

Sir Kevan Collins

Doctor of Letters

Durham Cathedral, 9 January 2020

Sir Kevan Collins' story is one of dedication to education and commitment to public service. During both his education and his career he has embraced a breadth of experience of people and places and which have given him a valuable understanding of people and honed his respected leadership skills, as well as revealing a staunch commitment to tackling disadvantage and lack of opportunity through education.

He was the fifth of six sons born into an army family, and went to primary schools in Germany, Cyprus and the UK, before going to secondary school in Preston, Lancashire. He finished his secondary schooling at Kirkham Grammar School and completed a BA in economics and politics at Lancaster University.

Following this, a change of direction saw him complete a PGCE at Bradford and Ilkley Community College. He started teaching in Malmesbury Primary School in Tower Hamlets in 1985. He was to return to the London Borough, in a different role 17 years later. At this stage he pursued his teaching career back in Bradford at Moorfield First School, before teaching on secondment at the International School of Maputo in Mozambique. On his return to the UK he worked as a Reading Recovery tutor, became a literacy adviser then senior inspector for Bradford local education authority. He completed his doctorate in education at Leeds University undertaking a comparative analysis of early reading development in first language English speakers and children for whom English is an additional language

These diverse experiences in terms of geography and roles as teacher, researcher and adviser and with his knowledge and experience of literacy teaching in particular led to his appointment as Regional Director then National Director, of the then Labour Government's National Literacy Strategy. When the decision was made to merge the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in 2003 he was selected as the overall National director, for the Primary National Strategy.

After this, Kevan took up his post as the first Director of Children's Services in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2005. Under his leadership educational standards in schools were transformed with Tower Hamlets becoming a national success story across primary, secondary and special schools. His commitment to tackling disadvantage in education can be seen in the way he describes his strategy for improving outcomes for children in the Local Authority as the need to ensure expectations in one of the country's poorest boroughs matched those in leafier suburbs, sending bespoke analytical letters about primary school results, and intervening strongly on the basis of the data to agree programmes of work needed to secure ambitious targets with the aim of what he described as "establishing the rhythm" of expectations for achievement. He was promoted to Chief Executive after four and a half years as DCS. Here, he managed a £1 billion budget and around 8,000 staff – and had the unenviable task of finding £50 million worth of cuts at the council over three years. His decision-making process to achieve this was filmed for the Channel 4 documentary *Undercover Boss*, in which he served meals-on-wheels alongside his employees and told the cameras that his priority was to "minimise the impact of cuts on the frontline".

But his heart was in education and the chance to bring together his experience of teaching, research and leadership was too good to pass up. He was appointed as the chief executive of the newly formed Education Endowment Foundation in 2011. He admits that leaving that high-status role to set up the fledgling foundation was "a huge decision" but perhaps made slightly easier by his earlier observation that "Chief executives of councils, they kind of float above the ground."

Sir Kevan's tenure as inaugural leader of the Education Endowment Foundation has seen the charity, which is dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, become largest funder of education research in the UK, and established Britain as the world's leader in the area.

The Education Endowment Foundation funds a large number of interventions that aim to improve educational outcomes for children and young people – but compared to other organisations of this type, the Education Endowment Foundation stands out for its relentless approach to producing and disseminating high-quality research that

focuses on the causal impact of new interventions on attainment. To do this, they have completed nearly 100 randomised controlled trials as well as another 50 evaluations and pilot studies. More than half of all schools in England have been involved in an Education Endowment Foundation research project.

These are hugely impressive figures, but even this might not be successful were it not for the Education Endowment Foundation's commitment to sharing and translating that evidence in a way that teachers can use – whether this is through their widely used Teaching and Learning Toolkit summarising research, or their innovative research schools network.

All of this risks downplaying the wider impact that Sir Kevan and the Education Endowment Foundation have made. As the first of the “What Works Centres”, the Education Endowment Foundation has inspired a host of other organisations, ranging from the Early Intervention Foundation to the Centre For Ageing Better, and from What Works Wellbeing to the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction. These centres aim to bring the same rigour and attitude to evidence and collaboration as Education Endowment Foundation to their own policy areas. Kevan has been made the founding chair of the Youth Endowment Fund, a £200m charity dedicated to reducing serious youth violence.

The Education Endowment Foundation, as the trailblazer, has shown that it's that not every intervention works – and that in some cases, it's just as valuable to know that something is ineffective as it is to know that it works, if that knowledge helps us prioritise resources and energy somewhere more successful. The Education Endowment's model is admired internationally with partnerships with other organisations in Australia, Chile, South Africa and Jordan all working to tackle educational disadvantage through a global partnership.

He was knighted in 2015 for services to education and has been identified as 'Evidence Champion' for the Secretary of State's Opportunity Areas.

And in his time as Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation Sir Kevan has cemented his reputation not only as a non-partisan, capable and personable

leader, but also as someone who thinks deeply – and has the evidence – about how to solve some of the most intractable problems in education: the long tail of underachievement, the link between social disadvantage and low attainment, and how to teach all children to read.

“England’s education system is not broken,” he is quoted as saying. “England has a good education system, but it is not yet good enough for everybody.”

Today's ceremony is a celebration of the educational achievements of the Graduands gathered here today - many of whom I am sure will go on to achieve great things themselves. We are fortunate that in Sir Kevan we have a champion of educational opportunity for those less fortunate in society, so they too can fulfil their life's potential.

Chancellor, I present Sir Kevan Collins, to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

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