

Next Practice in System Leadership – Practitioner Profile

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What are you aiming to do with your Association?

Establish a collaborative, cross-phase, 5–19 quality assurance system across the Forest of Dean.

1. What is most exciting to you about the work that you're involved in?

We are excited by knowing that together we can make a real difference to the future prospects, not just of learners across the Forest, but the whole community.

2. You said that your partnership is vibrant partly because the schools have all chosen to come together – what initially brought you together, and how did you go about establishing your partnership?

We were motivated to work together initially because we lead schools which are remote from the hub of Gloucestershire networks. We recognised our common interests and the value of sharing our expertise. We have held regular meetings, as a voluntary partnership across the secondary and FE organisations, for over 6 years. In the early days our meetings offered an informal support network. It rapidly became clear to us that shared policies and practices, in some areas, would support us all. Joint INSET activities enabled us to share provision in a more cost-effective way. It was on the basis of a core of shared practice that we agreed, early on, to forge collaborative GCSE, BTEC and Increased Flexibility provision for 14 to 16 year olds. This has involved students being educated on different school and college sites for the last two years.

Our developments have coincided with a demographic dip across our area. This has given us an impetus to rationalise resourcing together rather than to compete. An added incentive has been the national recognition of the value of vocational pathways. In a context where c500 students leave the Forest every day to attend Grammar Schools in Gloucester, and where we know that we

deliver equally high quality and more personalised learning pathways, we have become ever more determined to share our best practice.

The final ingredients in our vibrancy have been organising ourselves to offer the full range of the original 'flavours' of specialist college between us and benefiting from our Leading Edge School driving forward a coaching ethos across all our organisations. We know that the deeply trusting relationships established over a significant period of time have given us firm foundations for learning together.

3. You're interested in Quality Assurance across the partnership that you're working in – can you tell us how you are approaching that?

We are keen to ensure that our customers know that all our schools are all working to the same high quality standards of learning and teaching so that:

- We educate everyone within our community
- Choice of school will be predominantly according to locality and specialism rather than prejudice based on perceptions of differences in quality of provision.

We have asked a sample of partner primary schools to take part in our pilot activities, alongside 2 FE Colleges, 5 secondary schools and 1 special school. Initially the Heads and Principals will co-observe lessons in pairs across the schools involved to enable them to moderate judgments and to ensure that the plans for the rest of the pilot are appropriate. We will then roll out the pilot to involve observations, work sampling and student pursuits by a range of colleagues and students working in cross-school pairs or groups. On this basis we will develop our own definition of best practice in our context, plan and implement further shared continuing professional development across our area. The pilot will be supported by the coaching model, led by our leading edge school, which pervades all levels of our organisations.

4. We're interested in issues of governance and leadership – what, if any, formal structures have you put in place, and how did you decide on this model?

Because our partnership is a voluntary one, leadership is shared on the basis of collaborative commitment. Currently the Principals and Heads meet as a strategic group to drive our shared agenda forward. An Operational Group is formed from the Deputies and Vice Principals. We enjoy the support of our Governing Bodies, who have helped us to shape our shared vision. We see the setting up of a cross-school governor committee as a next logical step in cohesive policy development. We have considered appointing a joint-funded coordinator for our work. At present we are driving this initiative ourselves as the initiative forms such a central part of the continuous improvement process for all organisations involved. Our shared philosophy is that this arrangement is 'right' for our current stage of development. We will ensure that it evolves to meet changing leadership needs.

5. What do you see as the key challenges for your partnership at the moment, and how are you setting about overcoming them?

New partners wanting to join us present a challenge. People are genuinely excited by what we are doing. Inducting new partners and setting up new trusting relationships takes time and commitment. We are overcoming these challenges through carefully considering proposals from others and sticking to a core of organisations so that effective communication can be maintained.

6. You've been in touch with the field trial sites at West Wiltshire and Stevenage. How are these conversations helping you to move forward with your own plans?

It is a great reassurance and added stimulus to link up with others who are working on similar initiatives in different contexts. Sharing good practice is invaluable. It stands to boost confidence and save valuable time for us all.

7. If you are as successful as you hope to be, what changes will there be in 12 months' time, and what difference might that make for young people?

Students are already committed to accessing courses across organisations from the age of 14 onwards. In 12 months time they will have the reassurance that all schools are working to the same high quality standards agenda. Learner aspirations and self-esteem are key issues as many of our organisations serve micro-areas of rural deprivation. Analysing learner progress and celebrating success across the whole area will enable us to tailor our course provision ever more accurately to learner needs.

8. If you could give one piece of advice to others setting up a 14-19 partnership, what would it be?

Structures and systems will only be effective if the relationships that underpin them are secure and offer mutual challenge and support. Take time to ensure that you have built trust and a genuinely shared vision for the future.

9. What are your passions outside of work?

My passions are gardening and running - both great for achieving peaceful reflective time, fresh air and building fitness into an exciting schedule.