramatically during their tenure, but examination results remain the same as this is not their focus. Financial performance continues improving after they leave as revenues keep growing and costs start consolidating, but exam results hardly change.

Philosophers debate and discuss, focusing on values.



Philosophers are passionate about teaching and love debating the merits of alternative approaches. They are normally English or Language teachers (89% in our study), adept with words, and often come from a family of teachers. They believe schools fail because they're not teaching their students properly. They think of themselves as experienced teachers, rather than as leaders.

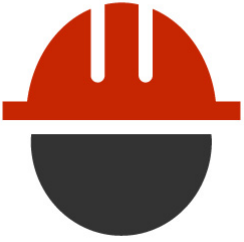
They spend as much of their time as possible with other teachers debating and discussing alternative teaching methods. They're somewhat elitist (although they'd never admit it) and believe teachers are far more important than the people who support them or the students they teach.

Teachers are very excited when the Philosopher first arrives, as she or he tells them how important their work is and how much value they add to society. They start going on trips to observe other teachers and invite teachers to their school, to share ideas and approaches. But fundamentally, nothing changes. Students carry on misbehaving, parents are still not engaged, and performance - both financial and examination results - stays the same. When asked why performance hasn't improved, the Philosopher says, "These things take time. Teaching is an art and it can't be transformed overnight."

In the two to three years the Philosopher leads the school, teachers become increasingly frustrated as they're still having to manage poor behavior and fill out forms. There are no significant improvements during the Philosopher's tenure and performance - both examination results and

financial – coasts or declines after they leave.

Architects redesign and transform, focusing on long-term impact.



Architects are the only leaders with any real long-term impact, as they quietly redesign the school and transform the community it serves. They typically studied History or Economics at university (68% in our study) and acquired an understanding of how past leaders created the societies and economies we live in today. They didn't set out to be teachers, but decided to initially work in industry (rather than education) as they like to “get things done rather than sit around drinking coffee” as one Architect explained.

Although they were successful in industry (normally working there for 10 to 15 years), they wanted to have a greater impact on society. So they looked around for a different career and discovered teaching. They're insightful, humble and visionary leaders who believe schools fail because they're poorly designed, or do not serve (and thus are not supported by) their local community.

They believe it takes time to improve a school and, therefore, take a long-term view of what they need to do. “After all, Rome wasn't built in a day,” as another Architect said. They redesign the school to create the right environment for its teachers and the right school for its community. Typically, they start by acquiring or setting up a primary school so they can teach students from a younger age, to give them more time to have an impact and embed positive behaviors earlier on. (In the UK, a secondary school can take over a primary school as long as the government agrees to this. This results in them combining their accounts, assets and liabilities; and enables them to share resources between the schools.)

They also improve their future opportunities by, for example, setting up a sixth form to help more of them get into university. They then improve student behavior (by moving poorly behaved students into a separate pathway), increase revenue (by developing non-teaching offerings) and improve teaching and leadership (by introducing coaching, mentoring and development programs). They also collaborate with local organizations to bring students' attention to the opportunities around them and arrange trips abroad to open their eyes to other cultures.

In short, they take a holistic, 360-degree view of the school, its stakeholders, the community it serves, and its role in society. In many ways, they combine the best parts of the other leaders, but they make these changes in a different sequence and for different reasons – to transform students and communities. For example, both Accountants and Architects also acquire a primary school early on. However, Accountants do this to increase revenue, but Architects do this so they can have more impact (by teaching students from an earlier age).

Performance is slow to improve as the Architects spend most of their initial time and energy engaging with the local community and building the right environment inside the school. But then examination results start improving in the third year of their tenure and continue improving long after they've left. They are visionary, unsung heroes. Stewards, rather than leaders, who are more concerned with the legacy they leave than how things look whilst they're there.

Who Gets Recognized and Rewarded

Perversely, although the Architects are the only leaders who improve long-term examination results, they are the ones we least reward, least recognize and rarely appoint.

Instead, we honor and reward Surgeons for dramatically increasing examination results during their tenure, even though these improvements cannot be sustained. In our study, 38% of the 68 Surgeons we identified had been knighted by the Queen, 24% had received a CBE, MBE or OBE and they are typically paid 50% more than the other leaders. However, we fail to see are the long-term problems created by simply excluding poor performing students and focusing resources on improving immediate examination results. In some cases it took schools four years to recover from these changes, with up to \$2 million paid to consultants to help clear up the mess.

The Philosophers were the most publicly recognized leaders in our study, with 30 per cent of the 161 we identified receiving a CBE, MBE or OBE from the Queen and 43% appointed as National Leaders of Education, to establish best practice and guide other leaders. They are also the most frequently appointed, 82% of leaders if our sample of 411 leaders is representative of the total UK educational system. However, they were the worst performing leaders in our study, both during and after their tenure. Although they talk passionately about the importance of good teaching and get everyone excited, they don't actually change anything and their schools either coast or decline.

Even the Soldiers and Accountants who only focus on financial performance receive more public recognition than the Architects (30 and 27% received a CBE, MBE or OBE respectively) and, along with Philosophers, are paid typically 20% more than the Architects.

Meanwhile, the Architects who quietly redesign their schools and transform their communities, go unnoticed. Is this because the improvements can't be seen until late in their tenure or after they've left? Or is it because they're outsiders who've not worked in education their entire career and see things differently? As one Philosopher exclaimed, "You can't run a school unless you've taught for 20 years!" This clearly isn't true.

Is it because they're leaders first and teachers second? In a profession that prioritizes teaching and often thinks schools can't, or shouldn't, be managed. Or is it because they don't publicize what they're doing and quietly get on with the job in hand? As one Architect explained, "Schools can't be run on personality alone. I want mine to keep improving long after I've gone." Or, as another simply put it, "No one should notice when I leave the room."

Finding More Architects

Our findings suggest the Architects have the most positive long-term impact on exam results (on average, 15 to 23% higher than other leaders). Other research has found a 50% increase in exam results leads to between a 0.7% and 1.5% increase in gross domestic product (GDP), as better educated students are more knowledgeable, more innovative and earn more money.

If our findings are representative of the whole UK educational system and the relationships between exam results and GDP is consistent with previous studies, then finding and developing more Architects to make them 50% of all school leaders would increase the UK's schools' performance by 9.68% and its GDP by between \$3.8 billion and \$7.6 billion.

How can we appoint more Architects? We also need an educational system that identifies, appoints, rewards, and recognizes them. One of the simplest ways to do this would be to change how we measure their impact.

Currently, we compare schools, and their leaders, by looking at the percentage of students achieving at least grade C in five or more subjects and the level of spend per student. However, these measures do not show how the leaders achieve these results or the value they add to society. For example, they might have cut the number of students to improve the percent with five or more grade Cs, or delayed critical long-term investments to reduce this year's expenditure. Equally, spend-per-head gives us no view of the surplus they've grown to be reinvested in the future. And, crucially, we ignore what happens after the leader leaves.

Instead, we would recommend assessing a leader's social and economic impact both during and after their tenure using new measures. Measuring and comparing the actual number of students graduating with a grade C in five or more subjects (rather than just the percentage) and the total budget surplus they create (rather than their spend per student) would be one place to start. This would help surgeons be seen as expensive cutters (not transformational leaders) who reduce the school's social impact and create long-term issues. Philosophers would be seen as ineffectual debaters (not inspirational leaders) who talk a good game, but have no impact. Soldiers would be recognized as temporary cost-cutters and Accountants as good long-term financial investors, with neither significantly improving student outcomes.

By contrast, the Architects would be highlighted as the transformational leaders they are and could then receive the recognition they deserve. As one Architect explained, "My measure of success is – are parents complaining more? And are we issuing fewer anti-social behavior orders (ASBOs) within our local community? If so, then parents are engaging more with the school and our community is improving."

Surely, this is the kind of strategic, transformational and inclusive thinking we need, if we want to actually improve results.

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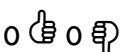
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Femke Geijssel 2 hours ago

The articles says there were interviews of 411 leaders, as well as those who work for them, analyzed their education, background, and experience and recorded their actions and impact using 64 investment variables and 24 performance measures over seven years. Were can we read the full study including methodology? Cordially, prof.dr. Femke Geijssel, University of Amsterdam / Dutch Academy of Leadership in Education

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