

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

Biddenham Queen's Park

Context for the Field Trial Site

Biddenham Queens Park (BQP) is an informal collaboration of three schools; one lower, one middle, one upper school, and a children's centre, serving a multi cultural and relatively deprived community on the outskirts of Bedford. The three schools form Bedfordshire's only full service extended school and work together with the children's centre to offer a range of services, including education.

The schools are:

- Biddenham Upper School;
- Westfield Middle School; and
- Queens Park Lower School

Bedfordshire is one of the last remaining authorities to operate a three tier system in which children start middle school in year five and upper school in year nine. A strategic review and whole town consultation during 2007 concluded with a vote by councillors to retain the existing system. It has since been decided that control over children's services will pass to a new unitary authority and the effects of the transition on the decision to stay as three tiers has yet to be made known. However, the uncertainty and political turbulence over the last two years has been an important backdrop to this Next Practice in System Leadership field trial.

The vision that unites BQP is a desire to bring coherence to the experiences of pupils and families in the locality, as the children progress from 0-19. In particular BQP has been working together to try to help families to overcome significant barriers to student achievement. An example of their established and successful work is the out of school education programme, which involves all 3 schools and attends to the education of those who do not or cannot attend school. .

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

BQP is led by a Governor Alliance Group, which is informally constituted but which has clear membership and terms of reference. The Alliance Group comprises ten governors; three from the upper school, three from the middle school and four from the lower school. Of these, three are governors across two of the schools. The leader of the children's centre also joined the Alliance recently and Jim Gunther is the independent honorary Chair.

The role of the Alliance Group is to support and oversee nine collaborative development projects through to adoption by the individual schools' governing bodies. The projects are:

1. agreeing a common approach to healthy schools;
2. aligning PSHE curricula across the schools;
3. developing common policies for attendance, anti bullying and behaviour;
4. improving transition in core curriculum areas of mathematics and English;
5. developing inclusive practices across all 3 schools – review of SEN procedures and policy;
6. exploring common 'contractual arrangements' e.g. grounds maintenance;
7. aligning common Assessment for Learning practice;

8. developing a common Learning Platform and VLE; and
9. developing of the Trust (with the Bedford Learning Community).

Professional leadership and support to the Alliance Group is provided by Anne McCormick, who is also the headteacher of the lower school.

BQP is part of a wider learning network of 23 schools that have applied for the SSAT Supported Schools Programme in order to become a Trust. Should the progress towards a single Bedford-wide trust or pyramid trusts prove to be unsuccessful, BQP proposes to apply for trust status on its own behalf.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

The Governors Alliance Group is seen as a prototype for a change or steering group to lead a possible future Trust. By putting Governors at the heart of innovation from the outset, BQP is tackling the development of new models for governance, one of the most sensitive and intractable issues in collaborative arrangements, head on.

At the same time, commissioning the Group for a limited period of time, one year in the first instance, and agreeing a clear remit and terms of reference, ensures that the model can be adapted and refined as plans move forward, and not “fossilised into an organisational structure”.

Leadership for BQP is collaborative, but is spearheaded by the primary school headteacher. This was a conscious decision made on the basis of Anne’s talent and commitment in the first place and to challenge preconceptions about secondary school domination of cross phase collaboratives. Anne’s appointment also helped to allay the concerns of staff fearing a secondary take over. The primary school’s connections with the children’s centre and with the community also mean that programmes led by Anne can be influenced by the views of a wide constituency, to which she has access.

BQP has made good use of Innovation Unit processes, such as process mapping and the Bridge Change Framework. During periods of serious disruption to their plans, due to political instability in the local authority and the unexpected decision to stay with a three tier system, such processes have supported the headteachers, the Alliance Group and other stakeholders to work together to agree a new way forward.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

BQP’s plans for a 0-19 offer are rooted in a commitment to delivering the ECM agenda for the young people in their community.

The context in which they are attempting to remodel their provision is politically and socially complex. BQP is the first group of schools in the locality to attempt a radical overhaul of structural relationships and provision, and to tackle the changes to school leadership and governance necessary to support that process.

BQP are thus trailblazers for Bedfordshire, with all that that implies. The impact they therefore hope to have is to:

- secure the commitment of school leaders, Local Authority officers and other stakeholders to partnership working and learning practices to enable BQP to deliver ECM for the community

- respond in real time to, and capitalise on, the unfolding opportunities offered by processes such as the formation of a unitary authority, possibilities to secure trust status etc.

Emerging issues

Working in such a politically volatile environment has been challenging for the Alliance and there were occasions when it seemed as though it would be impossible to make headway. But their absolute commitment to their vision and to each other has enabled them to remain resilient despite the significant challenges thrown in their way.

One of the effects of the original proposal to restructure to a more conventional two-tier system was to mark the middle school in BQP for closure. The perception of a need to protect places and jobs threw the middle school leaders and governors, already the least involved of the three schools into campaign mode, and introduced a conflict of interest between the needs of the Alliance, which would benefit from the rationalisation that restructuring would bring, and the needs of the individual school, which clearly would not.

The decision to stay with the three-tier system meant a reprieve for the middle school, but relationships had been damaged during the period of the campaign and BQP's plans in the meantime had been dealt a serious blow. Careful work to rebuild trust and a determination to see the bigger picture are helping BQP to come through what has been a very difficult time.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that leaders of partnerships could usefully consider the following questions:

How can governors become involved in piloting new leadership and governance models?

What skills are required to bring schools under serious threat into discussions and arrangements that may exacerbate their problems? How can such conflicts of interest be resolved?

What are the different models of leadership that can inspire confidence in a diverse group of stakeholders? What skills and attributes does such a project leader need?

How might you use futures oriented collaborative processes and high profile events to help your partnership to keep going through difficult times?

What could working towards trust status offer your partnership?