

Vulnerable schools with inconsistent results

Case study school 3

School context

This small school is situated in one of the most disadvantaged wards in the country. The percentage of pupils claiming free school meals is well above the national average and 21% of pupils have special educational needs (SEN). From September 2004 to September 2006 there was no substantive headteacher in post due to threat of closure. Mobility of children leaving/joining the school had been at a high level during these turbulent few years. When the current headteacher joined the school in September 2006, the school was 'vulnerable with inconsistent results'. Although the quality of teaching in Year 6 had ensured high standards at the end of Key Stage 2, overall progression across the school was inadequate with significant underachievement of pupils in some year groups.

Barriers to improvement

- When the new team were appointed in September 2006, there were only 72 pupils on roll and only three classes: Class 1 (Reception, Year 1, Year 2), Class 2 (Year 2, Year 3, Year 4) and Class 3 (Year 4, Year 5, Year 6). The polarised spread of ability and the fact that there were at least three age groups in each class presented a difficult task for teachers to provide suitable support and challenge for the many extremely able, gifted and talented children alongside those with SEN.
- The growing number of pupils joining the school since September 2006 meant classes had to be constantly reorganised. Changes mid-key stage impacted on the year-on-year performance.
- A new class team started at the school with 50% of teachers being newly qualified teachers (NQTs). While their enthusiasm was a considerable advantage, they required support in their first year of teaching in very challenging circumstances.

The school-based issues – what needed to change?

- The quality of teaching and learning needed to improve significantly.
- Assessment systems needed to be established to effectively target and challenge all pupils.
- Lack of subject coordinators meant monitoring systems were not sufficiently developed and staff needed to have a thorough understanding of achievement and standards and be able to evaluate the impact of intervention on standards.
- Standards and progress in writing across the school were unsatisfactory.

Priorities for school improvement

- To implement a consistent approach to teaching all aspects of writing to raise standards and improve progress.
- To develop a consistent approach for teaching standard written methods in mathematics so pupils were confident in problem solving/using and applying.

- To implement a rigorous assessment/pupil tracking system where staff could clearly identify children who are underachieving and plan appropriate support to ensure children achieve (or exceed) targets.
- To develop the role of the core subject leader to secure school improvement planning.

What was done?

- The headteacher (who is a leading teacher (LT)) spent 50% of her day modelling good practice to NQTs/inexperienced teachers.
- An intensive programme to improve writing was implemented including the setting of individual targets, the use of *Talk for Writing* and *Support for Writing* materials and regular periodic assessment of progress towards targets.
- The headteacher met the staff termly to discuss the progress of each pupil in detail. These meetings were used to review progress, set targets for the coming term and decide how each child was going to meet or exceed his or her targets.
- A rigorous assessment tracking system was put in place so that the progress of all pupils is assessed termly. Staff identified pupils who were underperforming and identified appropriate pedagogical approaches and/or additional support to ensure accelerated progress. Programmes and resources used included: *Talk for Writing*, *Support for Writing*, *Springboard Maths*, *Overcoming Barriers*, *One-to-One Tuition*, *Securing levels from 2–3*, *3–4* documents and the expertise of LTs within the school. Assessment for Learning (AfL) was also a school priority with many elements well-established in the first year. An emphasis was put on involving pupils in their own learning including a focus on feedback for learning and next steps marking.
- Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) was introduced in all classes for all pupils for writing, reading and mathematics. This helped all teachers to develop knowledge of levels of achievement and ensured that next steps in learning were identified for all.
- The headteacher modelled the role of an effective subject leader. Rigorous evaluation systems were put in place through analysis of progress and attainment data in core subjects, focused lesson observations, scrutiny of work and pupil interviews.

What has been the overall impact?

- Standards have risen in all subjects, particularly writing across the school. The most recent attainment data for Key Stage 2 (2009) indicates that the school's focus on improving writing has been highly effective with 90% of pupils achieving level 4+, a rise from 47% in 2006 and 30% achieving level 5 in writing, a rise from 0%.
- AfL with APP is embedded across the school.
- There is a positive 'can do' culture where praise and encouragement prevail and self-esteem is high.
- Subject leaders now carry out their role effectively. Staff know what is going on strategically in their subject and what is needed to improve it. Subject audits, lesson observations, planning/work scrutiny, pupil interviews and data analysis examination helps them know what hinders or prevents achieving objectives and this then feeds in to the school improvement plan.
- The overall impact has been the school was found to be 'outstanding' by Ofsted in every area in March 2009, a huge achievement in less than three years! The school is now a 'Great school with the potential to provide system leadership' and already shares good practice with a local cluster. The headteacher has recently been invited to be a host headteacher for the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services associate headteacher programme.

The full case study is available on the What Works Well website at www.whatworkswell.standards.dcsf.gov.uk. Please follow this link and then search for 'Leading on Improvement'.