

# What is a parent supposed

As a parent, the EADT's **LIZ NICE** is worried about the changes to education in Suffolk. Is she right to be? She spoke to headteacher of 'outstanding' County



Upper School in Bury St Edmunds, Vicky Neale

**I** moved back to Suffolk after having my children because I wanted them to experience the same three-tier education I'd had.

So, you can imagine my horror as a parent when Suffolk County Council decided that three-tier education had to go.

I heard all the arguments. Two-tier education was less disruptive. Results are "just better" with two tiers. But to me it made no sense.

I went through the three-tier system and loved it. Primary school taught me to read and write and add up, upper school helped me to get my exams and into university, but it was my middle school (St James in Bury St Edmunds) that made me.

There I made my first magazine, wrote my first play, made my best friend, Helen Thompson, who remains so to this day. And there I became irreverent – I still remember how in school orchestra we used to swap instruments just for fun. And it was fun. Because we were allowed to have fun. There were no exams to worry about, so I could just get on with becoming a person.

My worry, as a parent, is that in our results-driven education system, the "becoming a person" part of education is being lost.

I decided to go and visit Vicky Neale, the head teacher at County Upper school in Bury St Edmunds, who felt so strongly about three-tier education that she spearheaded the break-away movement that now sees Bury St Edmunds divided in two.

Was I just romanticising the past? Longing for something that has long since passed its sell-by date?

Vicky doesn't think so.

While most of Bury is working towards becoming two-tier in 2016, Vicky and County Upper are now part of the Bury St Edmunds All Through Trust. The trust also includes Barrow primary school, Tollgate Primary school, Horringer Court, Howard and Westley Middles. For pupils belonging to the trust, three-tier education is still possible, although according to Vicky, by talking about 'three tier', I am already old hat.

"It's all about one tier now, or 'all-through' as we call it," she says. "As far as we're concerned, that's what we offer here. One set of



■ County Upper School headteacher Vicky Neale advocates 'all-through education in three phases', which she believes is best for children.

Picture: GREGG BROWN

governors. One set of values across all the age groups. We have such close links with our primaries and middles that the children are coming here (to the upper school) all the time, so when they do eventually join us at 13, they don't feel daunted in the way they might have done in the past."

Some evidence suggests that children's education is affected by a move and that they can take up to a term to recover, but Mrs Neale says that with the new trust this is no longer the case, because the curriculum and assessment in every subject is planned from 4-18.

She shows me the plan for Spring Term: science morning at Barrow, speaker day at Howard, maths morning at Horringer, concert at the Apex and art display for all...

The programme reads like one school because, Vicky argues, it is. "We're all accountable for the children across all the different levels," she says. "That's really important. Horringer are ultimately accountable for our GCSE results, for example, and so on..."

I think many parents will find this appealing, and Vicky agrees.

"The problem is going to be with the number of places," she says. "When parents realise that they still have a choice, that their children don't have to stay in their primaries until they are 11, then I don't think

there will be enough places for the parents who want their children to move at nine. Parents are telling us that where a couple of new classrooms have been added onto a primary school it isn't enough."

This has always been my concern.

When I went to middle school, I remember being thrilled to discover the science labs and the sports

“The problem is that education is generally decided upon by people who were academically brilliant. They don't understand that 'better teachers' or 'working harder' isn't the answer

fields, none of which will be available to my children, if they remain within the two-tier system, until they are 11. That's two more years longer my children will have to wait than I did. Is that progress?

I've heard people say: "You don't need science labs to teach science." But really? It sounds like a money-saving exercise to me. Says Vicky: "There is no doubt that two-tier is

cheaper." And apparently quite a few parents agree with her:

"Horringer and Westley are already full in years 5 and 6 and many parents of younger pupils tell us that they are going to make the move," Vicky says.

We also spoke more generally about the future of education.

Vicky says the changes to our system in Suffolk won't be helped by the changes coming in from on high since Michael Gove's tenure as Education Secretary.

"The new GCSEs and A-levels are exceptionally hard," says Vicky. "We are going back to the '60s and '70s, when only 5% of pupils got A-levels, only nowadays we need to get a far higher percentage of pupils through. Whilst it is good to challenge the very bright, many pupils will find it very hard indeed."

"The problem is that education is generally decided upon by people who were academically brilliant. They don't understand that just 'having better teachers' or 'working harder' isn't the answer."

"In the same way that I was so hopeless at handicrafts I had to read poetry to the class instead, many children are brilliant at practical things but struggle academically. They shine when the academic subjects are taught in a practical context.

"Our system is designed for those

who can do the academic side but it completely ignores the practical. Which is why industry, the CBI and Government are crying out for more engineers and practical skills."

Vicky believes the future lies in proper technical education; not at separate technical colleges, where children can get stuck if they make the wrong choice, but within a trust of schools, so that schools can offer two pathways and children can move between them if necessary until they find the right path for them.

"My worry is not for the children at the top, it's for all those who are in the middle. The system has been designed by people who were at the top, for others who are at the top. But what about all the others?"

Vicky has been in education all her life. She doesn't tell me how long but I know she has devoted herself to the children of County Upper for as long as I can remember. She never misses a school performance, even if she sees it three times... "I have a very understanding husband," she says.

And County has been rewarded with eight outstanding Ofsted: two when she was deputy, and, since she became head, three full inspections, two surveys and a subject inspection.

"It's liberating (to be designated outstanding)," she said. "It means

# to believe?



■ Paul Geater says that a two-tier education is better for pupils.

## The county should have gone totally two-tier decades ago

All the evidence suggests children in a two-tier system do better than those in a three-tier system. National statistics prove the point, as do those in Suffolk.

The county has always been a mixture of two-tier and three-tier education, and pupils in two-tier areas - which include greater Ipswich and south east Suffolk - have consistently had better GCSE results than those in three-tier parts of the county.

There's no mystery about this. Children find the upheaval from moving to primary to secondary school unsettling. Experts believe this puts their education back by between one and two terms.

Reducing this disruption from twice in a child's school career to just once must be good.

And by having a disruption at 13 is incredibly disruptive - it comes only a year before youngsters begin their GCSE courses.

**Paul Geater**

our political editor's view



Evidence that two-tier education is better is clear - in Suffolk, the schools in the Woodbridge area were not performing well during the early 1980s. The decision was taken to re-organise them under a two-tier system from 1988.

Since then the Farlingaye pyramid has been one of the best in the county.

Changing education systems is incredibly disruptive for the pupils caught in it and the teachers involved - but there are times when change has to happen. Three-tier education was a 1960s-inspired revolution that failed. It is time to recognise that fact.

you can just get on with the job"; which, for her, is helping children "become the best that they can be."

"If a G at GCSE is the best they can do, then I will do everything I can to help them achieve that. If it's straight A's and Oxbridge, then that's also what we'll do all we can to help with."

I ask her how she found the courage to stand up against the LEA and others in Bury to fight for all-through education in three phases.

"Because it's what I believe is best for the children," she said. "Those three phases (4-9; 9-13; 13-18) fit with children's development. I've seen it so many times. It just works and that's why the top independent schools keep it."

The battle for three-tier versus two-tier is lost in Suffolk. I know that. And so does Vicky. But is the war really over? "All through is the fastest growing system nationally and the opportunity to provide it in three phases is there. New buildings

are going to be provided across the country to cater for the extra children going through the system. Why not make them 9-13 buildings on the same campuses?" says Vicky. "It doesn't have to be the end. Indeed, if we're going to get technical education right, we need to think differently in this country." But will we? I can't help feeling a bit disheartened; a bit as though decisions have been made from on high for which my children will suffer through no fault of their own while it's all being sorted out.

I ask Vicky about her own education, which culminated in a first class degree in physics from London University.

"My physics teacher used to tell me to sit at the back and read *Jackie* magazine," she said, her eyes shining. "He said physics wasn't for girls. But I didn't agree."

As she spoke, I found I couldn't stop listening to her. I hope I'm not the only one who does.



■ Further education students working on a true construction build alongside trade professionals.

## Work experience? This is the real thing

A collaborative construction project, launched before Christmas, between Havebury Housing Partnership and West Suffolk College to build seven new homes is on schedule.

The scheme, in which students will help build three high-specification houses and four flats on a former underused garage site in Mitchell Avenue, Bury St Edmunds, is expected to cost in the region of £900,000 to complete.

The project, believed to be the first of its kind, sees Further Education students working on a true construction build alongside trade professionals and will give students unprecedented hands-on experience of a real life development project.

The original designs were submitted by HE students last year on the Construction Management and Building Services courses and developed by one of Havebury's consultant architects, Infinity Architects.

So far students from the Bricklaying Level 2 course have been on site, working alongside professional bricklayers, and, as the build progresses, students from carpentry, electrical and plumbing courses will also get involved. In addition, six students from the college's Media Production course have been commissioned to film and edit a short film on the construction project, capturing each stage of the programme.

It further strengthens the college's commitment to work in partnership with local employers to offer students meaningful work experience opportunities to enhance employability and encourage entrepreneurship.

Gary Clarke, Assistant Principal for Enterprise and Employability,



■ Bricklaying students on the construction site at Havebury Housing. Below, Havebury Housing chairman in Donald McKenzie.

Pictures: CONTRIBUTED

said: "Our aim is to bring the world of work to life for our students. This project does this in excess. Thanks to Havebury Housing Partnership and their partner contractors, such as Cocksedge Building Contractors, our students are getting a truly real life experience of a construction project. Those who have been involved so far are coming back buzzing with excitement and I've seen an immediate change in their understanding and maturity".

Gary added:



"Cocksedge Building Contractors have been really fantastic with the students and have been so impressed with their commitment and enthusiasm for the project that they have agreed to offer one student an apprenticeship at the end of the project."

Suzanne Newman, Development Manager at the Havebury Housing Partnership, said: "Havebury are very committed to enhancing local communities. We are delighted to be able to provide local students with the opportunity to enhance their skills before going out into the workplace."

## College joins six-book challenge

Students at West Suffolk College are being encouraged to read six books over the next five months to be in with a chance of winning great prizes including a Kindle Fire and Amazon, Cineworld or book vouchers.

The Six Book Challenge is a national event taking place in libraries all over the country. To take part in the challenge, students just need to sign up in the library and take out their first book. They will be given a reading diary and are required to write a brief review of each title afterwards, before being issued the next book. Those who complete the challenge will be entered into the prize draw in May.

Librarian Julia Lale said: "We are delighted that dozens of students have already signed up for the challenge. We want to encourage readers to stretch themselves, so a confident reader who enjoys sci-fi may be challenged to try out a classic, or someone who doesn't read often will be offered a shorter book as one of their six.

"The prizes are great but I hope people will realise the huge benefit they will gain from reading more too. It is a habit that will enrich your life."

■ For more information about the challenge, visit <http://sixbookchallenge.org.uk/about>