

The Great School Framework

Shared aspirational vision, values, and culture

Case study – Roman Fields Provision

www.romanfields.herts.sch.uk

Starting point

Roman Fields opened in 2010, in an attempt to address a significant need, namely to educate a cohort of complex young people who all had EHCPs and amongst whom the majority had a number of co-morbid diagnoses. A significant portion of these young people had not accessed school for 18 months and a large number of very complex youngsters were leaving Hertfordshire to access their education outside of the county, at great expense. Those that remained were identified as too complex for an ESC, or typical SEMH setting to deal with. The headteacher joined in January 2014 and identified that, whilst there was some strong practice, there were also significant areas for development.

Most of the teaching the headteacher witnessed either required improvement, or was firmly inadequate. A large number of “lessons” could not honestly be described as such, and games and other activities were being provided as a substitute for learning rather than as an enhancement to it. There was insufficient challenge and engagement with learning across the provision. Expectations of pupils were low.

The behaviour of pupils fell short of expectations, and some of it could only be described as intimidating. A significant number of staff would never challenge poor behaviour, and those who did challenge it were not supported by their colleagues.

Staff absence was very high, both in terms of prolonged absences and the number of absences. Staff morale was low because there was no cohesion of purpose or approach.

It was therefore apparent that before the school could tackle the complex needs of the pupils in its care, it had to tackle the systemic issues that made teaching and learning within the provision ineffective.

Establishing a shared aspirational vision

Although there looked like being a great many problems, there was really only one: pupils were not being given a high-quality education. If lessons were not engaging them, why should they behave? If the school was not providing them with a sense that they could achieve and successfully transition, why should they attend?

As well as addressing the primary needs of the pupils, a focus on delivering good lessons could act as a unifying philosophy for the staff body. The school therefore established expectations for lesson quality, and followed up these expectations via observations. Surprisingly, there was actually some staff resistance to the notion of delivering higher-quality lessons. The most common objection was that the pupils couldn't cope with such demands as a result of their special educational needs. This was evidence of an ingrained culture of low expectations and the most potent way to challenge it was to demonstrate that pupils *could* achieve.

The school therefore sought to rapidly progress pupils towards meaningful qualifications. Those teachers that shared the ethos of delivering high quality lessons moved their pupils through the relevant learning and prepared them for examinations. Functional Skills assessments were used in this area as they could be taken at any time of the year. Some pupils managed to therefore attain qualifications within six weeks of joining the school. This proved to both staff and pupils that success was achievable and tangible. Staff who were initially resistant to this either changed their approach or were forced to confront the reality that the largest barrier to pupil progress was the low expectation of what pupils could achieve. Where staff were unable to meet the demands of the

new, aspirational, culture they were replaced by those that could. Although recruitment was carefully considered it quickly became easy to attract high quality candidates when news of the school's success became more widely known. As well as refining the staff body, the school deepened the skill set by investing in specialised staff to provide supported work experience and transition. Once again the vision and ethos that the pupils could succeed led to them finding success in the workplace and in further education once they had left the school. The entire process of raising aspiration became self-perpetuating, and the vision developed into a culture.

Maintaining an aspirational culture

Despite some of the difficulties the school had in establishing a shared vision, it could be described as the easier part of the process. Agreement on a principle can be delivered by a simple show of hands; delivering on that principle takes constant hard work. Nonetheless, the school has routinely managed to deliver high quality lessons and the outstanding educational outcomes that flow from them.

Part of the school's success in this area was understanding and communicating the idea small and sustained improvements can lead to impressive results. The headteacher made it clear that he wanted staff to teach "Good" (in the Ofsted definition) lessons all the time. The mantra adopted was that consistently good lessons lead to outstanding outcomes. Expectations were therefore high, but also clear and achievable.

These same expectations translated to the pupils, particularly in regard to behaviour. Everything the school does is backed up by a firm but fair sanctions policy. If youngsters are not putting sufficient effort into their work, then they are held back after school until the work is completed to the expected standard. When making a judgement of what a young person is capable of, the school couples its expectations with everything that is known about the person in question, in order that the correct level of work is set. The importance of learning is therefore culturally embedded. All obstacles to learning are removed, and all support necessary is put in place. Staff discuss all the pupils at the school at the end of day during debrief sessions, and leaders and key staff engage in weekly case management meetings to make sure that every pupil is getting the support that they need.

This same culture informs the approach to behaviour. By having a bespoke approach and refusing to externally exclude, leaders make it clear to pupils that they want them at the school, they want them to succeed, and they will do everything in their power to make sure that they do. When success inevitably follows, the staff reward them individually and celebrate them collectively.

Once the school successfully embedded the right culture, it sought to apply this approach to its work with external agencies and partners. By emphasising an approach of collaborative learning and sharing best practice the school was able to work much more effectively with other agencies, and this in turn enabled them to have a more profound impact on the pupils at the school.

The dividend of shared values

The school's GCSE outcomes are now the best of all provisions of this type in the UK and this standard has been sustained for four years. Youngsters not only catch up lost ground, but often succeed far beyond what they were predicted at the end of Key Stage 2. The school won the National Autistic Society's Excellence award in 2018, following an inspection of its practice. Persistent absence rates have been reduced by 75%. All pupils transitioned successfully in 2018; seven now attend university and all others have secured college places, apprenticeships and/or paid work. Ofsted found the school to be outstanding in all areas in January 2019.

However, the culture of the school has meant that it has not rested on its laurels. The constant drive to ensure that pupils get the very best education demands a constant review and improvement of the school's own processes and practices.

Trevor Orchard

Headteacher

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