



Teaching practice, methods and self-evaluation

Cardiff High School
and Willows High School

Context

Cardiff High School is an 11 to 18 school and Willows High School is an 11 to 16 school, both located in Cardiff. Willows High School has successfully overcome historical learner performance issues to become one of the highest performing schools (with similar levels of free school meals) for learners achieving the Level 2 threshold including English and mathematics.

In 2013, Estyn judged Cardiff High School's current performance and the school's prospects for improvement as 'Excellent'. Estyn described the quality of the teaching as 'Consistently high' as were the systems to ensure learners' well-being. Willows High School was inspected in December 2012 and performance was judged to be unsatisfactory, in need of significant improvement. In January 2014 the school was judged to have made sufficient progress and was removed from the list of schools in need of significant improvement. As part of Willows High School's improvement drive, they work with other schools through a range of networks which enable them to select proven effective approaches which can be adapted and applied to their own context.

Impact

The partnership strengthened middle leadership at Willows High School through intensive training delivered in collaboration with Cardiff High School.

It led to changes to pedagogy in design and technology and strengthened practical work in science at Willows High School.

The partnership work helped to raise learner aspirations and engagement at Willows High School through Year 9 learners from both schools participating in a residential outward bound course.

Both schools contributed expertise on school-led improvement to the regional consortium.

The work helped to improve approaches to learning and teaching at Willows High School.

Focus

The partnership's priorities were to raise the standards of learning and teaching, develop and support middle leaders, involve all staff in professional networking, and raise learner aspirations. After the structured partnership activities had taken place, staff from both schools remained in touch on an informal, ad-hoc basis to exchange ideas and support.

What they did

Both headteachers worked together to evaluate Willows High School's position, agree the partnership's priorities and focus, and convey the ethos and aims of the partnership to their senior leaders.

Collaborative needs analysis

At the start of the partnership, the senior leadership teams from the two schools conducted a broad discussion of issues around learning and teaching, examinations arrangements (including the content specification and assessment methods used by different boards), inspection preparation, and harnessing technology for learning. Middle leaders analysed both schools' strengths and areas for improvement, and used the outcomes to shape a joint school INSET to ensure that both schools benefitted from the training as much as possible.

Outcomes

The initial discussion was a springboard for the rest of the partnership activities.

Senior leaders relayed the key messages to other staff so that they understood these principles from the partnership's outset.

Developing middle leaders

Cardiff High School had promoted staff with great potential into middle management and this was replicated by Willows High School. Cardiff High School delivered an intensive coaching and mentoring programme to aspiring middle leaders at Willows High School which focused primarily on pedagogy, leadership skills, and raising aspirations.

The middle leaders showcased examples of inspirational practice from sector-leading peers, and encouraged staff to go 'back to basics' by re-examining practical aspects of teaching like pedagogy and planning. They then disseminated their learning to other staff.

At the same time, the newly appointed special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) at Willows High School worked with her peer at Cardiff High School on an intensive programme of training and support.

Outcomes

Middle leadership at Willows High School was strengthened with a clear focus on raising standards and supporting learners.

The coaching and mentoring programme enhanced the skills and knowledge of the participating staff, and improved their accountability.

Changes in learning and teaching practice were disseminated to wider staff who incorporated aspects into their own practice.

Raising expectations

The partnership recognised the need to raise learners' aspirations at Willows High School in order to facilitate their achievement. As part of this, both schools held a joint residential outward bound course for a group of Year 9 learners involving team activities such as white-water rafting and orienteering.

The partnership created a unique progression pathway which allowed Year 11 learners entry to Cardiff High School sixth form, breaking down historical barriers of movement across the city.

Outcome

The course helped to raise learners' aspirations and encouraged them to develop a shared positive attitude and drive towards learning and achievement.

Strengthening learning and teaching

Leaders at both schools communicated a vision of lessons that were engaging, exciting, and relevant to learners. Staff from both schools then took part in a joint INSET focusing on best practice in learning and teaching that included a carousel of six workshops, group work and informal discussions. This inspired and enthused them and encouraged reflection on their own strengths and areas for improvement.

Cardiff High School provided specialist training in improving learning and teaching for Willows High School staff through the Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP), attendance at a national learning and teaching conference and the sharing of the 'refinery' – a culmination of ten years of research into learning and teaching at Cardiff High School.

Staff from both schools participated in a collaborative programme of lesson observations and team teaching activities. At the same time, the partnership encouraged an informal exchange of schemes of work. This led to further work within individual departments. For example, the heads of the design and technology departments worked together to discuss and plan practice. They developed a new pedagogical approach at Willows High School that was facilitated by a change to an examination board, which used a method of assessment that was more closely aligned to the needs of the learners. At the same time, staff from the science departments in both schools worked together to strengthen practical work.

Outcomes

Both structured and informal activities contributed to raising standards of learning and teaching.

Staff's willingness to help and support each other underpinned the informal sharing of good practice and resources.

Staff from both schools showcased aspects of their best practice and learned proactively from others, thus facilitating mutual learning and ownership.

Staff at all levels developed positive relationships.

The partnership gave Willows High School the opportunity to benchmark itself against one of the highest performing schools in Wales.

Variance in practice and expectations between different departments was reduced as a result of seeing how others worked.

Demonstrating what worked

Both schools have disseminated their experiences through conferences and events in Wales and further afield.

Cardiff High School developed a collaborative style of working which could be used in other contexts, based on 'improvement through osmosis rather than a didactic approach', which helped it to fulfil its role as an accredited training centre.

Outcome

Both schools are contributing expertise in school-led improvement through the regional consortium which is making increasing use of school networks as a means of raising standards.

Why it worked

- Funding increases the capacity to engage with and benefit from the partnership. Cardiff High School employed staff for the duration of the partnership so that staff could be released to attend training. This increased the impact of the partnership.

- Early on the schools' partnership established an openness to learning and a commitment to mutual improvement among all staff. Entering into the partnership with an open mind is essential if learning is to be consolidated and applied rapidly.
- Positive relationships between senior leaders. School leaders are ultimately accountable for the partnership's success. To ensure that the partnership is successful and that all staff have the necessary buy-in, senior leaders must model effective collaborative working.
- The schools' partnership established mutual respect, honesty and trust between both schools at all levels. Staff need to engage with dignity and view the partnership positively in order to improve their practice.
- There was a mutual benefit for both schools. For partnerships to have the greatest possible impact, each school should have something to share with and gain from the other.
- The 18-month pathfinder provided the right time frame. The partnership should be long enough to enable staff to learn as much as possible from the partner school, but should not go on past that point. This facilitates an effective use of staff time and funding.
- Using a mix of formal and informal activities to develop and share good practice. Informal discussions can be as effective as structured activities, provided they offer suitable opportunities for professional dialogue to 'flow'.
- The schools worked collaboratively to align the partnership plan to meet the needs of both schools. Having a flexible, custom-fit model which is regularly reviewed and adapted so that it continues to meet both schools' needs was central to the partnership's success.

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