

Business class

A hairdressing salon, a fair trade café and a car valeting firm are just a few of the businesses set up by St Christopher's, a special school in Wrexham, to help pupils learn about enterprise. **Maxine Pittaway**, headteacher for 15 years, explains the school's business ethos, which led to her winning the 2009 Teaching Award for Enterprise.



HOW WE DID IT

“When I was at college, I attended a lecture about how education and business should work hand in hand. My mother was a special needs teacher and my dad ran a garage, so I had experience of both worlds and could see exactly what the lecturer was saying. I realised enterprise education could open doors.

I opened the hairdressing salon here 20 years ago. I was frustrated with sending students out on work experience, only to find that they hadn't been allowed to do anything more than put the kettle on and sweep the floor. I wanted people to focus on what our pupils *can* do, not what they *can't* do. The salon teaches them to answer the phone, use a till and deal with customers, giving them skills and confidence for the workplace.

From that start, we made work-related education a policy for all pupils across the school. I looked at what we could achieve, asking colleagues for ideas and visiting other schools and colleges for inspiration.

Now, in addition to the hairdressers, we have a beauty salon, a café with a fair trade shop, a charity shop, a market garden and stall, and a car valeting firm. We also have an environmental task force doing gardening for senior citizens. Off-site, our Millennium Eco Centre attracts 16,000 visitors a year.

Every project begins with an action plan. I work out what we need to set up the business and how much revenue it will bring in. Any profit goes back into the school, helping us sustain and grow our businesses.

We call ourselves 'St Christopher's school' – I've tried to lose the label 'special'. I'd rather people thought of us as 'specialists' in what we do. All children have special needs, and school is all about finding the right education package to meet their potential.

We have 240 full-time pupils. The youngest are six, but the majority are 11 to 19. We take children with severe and complex or moderate learning difficulties, children with emotional behavioural difficulties and other disabilities, and we have an autistic unit too.

We also have some pupils from mainstream schools for part of the week, and lots of young people from the 14-19 Wrexham Learning Pathways come to do, for example, caring or hairdressing. Our staff team is 140-strong, but only about 30 of those are teachers. We need lots of people with lots of different skills to develop our pupils' potential.

The 14-19 Learning Pathways have been revolutionary, offering pupils more opportunity to do vocational training in school. Wales is further ahead than England in that respect, especially since England rejected the recommendations of the 2004 Tomlinson report. The government needs to accept that the vocational route is as worthwhile as the academic one.

On the downside, our funding is not equal with that in England, or even with other authorities in Wales, and we suffer dreadful budget pressures. Nineteen of the 22 local authorities in Wales provide more funding per pupil in their special schools than we receive in Wrexham, although Wrexham LEA is very supportive of the school. I'd like to see a fairer system across Wales.

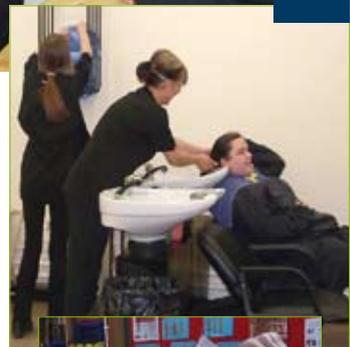
We couldn't do what we do without the support of the community – the public, the LEA, the 14-19 network and local businesses. Tarmac provided us with 46 acres of land at one of its quarries on which to build the Eco Centre. Brother Industries has helped us with all sorts of things, and one of its managers is our chair of governors this year. Other companies take pupils on work experience placements, provide materials, donate signage and sponsor overalls.

Ideas for new initiatives often come from the children. Some of our boys were saying mechanics' courses weren't pitched at their level. So we set up the valeting business, and now have contracts for car washing with local taxi firms and Wrexham police.

Working with the police led to a trip to the police station, where pupils noticed all the recovered bicycles. That resulted in a new project – 'recycle a bicycle', which linked in with our technology department wanting to make the Key Stage 3 curriculum more meaningful.

Our businesses give pupils the opportunity to gain accredited qualifications, and their results keep improving. For example in the shop we started with OCN [Open College Network] units, and we're now looking at City and Guilds. There will always be some young people for whom the OCN units are suitable, but others are capable of doing level 1 or higher.

Since winning the Teaching Award I've met Gordon Brown and been on TV, but the best thing has been the number of visitors it's brought to the school. It seems lots of other schools, mostly in the mainstream, are interested in following our lead and using vocational education to develop pupils' skills and self-esteem.



Pictured from top: A fair trade shop, hairdressing salon and bike recycling scheme are among the businesses run by pupils and staff at St Christopher's.

Below: Maxine at a Teaching Awards reception at 10 Downing Street.

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