



Alliance
for Learning

BRIGHT FUTURES EDUCATIONAL TRUST

Blackpool DFE Funded English Improvement Project - Lisa Fathers (BFET)

Context

In 2017, 282,603 school children were being taught at under-performing secondary schools. Many of these schools are in coastal locations like Blackpool. In recent years there has been an increase in government, Ofsted, research and media interest in the achievement of learners in coastal regions. In the 8 secondary schools across Blackpool only one was judged 'good' by Ofsted and the other schools had the following areas in common as part of their journey to school improvement:

- A new principal/executive principal appointment
- Part of a MAT
- High exclusion data and low attendance at school
- Difficulty in engaging parents
- Schools had a poor community reputation.
- Schools suffered from poor recruitment and low retention of staff.
- It appeared that the 'coastal' locality of these academies was presenting historical, social, economic and cultural issues that schools found difficult to tackle.

The English subject issues

Blackpool was an 'Opportunity Area' and whilst some school subject areas were being supported, nothing was in place for English and outcomes were a cause for concern. Literacy, reading, and oracy were also at poor levels in Blackpool and were impacting on achievement both generally and in other subject disciplines.

A solution focussed project 2017

A rapid intervention project involving a range of stakeholders was agreed. The Alliance for Learning Teaching School was commissioned to co-ordinate the project (October 2017). There were 8 secondary schools, including the PRU (Pupil Referral unit) involved and a financial package agreed over two years. Targets and expectations were made clear at the outset and an English Review Team was also established as part of this work

Project design

- There were 8 secondary schools including the PRU involved in the English strategy which started in 2017.
- Literacy, reading and oracy were significant issues impacting GCSE outcomes, so this was intended to be an expedient piece of work with a focus on Year 10/11 initially.
- A core part of the project was to be SLE support to improve teaching and learning in all English departments including teaching the new GCSE specifications and to improve school's internal assessment and predictions.
- The scope of the project involved a range of interventions for KS4 to improve outcomes in English GCSE for 2018/19.
- Schools were given £40k across two years to spend on agreed, evidence-based interventions which were expected to have a measurable impact.
- Schools were provided with an agreed menu of support and interventions and underpinning all of this was the creation of a collaborative approach through the development of a Head of Department English Network to sustain joint working and ongoing practice sharing.
- Lisa Fathers and Lynn Nicholls (former Headteacher/English teacher) were the appointed strategic leads who met regularly to review the impact/progress of the schools involved and report back to the DFE.

- There was an initial review of each English department conducted by Lynn Nicholls and an independent SLE in the Autumn. These resulted in a report containing advice and guidance on what was working well and what needed to improve.
- The main issues were common across all schools to a lesser or greater extent: quality of teaching and learning, recruitment of specialist teachers, developing leadership of Heads of Department and being prepared for the challenge of the new curriculum and assessment process. In some schools, time had not been built into the previous year to really do the detailed preparation and planning for the new specifications.
- A mid-year monitoring visit supported the big picture about the complex issues facing Blackpool schools. At this point it was clear that a couple of schools were on track but that the other schools were less certain. Two schools had multiple issues and struggled with incredibly challenging cohorts that presented complex issues.

Project evaluation and summary comments

In terms of impact this project created, there has been a significant uptake and engagement with SLE work which had a real impact on student outcomes. Department staff tell us that they feel supported in their managerial roles, their implementation of strategy and vision and, perhaps most significantly, their every-day classroom practice.

Highlights

- All staff found enrichment activities, most notably the Prince's Teaching Institute (PTI) weekend, reinvigorated their love of English and inspired better practice within their departments. It led to the creation of new ideas and activities for improved schemes of work across Blackpool.
- Collaboration is a word staff repeatedly return to; the opportunity to share practice, ideas, and areas of both success and challenge. Whether that collaboration is with SLEs, other Blackpool schools or simply within and across departments, the impact has been significant.
- SLE support is crucial in supporting middle leaders to make significant and valuable changes to improve outcomes for children in Blackpool. Having this expert 'sounding board' allows staff to feel more empowered in their roles. Change must be sustainable, not just at KS4 but at KS3. Projects such as the Blackpool literacy project though separately governed were inextricably linked to the English Project. In order to maintain the energy, focus and capacity that has been built, the literacy strategy needs to continue and along with the curriculum re-design work underway in all schools this should ensure that we no longer 'firefight' at KS4. Indeed, literacy has now been agreed as a town-wide, cradle to grave priority.

Overall, the most notable impact the project has had has been the development of a sense of collaboration and community within the Blackpool schools. The funding has enabled staff to create new shared resources to improve standards of teaching and learning through aspects such as modelling and providing high quality curricular resources. Investment in staff CPD has consolidated understanding of examination syllabus requirements to provide students with the most precise and focused information to increase their attainment.

The project ensured no school was left behind because of the Blackpool networks and good stakeholder engagement with Chief Executives of MATs to lever and secure improved performance in all the schools and were accountable for doing this. As the project drew to a close the English HOD network was strong and embedded as a network and results across most schools had risen in English Language by at least 5% points at grade 9-4. The spirit of openness between schools was better developed and all schools moved to AQA which means that the potential for further improvement is good. There have been additional benefits in terms of schools working more closely together around a shared, town-wide vision.