

innovation

St Mark's School, Bath – daring to be different

Our secondary school is small with 310 students. It is, more often than not, the lowest in the local league table of high performing schools, despite achieving our best ever GCSE results this year with 55% A*-C. A small secondary school is often perceived by some to be a lesser model. Not so! Working with a Small Schools' Collaborative through The Innovation Unit opened our eyes to the benefits. We are undersubscribed and very aware of our diseconomies of scale. As a positive response, we have worked on a 'Dare to be Different' agenda in pursuit of being 'small by design and not by default' – and not simply a shrunken version of a larger school.

This year we have embarked on our dare. We have moved to mixed age teaching for Years 7 and 8, based on the concept of 'stage not age'. The combined group is considered as one. We have devised learning programmes which we call 'tracks'. In simple terms it likens learning to a motorway. If you are travelling fast you join the fast lane. If you are travelling a little slower you join the slow lane and take a little more time on your journey. Track 5 is the 'fast track' group and whilst populated by Year 8 students the learning programme currently mirrors work undertaken by students in Year 9. Next year, it is hoped that the fast track group will join Year 10 students and embark on the first of three years in Key Stage 4.

From 2008, this combined group of students will study for GCSE courses in one year, obviously with twice the amount of time. Early entry has traditionally been the preserve of more able students where bright mathematicians in particular take their GCSE at the end of Year 10. However, we have a two pronged objective in our move. It will suit more able students but our hypothesis is that it will suit our underachievers as well. We lose the hearts and minds of some of these students at the end of Year 10, when the long haul towards the end of Year 11 is too great and the wonders of the world outside become ever more pressing and compete with learning. We feel that if students study for GCSE and gain a grade C at the end of Year 10 they will 'have it in the bag'. If they don't do well enough, they would have the option to resit. Currently, every future hinges on the last minute results at the end of Year 11 and to resit means taking an extra year out of further education/sixth form to achieve their gateway grades. We would be providing the opportunity within school. By 'bagging' GCSEs in Year 10, it would also free up some students for more work-related learning and extended work experience without detriment to their studies. Most students will continue to follow Key Stage 3 for three years and Key Stage 4 for two.

As a small school, we have all too frequently been perceived as being Christian, caring and very good with students with special needs and as such, less good with more academic children. Our fast track students in Year 8 are already experiencing the challenge. As one student explained to his mother over dinner at the end of last term, "It's like this mum – things are going to change next year at school. If you are good enough you are old enough." This young man's quest was on to join the fast track. This time next year he could be doing his first GCSEs.

We are embarking on a major evaluation of our 'Dare to be Different' agenda. We believe the size of our school will allow us the opportunity to develop this more flexible approach to learning. That's the theory. We'll keep you posted.

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