



The City Academy Bristol

Case study



department for
children, schools and families

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Introduction

The City Academy Bristol opened in 2003, replacing the underperforming St George Community College. It moved into purpose-built £25m premises in September 2005 in the Easton area of the city. Specialising in sport, it is a large school with almost 1,300 students between the ages of 11 and 18.

It serves a disadvantaged area of Bristol, and has a much higher than national average intake of children who have free school meals. More than a quarter of all students have some learning difficulties or disabilities and more than 40 hold statements of special educational need. The skill levels of pupils at the start of Year 7, particularly in literacy, are well below the national average. More than two thirds of students are from minority ethnic groups, and more than 40% of students learn English as an additional language. Large numbers of students are refugees, or the children of asylum seekers. The school is heavily oversubscribed.

Raising aspirations

The City Academy Bristol has a simple but clear ethos: have belief in yourself you'll achieve.

In 2008 its students created a school anthem which urges students "not to give up" but to "persevere".

It would be a stretch to describe the Academy as a haven of peace and tranquility. The kids can be rowdy, and a wide diversity of languages is often spoken at high volume in transit between lessons.

But you can't ignore the fact that since opening, the school has turned around opportunities and achievements for children in one of the most deprived and challenging areas of the UK.

The school has the best student/teacher ratio in the city. Facilities include more than 600 computers, a fully equipped drama and dance studio.

Even David Beckham has made a guest appearance to teach the kids football skills.

The specialism

Principal Ray Priest says that the school's sports specialism has made a huge contribution to giving its students a sense of worth and belonging.

The facilities are impressive. The school boasts one of only four full size, all-weather floodlit turf pitches in the country, as well as an artificial turf pitch. There's a fully equipped fitness suite, a dance studio, gymnasium, 12 badminton courts, sports arena, tennis courts and a dance studio.

Elite athletes have the opportunity to receive professional coaching for up to 15 hours a week, as well as having access to physiotherapists, the latest performance analysis software and state of the art equipment. Alongside this intense training, they are also able to continue their academic studies in the school.

But the specialism isn't just about improving the chances of the most gifted and talented youngsters.

Every student at The City Academy Bristol is given the opportunity to find a sport or activity they really get on with, and to adopt an active lifestyle for life. At Key Stage 3, students get to try a huge range of different sports.

Director of Sport, Paul Skipp says: "We offer a huge range of different sports within the Academy. One of the things we do is first of all in Year 7 is give students the opportunity to try different sports that they wouldn't have got to try in primary school.

"Altogether we offer 16 different sports within the Key Stage 3 curriculum, and they range from the minority sports of lacrosse and volleyball and swimming, all the way through to the more traditional sports such as football, netball and basketball.

"Then as the curriculum progresses into Key Stage 4 and 5 students have the opportunity to specialise in different sports – they can go off site and try other sports such as rock climbing and golf – even mountain biking and hill walking we've done in the past. And if students really want to specialise and play at an elite level they can at post-16, when they can do many different courses that work alongside the sports courses."

Doing things differently

Principal Ray Priest was the headteacher at the predecessor school. There attainment was low, with only 17% of children achieving A-C at GCSE, not including maths and English.

He firmly believed that what was letting the children down was the rigidity of the curriculum itself. Since becoming an Academy, he has effected a sea change in the way that staff and students think about learning and teaching.

There have been two key changes in the way learning and teaching is understood and approached at the school. The first is that the curriculum now places much more responsibility on the students to develop their ability to learn. The second is the way that subjects are taught. Lessons throughout Key Stage 3 are organised through 'villages' which focus on themes of:

- Learning through collaboration
- Learning with independence
- Learning by using information
- Learning through application of thinking skills
- Learning through communication

So students may go to a learning session focusing on 'collaboration' in the Heritage and Design village, rather than having a traditional geography lesson.

In Year 7 students start Project 7. This is a course where students learn to learn. Learning skills are grouped into Resilience, Resourcefulness, Responsibility and Respect. Students are graded according to the 4Rs, and these results play an important part in setting targets and planning learning.

Each child has an 'achievement profile' which is calculated by an electronic reporting system. They also have a 'learning facilitator' who will chat to them regularly about their progress.

At the Academy, it is possible for students to sit examinations when they feel ready for them, and each year, many Year 10 students achieve GCSEs.

The Academy also has a specialist resource base for students with physical disabilities or severe emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. These students are taught in mainstream classes with additional support.

A team of attainment advisers from the school works closely with families of African, Caribbean, Asian and dual heritage.





The uniform



The uniform at The City Academy Bristol is a practical blue trousers or skirt with a fleece or sweatshirt top and a blue shirt or blouse.

Tops are embroidered with the school's red logo. There is a uniform sports kit that carries the school's branding too.

OFSTED

The City Academy Bristol was last visited by OFSTED inspectors on 14 and 15 January, 2009. Inspectors found that:

Overall

The City Academy Bristol is a good school and there has been marked improvement since the last inspection. From their often very low starting points on entry to Year 7, students of all ethnicities typically make significant progress. Standards across most subjects have lifted from very low levels to just below average.

These improvements have happened for a number of reasons. First, the principal continues to provide inspirational leadership. Leaders, governors and staff share his high expectations of what students might achieve and his vision of the Academy as a hub for lifelong learning at the heart of the locality. Second, the care, guidance and support for individual students, especially the more vulnerable, remain outstanding, including the specialist provision for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Leaders and staff, alongside many other agencies, have travelled that extra mile to forge strong partnerships, especially with harder-to-reach families, in order to maximise equal opportunities for all.

Standards have risen sharply since the last inspection. The percentage of students gaining five higher grade GCSEs was similar to that seen nationally in 2008.

Personal development and wellbeing

Students' personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They are proud of their Academy. Exclusion rates continue to fall and behaviour around the Academy as well as in lessons is generally good. On occasion, a small minority disappoint their peers by calling out or showing off in class. The Academy's specialism in sport has had a very positive impact on the extent to which the students lead healthy lives. Most eat healthy meals at school each day and many reach above average fitness levels and learn about teamwork and dedication through their participation in the extensive sports and physical education programmes.

Attendance has improved over time and is average although some students' attendance continues to cause concern and reduce their achievement. As part of a close-knit local community, students play a vital part in its welfare. They make a strong contribution, enthusiastically taking on leadership roles and responsibilities. Older students regularly mentor the younger ones and many represent the Academy at the highest levels in sport. They feel strongly that their voice is heard within the Academy. They are well prepared for the world of work.

Teaching and learning

Teaching is good and addresses the learning needs of all students well. In all lessons, relationships with staff and students are extremely positive. The behaviour of students is typically good and well managed. They thoroughly enjoy their lessons, respect their teachers and have positive attitudes to their learning.

In the best lessons, students are challenged to learn more at a brisk pace and in turn, they demonstrate high levels of motivation and initiative.

The outstanding curriculum is broad, balanced and cohesive, promoting progression in learning and equal opportunities for all. It develops students' creativity and challenges them to achieve their best.

There are a wide range of learning pathways involving both vocational and GCSE courses. An excellent alternative curriculum is in place for students who have difficulty accessing mainstream courses. The exceptional physical education curriculum has had a significant impact in improving motivation levels for all students and in helping raise the numbers staying on in education, after age 16, to high levels.

Care, guidance and support

The Academy knows its students very well. The new mixed-age 'learning families' help students know who they can turn to with a problem and to mix with their peers from other year groups. Students receive good advice about their future options as well as very regular feedback on their progress. They know what their learning targets are and what they must do to improve their work.

Attainment advisers work with many families, including those from Somalia who are new to the education system, to help parents to better support their children's learning. The provision for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with complex needs, is outstanding. Strong but flexible systems are in place to assess need, fully integrate students into Academy life and track their progress.

Leadership and management

The Academy is well led and managed. The principal's leadership is outstanding. He has been instrumental in raising the aspirations of students and in placing the Academy at the heart of the local community. Challenging targets for improvements in standards and achievement are set with increased accuracy.

The people



John Laycock,
Academy sponsor

When I first got involved with the City Academy, Bristol, I was chair of Bristol City Football Club, running an Academy football section for Bristol City. In discussions with the principal it became really obvious to me that the aims and ideals of Academies fitted really well with what I personally believed in.

The role of the Academy sponsor is interesting. Certainly it allows a freedom of operation, which before Academies was not as obvious. I now operate as Chair of the Governors, and the relationship with the principal and myself, I believe, is one of the cornerstones on which the Academy operates.

The Academy sponsor brings a level of experience to Academies, and a life outside the normal educational experiences. Certainly I have found working with Ray Priest, the principal, we have been able to mould both our skills together, and we have put together an educational environment which is beneficial to our pupils.

As the sponsor of The City Academy, Bristol, I have found that working with the principal, I have been able to bring business experience to the role of managing the Academy, which has meant that traditional educational values have really been added to my experience, and together, the offering for the children is better. And I believe that when I was at

Bristol City Football Club as chair, I was able to look at what we were providing there for young children, and it fitted really well with the Academy principles. So going forward I think we've got something that really works.

As a sponsor of an Academy, I think it's really important for lots of people in their business life to feel that they get to a stage where they're able to put things back into society. I believe firmly that there is a change in the ethos of successful business people, who are able to put their effort and their money back into society.

The Academy is an interesting concept. I do believe it's for the community – it's a facility that all can share. I think the children get a tremendous amount out of the Academy, but also the family and the community generally.

I believe in the Academies system and Academies generally. It's a fantastic opportunity to look at traditional methods of education and bring something fresh and new, and I believe that the input that we're able to give will make a significant difference to children's lives.

Academic achievement is important, but there are other things in a child's life that are also vital, such as the opportunity to get a job once they leave. I believe we have a responsibility to all the children to give them the best start in life. Not every child is academically adept, and we have to look at all the children and prepare them for life. Vocational learning is very important. We run construction courses that a lot of children undertake, and I believe Academies can make a difference to all our children.



Dr Ray Priest,
Principal

One of the things we're really proud of here at the Academy is that children come here whatever their ability, whatever their background. All children who live locally are welcomed at this school.

I'm really proud of the fact that the children that come to this school now have a pride in their local school, that their mums and dads have got right behind us, and that they too feel that their school is delivering for their children, and that the community has a place that they can feel proud of, that they can believe in, and they can say, 'this is our local school and we know it's delivering for our children'.

The City Academy in Bristol has sports as its specialism. We chose that because we believed it would engage young people, it would really motivate them to make a difference, and it would impact right across the curriculum – so it's been a really exciting choice for us.

The most important thing that we've done to improve teaching and learning is put the language of learning at the forefront of everything that we do. Really good quality teaching and learning is what is essential to make a difference, so we've worked on improving teaching practice, on sharing best practice, and on trying new approaches to teaching and learning that engage and motivate young people. At the end of the day, it's really about producing quality lessons.

One of the most important things for us was to make sure that we accepted children of all abilities. It's about where you live, not about your previous ability or your background – so all children are welcome here at the Academy.

The people (cont.)



Rebecca Thunhurst,
Drama teacher

The students at the the City Academy are very active learners. They're very eager to get up and move around. A lot of them are very confident and good at expressing themselves in social situations and in situations where they have to do things like public speaking. Drama gives them those skills and they rise to that very well.

At the City Academy, we feel that drama offers the opportunity to develop lots of transferable skills – citizenship skills and issues based skills – so we focus on that rather than performance and acting – that comes second. We do a lot of activities that involve developing those skills.

In drama, our aim is to develop students' citizenship skills and transferable skills, and acting and performance come second to that – so for example, we see it as our role to develop the students' confidence, cooperation, communication, expression, and most importantly, teamwork skills.

We have quite fantastic facilities at the City Academy. We've actually got two drama studios. One of the drama studios is fully equipped with lights, sound facilities and curtains, – and it's a black box, which the students work really well in. We've also got a gym and a dance studio that we use quite regularly.

In drama we do a lot of acting, dancing, singing and movement, as well as looking at citizenship skills and developing those skills.

We provide lots of opportunities for students to get involved in extra curricular activities, and a large percentage of students are really eager to get involved.



Ann Attwood,
Vice Principal

We help Year 7 children to settle in lots of ways. One of these ways last summer was that we ran four different activities for students. We managed to engage at least half of the current Year 7 cohort. We encouraged students from Year 10 to come in and help us with those workshops and the children had the run of the school. It made them feel comfortable about the place and introduced them to some of the children that are here.

One of the ways that we've found really helpful in settling Year 7 children into school is by inviting them to activities in the summer holidays. Last summer we held four programmes of activities for students and managed to engage half of the current Year 7 students. We also, again to help them feel comfortable, invited Year 10 students to mentor them, so it's a bit like having your older brother or sister there alongside you. They also had use of the school without the other children being here, and it was very successful.

Good behaviour is really important to us at school and we encourage that every day in every lesson by demanding that teachers make exciting lessons. Interested children learn, and interested children behave themselves. Children that are absorbed in their learning are keen to be in their lessons. Lessons need to be differentiated so that children can participate – it's important that they feel that they can be successful.

Parents often ask us about bullying at school. I think when a child is moving from quite a small primary to a much larger school, it can seem really daunting. One of the things we encourage families to do is to talk to us. And we talk to our children constantly about respect for each other. We talk to children about this often – in assemblies, in their learning family time and in their lessons. We get them to think about the way the conduct themselves in social spaces so that their behaviour is appropriate.

Since we've become an Academy, one of the things that I have noticed has changed the most is the aspirations that the children feel for themselves, and hold for themselves. A few years ago we had a small handful – maybe five children – who went to university. Last year we sent over 40. Children now engage with universities far more than they ever used to in the past. Children talk not about whether they'll go to university, but which one they'll go to. The conversation has changed.

The people (cont.)



Karen Miller,
parent

I have two children here at the City Academy, Bristol – one in Year 7 and one in Year 10. The seven-year-old joined in September and they're both having an absolute whale of a time here. They enjoy everything here – the computers, the sports, absolutely everything there is. My daughter, who's in Year 7 is into netball and trampolining. She's never done trampolining before, and she absolutely loves it.

My older two boys came to this school before it was an Academy and it just doesn't compare. Now it's an Academy it's bigger, better and the facilities are just fantastic. It's just fantastic for the children.

What I'd say to parents who aren't sure about Academies is go and have a look, you've got to see how fantastic they are.



Paul Skipp,
Director of Sport

I think we all get a tremendous amount of satisfaction seeing the children achieve and being able to provide opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise be able to have. We are based in the 14th most deprived ward in the country – we only have to look outside the front door of the school to see an enormous amount of deprivation. We know students don't have great big back gardens where they can play sport, so when students come to sport and you see them really enjoying themselves and getting stuck into different activities and working alongside other students from all walks of life, I think that's what ticks most of our boxes.

One of the things we're very proud of is how we include children of all abilities. We work in a multicultural area, but it really doesn't make any difference. It's important that we improve all students of all abilities. Sport is a great tool to include all. We have a range of equipment so that all students, whether they're in a wheelchair or are able bodied, can access sport. We do a number of training days so that our learning support assistants and teachers know how to use this equipment.

I've just come back after half term and found that eight of my students who'd tried golf for the first time through school, had taken themselves off to a golf course during the holiday to play. That's brilliant.





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