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Putting a spring in their step

In 1992 JANE Hastings, a member of a church in Acton, walked up to the gates of Oliver Goldsmith's School in Peckham and offered to give her time free of charge to help the local youngsters read and write. Jane had decided that in some way, she wanted to support the people of Peckham, and realised that way was through education, writes Anthony Phillips.

But at that time Oliver Goldsmith's was in serious trouble; a supply teacher told Jane that the school was the worst she had ever worked in. The school accepted Jane's offer and she was handed pupils with the most challenging behaviour. Jane soon realised the need far outstripped what she could offer. So she set out to meet the need, recruited more like-minded and qualified people, and founded an organisation called Springboard for Children.

Now, as the organisation is about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, it employs 28 people and works across seven schools in Peckham. The organisation, a registered charity since 1994, now has 150 students with special educational needs on its books, most of which are still at Oliver Goldsmith's, which has been transformed under the leadership of head Mark Parsons. Although Springboard keeps on growing, the task it faces in Southwark is still seemingly insurmountable.

In the information Springboard sends out to potential donors, it says as many as 35 per cent of children in some local primary schools are registered as having special educational needs, and that only 4 per cent of these receive the statutory help. There are 5,706 children with special needs in the borough's primary schools. This is where Springboard comes in, to help those who have fallen behind catch up.

And staff have intercepted some shocking cases, which may have gone unnoticed. They found out that one nine-year-old pupil was sleeping rough, after being turfed out of his home. "He was looking tired. His concentration was very low. He told us he had been sleeping rough for a couple of nights," Anna Guyer, a board member says. He had been left in the care of relatives by his mother, who left the country. But those relatives threw him out of their home. "There are other children who've been fostered and haven't spoken verbally until they were six, she says. "We've got a child who is eight who cannot recognise the sounds of the first ten letters [of the alphabet]. For me to see an eight-year-old at that level was really quite a shock," She adds.

Failure

"We help children who are finding it hard to learn, to read and write. Some are dyslexic, some are from an environment where reading isn't part of the family culture. Some aren't very good at reading, so give up," Anna explains. These children, who are prevalent not just in Southwark but many other similar inner city places, are 'vulnerable to the cycle of frustration and failure'. Many young children in Peckham are battling against the odds, Anna says.

Only this week the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) names the area as one of the most deprived in the whole of London. "If you look at some families around here, there are significant social problems. A lot of our children have English as a second language. Some children are from difficult families, a lot have parents who are illiterate. It's not universally true, with the best will in the world their parents may not have the time to help them," Anna says. And it does not end there: "We have a number of children who come from war-torn areas and they are disturbed, and their families are traumatised as well. We have children who are trying to deal with all or that as well as coping with school."

Over-stretched teachers in Peckham's primaries, although they may try their hardest, cannot meet the needs of all the children in their classes, Anna explains. So while they address the children who demand their attention through their behaviour, some quietly slip through the system unnoticed. "The teachers here are fantastic, beyond the call of duty, but the demands on them are too high," Anna comments. And staff and volunteers there are aware of the susceptibility of youngsters in the area to move into a life of crime, and this is their attempt to right that wrong even before it happens.

Confidence

So Springboard approaches local schools, and asks if they would want their involvement. Many of them jump at the chance, Janet Bristow, Springboard's Education Director claims. If they have money to spend then they have the choice of paying for one supply teacher, or for the same amount, paying Springboard, who can do ten times more work. The school pays a per capita rate, and the rest is through Springboard fundraising. All the charity needs is a free space in each school, to operate from. Pupils are then referred to them by teachers, and are seen twice a week on a one-to-one basis. "Half of our job is literacy, but there's also confidence. Confidence is the key, for someone who has failed in the public sphere at something," Janet says.

Springboard staff sit down with the youngsters, and find fun ways to help them identify letters with the way they are pronounced and said. The youngsters are taken through the first ten sounds of the alphabet, while they trace their fingers around the outlines of those letters. They later move on to writing and spelling. Sometimes computers are used, to keep children's interest, and plenty of praise is dished out. "Their confidence and self-esteem grows. We would never initially ask them to do something they would fail at. They go away feeling absolutely delighted. We get children mobbing us in the playground, saying they want to come to Springboard," Janet says.

What Springboard aims towards, she adds, is to get the children to the point where they are functioning in class. As soon as they get to that point, they go back. "It's a very finely balanced thing, because we don't want to get them back too soon, and undo all the good work we've put in." The normal time span they attempt this in is two years, although those who need it stay longer. Setting this time span, Alma says, means they can see more and more children.

And seeing more children is the primary aim of Springboard. The charity has a few more Peckham schools which have registered an interest, and it is looking to expand. This could mean across the rest of Southwark, into Lambeth, other London boroughs, or other British cities. They have no doubt that the need is there and some schools are crying out for help. But, like everything else, it depends on funding. Springboard wants to expand, but needs the assistance of local people and businesses to do so, to invest in their children.

If you would like to become a Friend of Springboard for Children or are a business interested in supporting the organisation, please call 020 7635 6797.