

WELL Project: Case Study

Research Informed School Improvement

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Summary

The impact of the pandemic on the school has given both the need and opportunity to reflect upon what we need to prioritise and how we should best seek to achieve those priorities. The school has fully engaged with sustained WELL funded EEF Professional Development to support our review of School Improvement processes. All school improvement is now based around the principles of 'explore – prepare – deliver – sustain', which stem from rigorous research for effective implementation in schools.¹

This approach has really shifted practice away from annual or even termly initiatives, often well-intended. Instead, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), supported by governors, deliberately set out time up front to explore and understand our issue, to take the time to thoroughly plan, and then put in the time to review. As a result, we are starting to shift the culture of improvement in school to a long-term, evidence-informed, and sustainable approach.

The Focus

Upon identifying the overarching priorities of curriculum, assessment, and staff development, we realised that there was a danger of focusing on relatively short-term cycles of planning and going for apparent quick wins. This approach, though well-intentioned and to some extent effective, offered little time to fully research and explore the issues and best bets prior to implementation.

In order to realise excellence in curriculum, assessment and staff development in a large secondary school, middle leadership amongst Heads of Department is imperative. To support leadership development at this level we recognised an opportunity to increase the level of expertise and consistency Heads of Department received on a frequent, low-stakes basis.

At student level baseline testing identified a need to explore and support skills in reading, especially for students who were below age-expected levels. Post-lockdowns, this need has been greater than ever.

As a large comprehensive school, we aim to know each and every one of our students and identify their particular learning needs. Understanding the complexity of need amongst students with identified SEND, our disadvantaged students and other students who require

¹ EEF, 'Putting Evidence to work – A school's Guide to Implementation'.

additional learning support has been identified as an area to develop with the rigour of the explore-prepare-develop-sustain model.

Action Taken

Strategic improvement in all areas is underpinned by our revised Continuing Professional Development (CPD) plan. We have reorganised directed time to facilitate a weekly CPD programme which protects time to revisit key areas of school improvement half-terminly throughout the year. The leads on each area use the EEF's Effective Professional Development guidance to plan training over the school year which builds teacher knowledge, motivates, develops techniques, and allows time for practice to be embedded.²

Our Heads of Department now have their annual and termly calendar structured differently to ensure that the principle of 'explore-prepare-deliver-sustain' underpins departmental development moving forward. Their line management and support meetings, and quality assurance is all scheduled to fit with this cycle. As result, we no longer have bolt-ons. If it matters, it is planned for and given the time. Department line management has changed from the traditional model in secondary school of a fortnightly meeting with a senior leader. Instead, that time has been reorganised so that Heads of Department structure their departmental development on a half-terminly basis with 5 distinct phases: diagnose; plan; deliver; review; plan for 2022-23. Each half-term involves meeting the senior leaders expert in assessment, curriculum, and staff development in order to explore progress in each area.

Our reading strategy is now up and running with great success in 2021-22, having taken the time in 2020-21 to understand what we needed and what that would look like. We spent the first year exploring both student need through baseline diagnostics and also staff development requirements to achieve a sustained shift in practice. Reciprocal Reader is used as a structured intervention tool to support student who require additional support in comprehension. This intervention sits within a package which also offers phonics, decoding and fluency depending on individual need. At whole school level we have begun to train teachers in the delivery of disciplinary reading starting with the use of Reciprocal Reader as a comprehension technique relevant in all subjects.

Result

Staff and school development: At a whole school level staff are clear about whole school priorities and their role in building knowledge, developing techniques, and embedding practice. The weekly programme ensures time is protected and dedicated to sustaining progress. Half-terminly revisiting of key themes is helping to ensure practice is both secured and then developed. We will develop this model.

Departmental development: At department level we have seen deeper analysis of the core areas of Quality of Education: assessment, curriculum, and staff development. Half-terminly Heads of Department meet the Assistant Head for each of these areas to discuss their progress and development work; these discussions lead to an output in the departmental development plan which is tightly focused on one area of improvement. The senior leader is an expert in their one area (assessment, curriculum, or staff development). Having that expert work with every Head of Department has led to much greater levels of support and challenge as Heads of Department work through the explore-prepare-deliver-sustain model to enact deliberate and informed change to their areas. Through this model we have been

² EEF, 'Effective Professional Development' guidance.

better able to identify specific areas needing support and also understand where best practice will help others. Feedback after 6 months has been very encouraging.

Kath Hardy, Head of Chemistry said:

"I am now getting really bespoke support and challenge through the new leadership structure and this is helping me drive the development of my department in a focused and supportive way. It's all very constructive and non-threatening at the same time has getting to the heart of how we continue to improve."

Richard King, Headteacher notes:

"All of our staff work incredibly hard and are committed to the process of continual improvement. By taking a long-term and evidenced based approach to school improvement we are focusing on developing and embedding proven strategies. This way, colleagues know that the precious time invested developing their knowledge, deeply understanding the issues in their subject, developing new skills and embedding new ways of working is not wasted on either the wrong thing or something that will not be in focus in a few months' time."

Next Steps and Conclusion:

Staff and school development: The high-frequency, weekly CPD model will remain as a structure to facilitate sustained progress on key areas of school improvement. However, one year in we will be able to develop the flexibility within the programme to facilitate training bespoke to the role of the member of staff, at the same time as developing coherence on whole school areas of improvement.

Departmental development: After Easter we will review the impact of departmental development using joint observations with Heads of Department and Senior Leaders. We will triangulate the impact of the curriculum by speaking to Heads of Department, teachers, and students. These reviews will help inform planning foci for the school year 2022-23.

Reading: We will end the school year with diagnostic testing that both shows impact and progress for 2021-22 and identifies need for 2022-23. Our Year 7s will be the first-year group to have experienced additional and highly targeted reading comprehension intervention. We will ensure their progress is sustained and monitor their need as they progress through school. Where we need to develop their reading support, we will do. We will continue to identify and support students in need of additional support in all year groups. At classroom level, our teachers will be skilled in promoting disciplinary literacy as relevant to their subject, actively modelling effective reading and vocabulary techniques.

SEND: Our SEND strategy is a year behind reading. We have learned the value of proper exploration and planning, so we are now doing this background work on SEND ready to develop the strategy for 2022-23. We are in the explore phase of our SEND strategy. We aim to have planned our strategy for September 2022 so that all staff can play their role in thoroughly preparing our approach to SEND ahead of delivery.

"The training sessions from WELL and the exposure to EEF guidance and training through WELL and Research Schools has informed our thinking and given us the confidence to advocate this approach with governors. In my 10 years as a deputy across the 2 schools/Teaching School, I really feel this is quite significant in terms of leadership and the impact WELL can have on training leaders to have sustained impact on learning."

Dr Michelle Henley, Senior Deputy Headteacher.