

PQH Application:
Key Area 6: Strengthening Community

I am the pastoral vice-principal in a large secondary school, which 4 years ago was in the early stages of a collaboration with a neighbouring grammar school of similar size.

Rationale. The area learning community had been mapping provision across its post-primary schools, and this gave rise to discussion around the possibility of shared provision between schools for pupils in KS4. The discussion was prompted by the following reasons:

- The necessity of having to lose teachers due to budget downturns, created tension for maintaining each school's curriculum offer. It appeared increasingly attractive to relieve this tension by designing some shared provision in ways that didn't impinge negatively on pupils' curriculum time;
- A perceived need to realize the moral imperative to provide pupils with a broader learning experience in an area where their relationships are curtailed both geographically and sociologically along religious lines; and
- Evidence from research of the potential for raising attainment that accrues from shared provision and the access to pupils from other schools as resources to promote each other's learning.

It was agreed that our two schools would run a collaborative pilot programme on behalf of the ALC using the formal term 'Learning Partners' and trial shared classroom provision in a small number of departments. The schools prepared a briefing paper and asked departments to discuss it and volunteer proposals for the pilot during a joint INSET day. Three stated aims were constructed from the rationale above. Four proposals were received, and these were subsequently discussed with senior management. After much discussion the two schools' English, RE and Business Studies departments were selected for the work. It transpired that these three had already done significant collaborative work with their partner departments via joint planning and sharing effective practice, and this experience was key to the selection. The departments prepared an outline plan to identify improvement targets for pupils in each subject, very much based on the individual programmes of work and analysis of past performance trends. There was some discussion of desirable pupil behaviours to develop in collaborative work scenarios, but it was not formalized or recorded.

Despite careful planning at senior and departmental level with our partners, we were disappointed by the varied quality and outcomes of initial experiences from staff and pupils' reviews. There was a strong strategic commitment to the potential of such learning contexts, but the perceptions fell far short of aspirations, and did not appear to be improving greatly. During a structured review with the same postholder in the grammar school, I suggested the idea of using a pupil voice exercise to highlight barriers to effective learning in shared classroom experiences, and relay the analyses and conclusions to staff. Furthermore, we agreed to use this knowledge as a resource in outlining effective strategies, processes and protocols at classroom, departmental and whole school levels to enhance teaching and learning; to disseminate these to staff, pupils and parents; and to ultimately prepare a joint teaching and learning policy clearly articulating our beliefs and effective practices as a manifesto for shared provision.

The information would be useful to address deficiencies in the design that had failed to set up pupils for successful collaboration, but it would also perhaps serve to engage the partnering departments in discussions around classroom organization and management issues. There was a strong feeling that the initial interdepartmental planning had centred almost entirely around matching and merging their respective learning programmes, and not enough on pedagogical issues like managing groupwork, discussion, peer assessment and consistent behavioral expectations in classrooms, all of which were frequently listed as issues in teacher and pupil evaluations. This latter discussion was hoped to generate agreed shared practice that would form the starting point for the preparation of a joint learning and teaching policy.

Personal Leadership role. I assumed responsibility for coordinating the pupil voice exercise in both schools following discussion at a joint management meeting. This entailed me working with the six HoDs to collate draw conclusions from the staff and pupil evaluations, and these informed ensuing work with my opposite colleague to manage the following:

- Designing the pupil questionnaire (in consultation with the two Student Councils) to highlight factors both promoting and hindering learning
- Leading the pastoral teams in administering the questionnaire in Y8, 10 and 13
- Collating and analyzing 600+ individual responses
- Constructing conclusions from responses and feeding these back to all staff, negotiating avoidance and defensive reactions as they appeared.
- Commissioning professional development from external agents based on the pupil voice analyses and proposing teaching strategies to bring improvements in pupil learning.

I reported to my own principal at this stage, who acted on behalf of both schools in challenging and supporting my work. HoDs accepted responsibility for designing forms of evaluation suitable to each department, and me and my colleague liaised with them to collate and analyse the ensuing data. In the initial pilot we very much underestimated the communication issues in managing the inevitable day to day problem solving, especially around pastoral and behaviour management issues that emerged, and we realized that our reliance on e-mails to facilitate communication was misplaced. We quickly resorted to using mobile phones to enable faster messaging between the two schools for dealing with these issues. We concluded, however, that better preparation using data such as that produced by the pupil voice exercise would to some extent reduce the need for such 'crisis calls' with a better understanding of pastoral and behavioural management, especially the importance of establishing more consistent expectations of pupil behaviour, and more consistent interventions for dealing with behavioural issues.

Outcomes. There was a very high positive response from pupils on being consulted on their classroom experiences, both good and bad. They saw that we weren't ducking unpleasant messages and were trying to deal with realities. They associated new and modified teaching strategies (for example circle time discussions, discussion boards, assertive questioning and thinking partners) with their consultation, and this may have contributed to the improved outcomes which we rapidly noted – 5% drop in absence (8% in KS4), 11% improvement in A*-C grades including Maths and English, and a 9% drop in severe behavioural issues requiring significant intervention.

When parents were informed via a joint newsletter from the two schools of the analyses and improvements, they responded positively, with 68% attendance at subsequent 'Help your child to learn' workshops. As I write this, staff from two of my departments are in the neighbouring grammar school helping their partners to mount a joint display for a forthcoming reporting to parents evening, and staff from another department are playing host to their partners in doing the same thing in our own school. Parents from both schools are speaking of the changing context of shared provision, and usually as a good thing! Several local newspaper reports have picked up and run with a common theme – that of both grammar and secondary pupils not missing out entirely on access to one of two desirable, respected but slightly differently oriented schools, giving them a broader perspective via their education and a healthier, better rounded preparation for whatever steps they take following this important time in their lives.

We are already committed to the next steps. Within our two schools there is a road ahead with steps made clearer by our experience, and it will lead to all of our departments making best use of the most profitable resources they have for their own development – their colleagues on the doorstep. Within the ALC there is a similar commitment to build further partnerships based on our experiences.