

## Learning by doing

*How schools are trying to inculcate intelligent giving in their pupils.*

CHILDREN can be tender souls. Pitch them a sob story and they often swallow it whole. Reflect the harsh reality outside the school gates, however, and they develop sophisticated strategies for making hard choices. That, at least, is the early experience of an initiative to teach philanthropy to young teenagers.



Two years ago the Big Give, an organisation which collates information about 6,000 charities worldwide in an attempt to foster philanthropy, asked the fee-paying Dragon School in Oxford to run a pilot programme. It gave the school £1,250 to donate to charity and asked 13-year-old pupils to decide where the money should go.

The children drafted reports championing the causes each preferred, argued their merits and finally cast votes to determine which charities received funding. Surprisingly, says Helen Cable of the Big Give, "real, mature and adult decisions" were made: pupils favoured small charities, such as a local one to assist homeless and poorly housed people, where modest sums of money would make a big difference.

The scheme has since been extended to three other schools, and Miss Cable hopes to expand it rapidly next year. So far, all the participating schools have been fee-paying, but she hopes that state schools will also get involved. Schools of both types have a long history of charitable fund-raising.

Overall, Britain gives a higher proportion of its wealth to charity than most countries; a reasonably robust study in 2006 by the Charities Aid Foundation, itself a charity, found that, of the 12 mainly big countries examined, only America gave more. Teaching children to make tough decisions about whom to help and how much is important, according to Danny Gill, a teacher at the Dragon School and head of the "social impact" programme there.

The project provides a good opportunity for children to learn not only how to choose charities carefully but also to get involved with their local community, use the web to develop research and analytical skills, and learn to present a well-argued proposal, says Mr Gill. "Our pupils felt responsible and empowered." In short, he maintains, the experience was good for givers as well as receivers. A rosy view, perhaps, but as governments find themselves increasingly strapped for cash, intelligent giving can only grow more important.

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