



PEB Exchange, Programme on Educational Building 2004/10

The United Kingdom's Part-Privately Funded Business Academy Bexley

OECD

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/613086010348>

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S PART-PRIVATELY FUNDED BUSINESS ACADEMY BEXLEY

The Business Academy Bexley is one of the first purpose-built, part-privately funded independent state schools in Europe. As part of the United Kingdom's new approach to raising educational standards in areas of social deprivation and low educational attainment, Bexley was designed to facilitate integration among its students and with local residents and to enrich the learning process.



© Nigel Young/Foster and Partners



© Nigel Young/Foster and Partners

Academies such as Bexley are independent, publicly funded schools for children of all abilities; they are sponsored by business, faith or voluntary groups working in innovative partnerships with central government and local education partners. These independent state schools are not maintained by the Local Education Authority. They are funded directly by the Department for Education and Skills, though a parity of funding with schools in the maintained sector that operate in similar circumstances is ensured. Their independent status allows them the flexibility to be creative in their management, governance, teaching and curriculum and to find innovative solutions to meet local needs.

The Bexley academy, which specialises in business and enterprise, accommodates 1 350 students aged 11 to 18 in Thamesmead in the London Borough of Bexley. It replaces Thamesmead Community College which was located on the same site.

This article describes the principle of academy sponsorship and how the government-appointed project manager contributed to the Business Academy Bexley, along with the project's open building design.

Academy sponsorship

The principle of academy sponsorship is a simple and effective one. Private enterprises, educational philanthropists or charities become sponsors of academies and contribute up to GBP 2 million towards their creation. Each academy is wholly independent and is owned and run by a private charitable trust company. This company is permitted to engage in trade in order to generate profits, which are then ploughed back into the academy, enhancing the quality and nature of the infrastructure, the equipment, and the rewards to teachers and support staff.

It is intended that the sponsor be the chairman of the trust company and of the governors, and appoint the majority of the governors, drawing them – as is the case of Bexley – from the world of industry, commerce, science/medicine and finance, as well as from the local community.

Revenue funding is provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) at comparable levels to maintained schools.

Project manager

The DfES appointed a commercial, not-for-profit company to manage the project. 3Es Enterprises Ltd involves a team of consultants with experience in teaching and managing education processes. 3Es was the first private

company to take over the management of the regeneration and creation of a state school.

3Es assumes that all schools wish to be successful and works to remove any barrier stopping them achieving this objective; this ethos was built into the educational design of the Business Academy Bexley. The new ethos replaces over-didactic teaching, long cheerless corridors and the endless summoning of bells, with an innovative curriculum, enrichment activities, the renewed importance of the form tutor, links with business and industry, and high aspirations and expectations for all.

Building design

The Business Academy Bexley is an innovative building that aims to stretch the boundaries of education. The project's open, transparent and compact spaces were designed to encourage integration and communication between students of all age groups, students and teachers, students and visitors, and all the different educational disciplines in the curriculum, as well as to forge links with the local community.

Working within DfES guidelines, the present chief executive of the academy and the architects developed an open-plan compact design based around three courtyard spaces devoted to business, art and technology. The project aims to provide a safe, exciting and enjoyable environment for out-of-hours extra-curricular activities.

The courtyards link teaching spaces on different levels as well as those dedicated to different educational disciplines. The teaching spaces are separated from each other only by partitions (which can be moved to change the size of teaching areas or to adapt them for other uses) but are open to circulation space and courtyard space.

There are no corridors, and pupil circulation occurs through the business court, art court and technology court at ground level or along the courtyards at levels one and two.

The large business courtyard (measuring 450 m²) is the social hub of the school, housing a café at ground level and a theatre, television studio, editing suite and fully equipped gymnasium above. It is also home to a "trading pit" or mini stock exchange – with large plasma screens – offering students their first taste of trading stocks.

On a 33-acre site, the three-storey building totals 11 800 m². The piled steel structure has exposed pre-cast concrete floor slabs, stick curtain walling, external sun shading, membrane roof construction and glazed roof-lights.



© Nigel Young/Foster and Partners

To minimise energy use and provide optimum conditions, the building is capable of reducing heat loss in the winter and, through its double-layered facade with external shading louvres that automatically track the sun's path, capable also of reducing heat gain during the summer.

In order to link the building to its community, an existing foot bridge (which was largely unused) was demolished and replaced with a pedestrian crossing. The school's entrance is now visible from the crossing, and its presence can be felt by local residents and commuters alike.

The Business Academy Bexley opened in September 2002. From commencement of construction to official opening was a period of less than 20 months.

In future Bexley will include a primary section and a nursery with crèche, becoming one of the first "cradle to university" schools in the United Kingdom.

Bexley is the government's flagship academy, pioneering the way for other independent, publicly funded schools. UK government ministers have long-term plans for a further 52 academies to be developed in partnership with business to regenerate education in deprived communities.

*For further information, contact the architects:
Foster and Partners*

London, United Kingdom

Tel.: 44 020 7738 0455

Fax: 44 020 7738 1107/08