Characteristics of High Performing Schools

School Report

Xxx yyyy Academy

School background

Xxxx yyy Academy (previously xxxx yyy Technology College) is a high performing, inner London mixed sex comprehensive school for students aged 11 to 18. The sixth form is a recent development, having started in September 2012. There were just over 800 students on roll in 2012-2013. Ofsted graded the school as outstanding in every respect in December 2012, just seven years after it had been put into special measures.

Evidence base for this report

The evidence for this report is based on an extensive analysis of college documentation and individual staff interviews with four Teach First (TF), teachers two beginning and two in leadership positions, the school principal and vice principal (VP), vice principals with responsibility for teaching/learning and professional learning, one focus group discussion/activities with five staff, and a student survey. The research questions were based on a research review of studies into high performing schools aimed at providing Teach First with an overall report across a sample of fourteen schools.

The school leadership and other staff were generous with their time and were helpful in providing access to documentary and other evidence, which together created the picture on which we report below. It is put forward with the obvious caution that we can only report on the evidence we found.

Professional learning environment

Research shows that High Performing schools are professional learning environments where teachers and leaders are supported and encouraged to continuously develop teaching and learning, making effective use of curriculum planning, assessment, progress-tracking and differentiated target setting. Specialist expertise is used effectively, as are coaching, peer support and co-construction and the use of observation and feedback. Professional learning and a sense of professional efficacy is rooted in collaboration and closely aligned with student learning.

Teachers as professional learners
Best practice in teaching and learning is shared widely in the school at every level. Staff belong to professional communities (PLCs) with three weekly opportunities to meet and work together in an area of teaching and learning which they have jointly identified as a professional learning priority. Practice is ultimately shared at a whole school level. Feedback from 'Book looks', learning walk observations and even the more formal appraisal observations appear to be genuinely valued by teachers for their learning potential and especially for their capacity to enhance student learning and achievement. The latter is a relentless focus for the school. Teachers whose performance continues to fall short of the school's aspirations for its students, in spite of the high levels of professional learning support, generally do not stay in their posts.

The school uses professional learning briefings as one means of sharing practice. These can be focused on whole school priorities such as literacy and they can also focus on areas which teachers have identified as a development focus. The school aims to embed a culture where staff are actively involved in reflecting on and identifying their own professional learning priorities so the school Professional Development (PD) menu/programme becomes more personalised and further improves performance.

For example, a voluntary literacy group undertook training, including phonics training, which was then disseminated through PLCs and shared with new teachers as they joined the school.

The school review cycle, its whole school lesson observation cycle, also feeds in to professional learning sessions at faculty level. Areas for development are identified for each faculty and action plans are drawn up for addressing issues within faculty time.

Action research/inquiry is becoming a more visible and important component of professional learning at xxx yyy Academy (xyx) in line with the move to greater reflective practice. The school works with Canterbury Christchurch University (CCU) on these inquiry projects.

At whole school level the school offers a Teaching Leaders programme and leadership development is one of the school's priority areas.

Mentoring and coaching
All trainee teachers and NQTs are mentored and their progress charted through lesson observations, coaching and feedback. The school has a high number of beginning teachers for whom mentoring and coaching (via observation and feedback) is tightly structured and ongoing. Mentoring is quality assured by means of observations and training for mentors. The school is not complacent and continues to learn about mentoring. For example, a VP is working with three subject mentors on a research investigation into effective support for teacher learning. Coaching programmes, tailored to teachers' specific needs, and led by Directors of Learning (DOLs) and designated coaches, are put in place for teachers who do not deliver consistently good lessons. Coaching is used as the model in these circumstances because it is characterised by reflection. Teachers are able to seek advice from within or outside their faculty and can also get support through joint planning, team teaching and in-class support. There are concrete and positive results in most cases. This is not a deficit coaching model and coaching is not seen as merely 'remedial.' Areas for teacher development are consistently identified, for example, where teachers graded 'good' could be moved on to 'outstanding.'

 Both established, senior staff and beginning teachers rated coaching and mentoring highly on their assessments of the school's professional development priorities. One TF NQT described her experience of professional mentoring and weekly conversations with her mentors in her first year as invaluable. In her NQT year she worked with the TF leadership development mentor. She picks her own focus for observations and describes the support in Yr 2 as "more like coaching."

Collaboration/ collective belief in capacity to make difference
The culture of the school is collaborative. The Professional Learning (PL) leader is fully aware of the value of collaboration in teacher learning. In addition to the more formal, structured collaborations such as the PLCs, she is promoting 'teaching and learning talk' at lunchtimes, for example. Faculty time, according to staff, is "used to work collaboratively, rather than 'do business'."

Beginning teachers (BTs), from whatever route, come together once a week to develop areas of learning and teaching in a programme designed by VPs. Time is also provided for peer observation and peer feedback. This is seen as supportive rather than judgemental. In Yr 7 for example, teachers observed each other so that they could develop consistent routines for the benefit of the students. Colleagues can work together with other NQTs or they can choose to work with people with specific roles. Joint

planning with Middle Leaders and other colleagues and team teaching are regarded by BTs as "formative."

Linking professional and student learning
Professional learning, whether identified through the very precisely targeted Performance Appraisal (PA) system or through a whole school focus such as literacy or assessment, is always centred around student achievement. Individual PA targets refer to attainment goals for student populations and are linked to the Student Improvement Plan (SIP) targets for student achievement. Both PA progression targets and PD impact are ultimately measured in terms of student progress. The impact of professional learning is also monitored through evidence collection in a variety of ways other than attainment data, including staff and student surveys, learning walks, observation analyses. One teacher described the Ofsted training as "eye opening" in terms of measuring the impact of professional learning on student achievement.

Teacher inquiry is also based on student learning. One NQT, for example, has completed an inquiry with Canterbury Christchurch University, exploring demotivation. The finding was that writing had become a demotivating issue and that students needed to have their confidence built up before starting writing tasks.

Use of specialist expertise
As well as the range of internal specialist expertise available, the school utilises a range of external specialist expertise, including through its partnerships with Teach First and Canterbury Christchurch University. Whole school priorities such as literacy are supported with specialist training (e.g. via the Literacy Trust) and local primary schools. HMIs, exam boards and Ofsted are all sources of specialist expertise on which the school draws, to name but a few. Outside expertise comes also from professional, creative and business partners whose promotion and sponsorship the school exploits to the full in order to extend the opportunities it offers its students.

Development of subject knowledge
Teachers feel they can draw on 'more experienced' colleagues for subject based support if necessary. Since the advent of the new sixth form, exam boards have been training staff in effective subject knowledge. Where there are gaps, the school uses additional support such as external Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), or music consultants for example. Subject teachers can also be partnered with teachers in other schools. All staff have the opportunity to visit an outstanding sixth form to observe and meet subject leaders. XXX YYY Academy has applied for funding to develop English/maths/science subject knowledge and they have a partnership with the Institute of Physics to develop subject knowledge. The school, in turn works with local primaries to help develop their subject knowledge. Whole school professional development (which is by its nature cross curricular) is pedagogically focused. Faculties then have the opportunity to use their designated faculty time to apply the new pedagogy in their own subject areas. "Most faculty sharing is around English subject teaching. There is a mix of experienced and inexperienced teachers and it is valuable to share subject knowledge." TF teachers, some of whom do not teach the subjects they may have studied at university, receive intensive training in subject knowledge from TF, plus an AST in school.

School leadership

Research shows that leaders in High Performing schools establish effective systems of leadership and management.
They promote and participate in teacher learning and development; establish goals and expectations for student learning; plan, co-ordinate and evaluate staffing, teaching and the curriculum and work collaboratively both within school and with external partners. They focus on developing leaders and provide vision, values and high expectations together with a strong sense of moral purpose. HP leaders set, monitor and evaluate new initiatives and focus on the provision of a relevant and attractive curriculum.

Values
Strong moral purpose underpins everything XXX YYY Academy does. The school wants to deliver real choices for students. They expect them to leave with the qualifications and skills to excel in life and staff have to commit themselves to that. This makes the school a "ruthless" organisation, dedicated to quality outcomes for all its students. "The moment there is a 'dip' things get tough". XXX YYY Academy recently had a whole school marking review for example – nothing is allowed to slip. Developing students' sense of 'self worth,' is also very important. Raising achievement, learning through collaboration and developing a sense of citizenry are all part of that and the school believes that it is wholly responsible for student outcomes.

Use of data/evidence in planning
The SIP and SEF are centrally owned by everybody, including governors, not just the Senior Leadership team. They work their way through with increasing levels of detail. Data starts with the quality of learning and teaching: it includes student survey responses, exam outcomes, internal progress data, attendance levels, punctuality and hard edged outcomes. There are also forums for forward planning using whole school data. Staff are held to account through data. There are three DEPs (data entry points) per year. Data are analysed in terms both of individuals and of different groups. They are also broken down by departments and can pinpoint individual classroom teachers. The school has a very clear picture of what is happening, with whom and where. They look for anomalies and follow them up, whilst recognizing that predictions for student outcomes are not set in stone because prior attainment data could be flawed.

Middle leaders are given support initially in data analysis. DOLs now monitor the data every six weeks through the data entry systems. After analysis, faculty times can be directed to areas that need attention. Data enables MLs to see particular students or issues that need attention and interventions (for example calling on SEN support) are discussed.

Systems and capacity
The school's recruitment formula is so rigorous that it can be quite intimidating for candidates, many of whom do not make it through the process. Selection includes a student panel, lesson observation, a data exercise applied in an action plan context (for ML and upward). Principles are established for staff at ML level and there is early and rapid in-school development. Recruits have to buy into the school ethos.

According to TF middle leaders,XXX YYY Academy has the "structures, the support and the imagination" in place to develop beginning teachers and to allow them to take on early responsibilities. TF are given strong induction and support. This includes lesson observations and grading. But they are also

challenged and made very aware of the expectations of the school. The school believes that for TF to be effective trainees need to integrate right across the board, including with the other start up routes. There are structures (e.g. weekly meetings with all beginning teachers and the PL leader) in place to achieve this and to ensure that TF people do not become a clique. However the school does have to factor in their expectations in order to make effective use of TF. TF trainees often make outstanding progress, so the school needs to challenge them. At the end of their first year, for example, they are given a small honorarium (3-5k) for a whole school project (for example student voice, citizenship) to take them out of their subject zone. Then they move back into traditional roles in their subject area, often with a new responsibility – e.g. as a Key Stage coordinator. "The school has to provide headroom for their ambitions". The school also recognizes that high achievers can also hit a wall with really difficult children. "They need a clear and developed notion of humility in their mission" and the school instills this quality into them, stressing that the important thing that makes the difference is understanding the need to devote time to the individual child. "Able people can be distracted from the moral purpose". The school has its own leadership programme in place (Teaching Leaders) and has a strategic commitment to developing leaders. Some TF teachers become MLs (such as heads of faculty) immediately after their NQT year.

By contrast, one TF ML had entered teaching in a school in the Midlands as one of two TF trainees before moving on to XXX YYY Academy in a middle leadership capacity. "This school did not really allow ambitious people to take leads." Experience was regarded as more important and the school was more hierarchical. He describes XXX YYY Academy as "a meritocracy."

Use of performance management and professional standards
Performance management (PM) is directly linked to the SIP and the SEF, but this does not mean it doesn't cater to individual staff learning requirements. 1:1 conversations with staff are used to identify their needs and the ways in which they think they can be supported. This is followed by a mid year review to monitor progress. Staff can also seek professional learning opportunities beyond the school. Training is in place to support MLs and SLs in effective performance management. Each team leader has support to understand and develop their role in the PM process.

Leadership of and engagement in CPD
It is recognised that every leader in the school leads professional learning. Common are peer observations, joint planning, collaboration and team teaching. MLs also think about their coaching roles and how to support their staff – they see every opportunity as a learning opportunity. Leaders at all levels are encouraged (during faculty time, PLC meetings etc) to take part in the learning process and share their experience and practice. SLT are also known to be engaging in professional learning. (NQPH (2) and masters). They use development time in residentials, e.g. in monitoring/evaluation review. Plus a 'bootcamp' for going back to basics – in the belief that learning continually needs reinforcement. They identify things that don't work, e.g. via Ofsted or the quality framework. 1:1 coaching is one way in which they remedy things, and they also ask "what can the institution do?" PD is typically a series of different workshops, stemming from the original audit. SLs support MLs in leading PLCs – in this way they show that SLT values and supports professional learning.

Support for ITE
A third of staff at XXX YYY Academy are training teachers or NQTs. XXX YYY Academy deliberately puts the emphasis on "growing their own" – (for the last 6.5 years) - through TF and other organisations. These entry routes are highly successful and a number of the current middle and senior leaders started

in this way. The school achieves buy in from its beginning teachers, not only to the ethos and values but also to the pedagogical priorities, professional learning culture and rigorous focus on monitoring quality.

CPD alignment with other developments especially curriculum

The school SIP is the principal professional learning driver. Professional development is closely linked with curriculum development, especially classroom enactment of the curriculum. There are also examples of PD in relation to new or different approaches to the curriculum. For example staff undertook PD in order to help them plan a new Business GCSE and MFL teachers were trained in phonics in order to overhaul the Yr 7 Spanish curriculum.

Teaching and learning

Research shows that High Performing schools have an explicit and continuous focus on quality in teaching and learning processes. They are inclusive and place high expectations on all their students. They have a broad range of curricula to engage and support students, personalised to accommodate individual aptitudes and needs. CfBT's research also revealed that HP schools have systems in place which mean that leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of all the teaching staff. They operate an evidence-based approach support. At the same time, such schools have a collegiate culture in which teaching and classroom management ideas are shared and problems acknowledged without fear of blame.

Teacher/student relationships

Positive relationships with students are key to all XXX YYY Academy's work. "There are high levels of mutual respect in the faculty. Relationships are hugely important in behaviour management. " "Positive relationships are important for creating a learning environment. It means students are more confident in asking questions or in asking for support or stretch. They can see this teacher as approachable." One DOL pointed out that restorative conversations are used rather than detention in his faculty and the DOL mediates between staff/students/parents. Teachers are sometimes required to compromise as a result of these conversations.

Most students (over 70% in English, maths and science) said they either got on really well or ok with their teachers. However a minority did say that they either had 'some issues' with their teacher or found it hard to get on with them. A smaller proportion said that their teachers did not get on with many students.

Behaviour management

Behaviour management (BM) is linked to clear ethos and expectations, the idea of positive citizenship and a culture of caring. Staff model good behaviour through positive relations. The school deliberately does not identify previously excluded students, for example – the same high behavioural standards are expected of all students. Rules are all carefully explained – they have a purpose. "If you can't explain them you shouldn't have them".

The class teacher is the first port of call, then the DOL or Head of Year (HoY) might have to step in. For TF teachers, the summer institute has dedicated workshops on behaviour management but BTs felt that the behaviour management support would be more helpful if it was provided once they started at XXX YYY Academy. There is a clear BM policy and HoYs and DOLs are supportive, but BTs would have appreciated more initial support in BM. Not all staff "do the same thing" which, they felt, can also make things difficult. They suggested that it would be useful to have specific BM INSET once at school, too. BM

problems can escalate so behaviour watch is constantly used, logging both good and bad behaviour. Staff are encouraged to set up a report which is used by HoYs to monitor and track standards.

About two thirds of students thought that their teachers in English, maths and science were either excellent or good at sorting out disruptive behaviour. About a third of students in English and maths and over 40% in science said that they experienced daily disruptive behaviour in their lessons.

Strategies for overcoming barriers to learning (e.g. SLD)
Over 80% of students in English and maths felt that their teachers were good at helping struggling students. Overcoming barriers to learning is a strong current focus of professional learning at XXX YYY Academy. The four most common needs have been identified as Autism/Aspergers/EBSD and EAL. Advanced bilingual sessions are led by middle leaders to support teaching and learning for all students. Professional Leadership briefings are used to provide 'tips' for EAL and literacy and MLs have been taking staff around on learning walks to identify and observe effective practice. Beginning teachers are exposed to a similar focus.

Use of learning resources
Interactive whiteboards were the most commonly cited resource by students. About a quarter cited games, puzzles and websites. English and science made use of television programmes and video clips. Most students said that they learned better with the use of different learning resources. Some teachers create their own resources. The TF trainee was particularly confident about creating and using resources. Other teachers said that they also used resources provided by special co-ordinators (e.g. G&T). Teachers plan collaboratively at KS3 and share resources. Further up the school, apparently, resource use diminishes, as the focus is on "results."

Use of strategies (AfL, collaborative learning, challenge, making connections)
Peer tutoring and collaborative student learning have required a real culture change in some areas of the school because things had been done so differently in the past. One DOL commented that "group work has really developed now, and students are given different roles to play. Students are also grouped according to the nature of the task". For BTs, mentors and coaches target specific teaching strategies, including group work, AfL and thinking skills.

The school has a lengthy Learning and Teaching Framework, under the umbrella rubric of Assessment, Outcomes, Differentiation and Plenaries. The framework covers a range of evidence-based practice. It contains ideas for starters and plenaries, questioning, peer and self assessment, formative feedback, independent learning, intervention strategies, revision strategies, AFL Strategies to support literacy, inclusion and displays. Teachers are expected to apply these in their daily practice and there is a shared understanding among staff of what constitutes quality learning and teaching. For example all staff said that they shared learning intentions and success criteria with their students. There were varied levels of accomplishment in these strategies expressed by teachers, according to their experience. For example, one TF trainee considered that there were several areas of his practice which required further development, including thinking skills, overcoming learning barriers, independent learning skills and collaborative learning. By contrast, a more experienced TF colleague considered only collaborative learning and making connections between learning and student's lives to be areas requiring development. Most teachers felt that they were at least 'doing ok' at developing their students' independent learning skills and thinking skills.

Students cited a range of teaching and learning approaches. For example just over half said that teachers helped them think about the way they learn in English, 48% in maths and 42% in science. Just over half said that they worked collaboratively with their peers in the three core subjects. Most students thought that their teachers knew their subjects really well. They used a range of assessments, including group tasks and discussions, homework and tests. Nearly 80% of students in English felt that their feedback was good and they knew what they had to do to improve. The proportions for maths and science were 60 and 66 percent respectively.

Teacher expectations of students are consistently high. This is part of the ethos of the school and the commitment to developing a sense of self worth. Two thirds of students thought that their teachers expected them to achieve well in English, slightly fewer in maths (60%) and 58.9% in science.

Relationships with students, parents and the community
Research shows that High Performing schools build relationships with students, parents and the community

Parental engagement in learning
There are scheduled parents evenings for all forms and one faculty has also had 'celebration evenings' which they regard as particularly important to boost student morale and improve motivation. Other events parents come to include exhibitions, and performances. DOL contacts parents if there are issues – before they escalate. Parents are seen as an important part of their children's progress. Classroom teachers are the first point of contact for parents in relation to individual students. Pastoral middle leaders hold parent mornings and visit students' homes. Staff are encouraged to send 'postcards' to parents with good news, too, if their child has achieved something praiseworthy. The school involved parents from the start - they start working with Year 6 families in October, for example. There was 100% attendance at the 2013 Year 7 parents evening.

Despite all the work with parents and carers there are still difficulties reaching elements of the community as there remain lingering memories of the years when the school was a hotbed of rioting, failure and disorder. A Somali worker has been employed to help engage Somali parents through coffee mornings etc. The maths teacher is also Somali. Data shows that Somali boys have achieved more highly at XXX YYY Academy than anywhere else in the borough.

Making connections between school learning and home/community

The school has strong links with local law firm ppp and QQQ. Through Artbeat, for example, the firm pays for professional artists to come and help work with students. After which they hold an exhibition in Liverpool Street to which parents come too. Another example of PPP and QQQ support is the Dragons Den where students pitch a business proposition – parents are involved in that as well. Other businesses are also involved with the school.   Deutsche Bank and Lloyds, for example, play a big role in the literacy project. Other agencies include Shoreditch voluntary bodies, New Scotland yard, local community groups. All of SLT is involved in the community.

In terms of system leadership, the school is working to support CCC Boys – both in terms of recruitment and in delivering a package of training. The school works with all phases and local primaries, and is frequently called upon by schools and external agencies to present/advise on a range of educational issues.

Support for wider learning outcomes
The school leadership believes that the school has a moral obligation to provide a "full entitlement" for every student, irrespective of parental involvement. There has been a realignment of SLT responsibilities in that a person will now lead on artistic and creative entitlement, plus a VP will lead on community action.

Concluding comments
It was a privilege to spend time at this amazing school! XXX YYY Academy is an environment where staff are (and are expected to be) dedicated to successful life outcomes for their students and where leadership potential, however inexperienced the teacher, is quickly recognised and facilitated. There was strong evidence for each of the four areas of activity identified by research as characteristic of High Performing schools and some interesting and innovative examples in each one from which other schools could learn. Only around forty students completed the online survey so data from that source could only provide a 'snapshot.' However this did appear to suggest a distinct degree of frequent, low level disruptive behaviour in the classroom, and teacher feedback suggested that early professional development in that area for beginning teachers might be worth investigating further. It might be of interest to focus an inquiry-based project, using video/camera observations, to explore support in this area.

Appendix: Collated student survey data for XXX YYY Academy

The evidence base for this report

Brief description of data collection and analysis process for school

The features of high performing schools which are the focus of this report were derived from a review of high quality research on professional learning and development, school leadership and teaching and learning. The studies included in the review were:

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