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# Developing a professional learning community for all

Kenton School has a thriving learning community, with all staff co-creators of their professional learning. Val Wigham explains how it works

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'If we want to create a workplace that values idealism, human connection and real, in-depth learning, we will have to create it ourselves.'

*Peter Block, author and founder of Designed Learning consultancy*

The most successful schools have energy, vitality and focus that you sense the moment you walk in the main entrance. The positivity is evident in the staff and the students; there is a real feel of purpose and commitment. Kenton School is like that. On the northern edge of Newcastle upon Tyne, it is one of the UK's largest secondary schools, with more than 2,100 students and 300 staff. The school has a vision for leadership and a focus on improvement that extends well beyond its own boundaries and takes a strong lead in sharing best practice, through its own family of feeder primaries and in partnership with other schools across the city.

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## Climate and community

So what gives Kenton its buzz, its va-va voom? The new building, which opened in 2008, has imaginative architecture, student-friendly layout, unique décor and state-of-the-art facilities. All play a vital role in shaping the positive learning environment, but the real difference is the staff, collectively and individually. The culture is one of a mutually supportive family, where each member is nurtured as an individual. Relationships among staff parallel those between staff and students, with the school motto, 'All different, all equal', seen to apply to everyone in the school community. Kenton also has a remarkable hunger for continuous improvement.

## Co-creators of CPD

The aggressive timescale of recent educational policy changes makes it difficult for schools to keep up, especially when significant budget cuts affect their capacity to respond effectively. Kenton School has addressed this through the formation of a flexible learning community and the development of an individualised Professional Learning Programme, in which all staff become co-creators of their own CPD.

In the majority of schools the CPD focus is, and has always been, on teachers. However, Kenton has a shared vision that values the performance of and builds capabilities in our teachers and associate staff equally. The learning community places a high value on partnership working and relationship-building, ensuring a shared moral purpose and a commitment to learning and leadership development for all staff.

### **Diversity and dialogue**

Our staff have a wide range of skills and functions, including:

- carrying out clerical or administrative roles
- preparing and maintaining resources
- maintaining the premises
- assisting teachers during lessons
- working directly with students
- having a management responsibility for finance
- and, of course, teaching.

***The change of name from 'support staff' to 'associate staff', now accounting for 50% of the workforce at Kenton, signifies a distinct ethos***

This diversity of roles means staff have a correspondingly wide range of professional development needs.

All need to be included in professional dialogues together but considered individually – this drives the aspiration to work collaboratively for system improvement. Trust is also central to our vision and that can only come from a partnership that is aligned with its vision, is emotionally in tune with itself, reviews its performance and constantly learns through self-evaluation and joint working.

### **The importance of associate staff**

The change of name from 'support staff' to 'associate staff', now accounting for 50% of the workforce at Kenton, signifies a distinct ethos. Research indicates that in many schools, associate staff still see the culture as one of 'them and us', where they have few opportunities for training and their contribution is undervalued. Kenton has worked hard to dispel such perceptions, fundamentally ensuring all staff have equal access to the school's development programme.

Achievements at all levels are recognised and accredited, and all associate staff at Kenton are involved in the performance management cycle. Teaching and associate staff develop alongside each other, helping create a holistic community of practice.

As the role of the teacher evolves so will the role of associate colleagues and a staffing model is required which identifies the range of staff skills and responds to their changing needs, some of which cannot be foreseen at present because of the rapidly developing landscape of learning in the 21st century.

## **Kenton's Professional Learning Programme**

### ***The PLP is designed to eradicate the 'silo effect' often found in large organisations***

At the heart of Kenton's approach to staff development is a bespoke weekly Professional Learning Programme (PLP), which thrives on creativity and a degree of informed risk. Outstanding professional learning does not happen in a vacuum, and the PLP is designed to eradicate the 'silo effect' often found in large organisations, where a lack of communication and cross-departmental support and pollination damage efforts to cultivate an effective learning environment.

The PLP typifies Kenton's outwardly facing learning community, driving innovative practice for teaching and associate staff by embedding and transforming their learning.

#### **How it works**

The PLP journey started in September 2005 with the rescheduling of the school day to enable teaching staff to finish early on Wednesday afternoons and giving them dedicated professional personalised learning time. It has since evolved into an extremely complex and diverse schedule giving all teaching and associate staff opportunities to take part in a comprehensive and differentiated menu of activities. Pupils now finish at 2.25pm on Wednesdays and staff CPD sessions run from 2.30-4.30pm.

Planning for such a complex programme begins early in the summer term following a review of qualitative and quantitative data from the previous year. Information collected from surveys, lesson observation feedback, student voice, focus groups, questionnaires, personal communication and exit interviews provides a rich empirical basis upon which to evaluate the impact, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of our CPD provision.

Constant two-way communication that explains clearly what is happening and why, and makes explicit the vision for professional learning, is vital.

### ***The associate programme reflects a more diverse menu of activities to accommodate the breadth of job roles***

Eventually, this collaborative process leads to the development of two professional learning programmes – one for teaching staff and the other for associate teams. The draft schedules are emailed to colleagues in early June for them to make amendments and then finalised before the end of term so all staff can plan their [personal learning pathway](#) for the next academic year.

The programme for teaching staff has been developed on the concept of a repeating carousel, with specific focus on departmental, whole-school, individual, cross-priority and year team learning. The associate programme reflects a more diverse menu of activities to accommodate the breadth of job roles from support assistant high level to financial manager.

### **A typical Wednesday**

So, what does professional learning on a Wednesday look like? It incorporates up-to-date knowledge of the national agenda for change in education, interwoven with the school improvement plan and school improvement strategies, identified through performance management, departmental self-evaluation, lesson observation feedback and departmental supportive reviews ([see timetable](#)).

### **Online organisation and planning**

To support the professional learning, an online learning hub allows all colleagues to access information before, during and after scheduled sessions. The online PLP is integrated into the school's VLE so staff can easily access information on specific sessions and track their personal learning log at any point in the programme, whatever their role in the school. So the programme the headteacher sees will be very different to that seen by a support assistant high level.

Before the weekly sessions, colleagues can go online and see their upcoming programme and, if there is more than one session available for them, they can opt in to attend the session that is most relevant. This is extremely beneficial as it identifies which sessions are the most popular and so allows adjustments to the number of sessions. It's particularly satisfying to know that certain sessions have to be repeated because they have proven so effective in colleagues' development.

### ***We have a fully paperless approval process***

And it's not just internal sessions that are recorded through the online hub; all colleagues can apply online to attend externally delivered sessions and courses. We ask for details of the course and how it will benefit the individual, the associated costs (including cover) and how the learning will be disseminated. Once completed, the request is notified to the line manager/PLP coordinator for approval, meaning we have a fully paperless approval process.

### **What next?**

Despite continual reductions in funding from central government, we will maintain the quality of our CPD commitment, offering value for money, increasing the investment in staff and ensuring a return in terms of the benefit on students' lives.

This article outlines phase one in the development of Kenton's learning community. The development and implementation of phase two is an exciting opportunity with the creation of a whole-school co-coaching model, an increase in collaborative professional learning within Newcastle, the north-east and nationally, and a new performance management and supportive review model.

## **Don't forget to water the plants**

Dr John Dunford, former headteacher and past leader of the Association of School and College Leaders, once listed ten lessons learned on his leadership journey and one in particular related to the development of staff.

When he was appointed as a headteacher, he told the appointment committee it was his job to 'water the plants', nurturing staff and getting them to think about the job and take real responsibility, not just pass decisions automatically upwards. But, as in the real garden, not all the human plants in the educational version need the same amount of water and nurturing. Some human plants need something much stronger to make them bloom.

At Kenton, this means backing up the basic Personal Learning Programme with a wide range of internal and external courses designed to ensure all staff can reach their full potential.

### **Emergent Leader's Award**

Teaching and associate staff annually have been invited to apply for an Emergent Leader's Award, submitting a proposal for a research-based project which would further the school's improvement significantly, in line with the school improvement plan priorities. All the expertise developed within the awards is disseminated within the PLP and this is professional learning for staff and delivered by staff.

The school is consciously trying to build capacity across staff to lead on professional learning opportunities. It is also extremely refreshing – and an increasingly frequent occurrence – to observe a member of the associate team leading a PLP session for teachers.

Staff can apply for an honorarium payment: a minor award of £1,268 and a major award of £2,525 for the academic year. Currently we have 14 teachers and nine associate staff on the award programme who are leading on a range of initiatives.

### **Middle Leadership Development Programme (MLDP)**

Supported by the National College, Kenton is one of the lead organisations in Newcastle for the MLDP, delivering professional development to middle leaders. We have four facilitators in the training programme and are working with our feeder primaries and local secondary schools in Newcastle, Gateshead and South Tyneside, delivering the programme to a cohort of 30 middle leaders.

### **Kenton's Scholarship Scheme**

A further aspect of the Professional Learning Programme is the Kenton Scholarship Scheme, developed to share learning, knowledge and expertise across the school. The initiative gives teaching

and associate staff the opportunity to develop a reflective practice project, which will close the progress gap by reducing the difference between outcomes for specific groups and those for all students.

The scholarships carry no additional salary but staff can apply for a maximum bursary of £1,000 to fund initiatives, paid from the Specialist Schools Funding Grant. The projects can involve a single teacher; collaboration between teaching and associate staff; or a collaborative team of two or more associate members of staff focusing on a mutual topic.

The action research project can take on an even larger scope by involving a particular department or year team. We currently have two scholarship initiatives – the development of Applications for Learning with the IT department and a year leader of welfare working with a member of the administration team on an attendance tracker for Year 9.

The school also has an excellent record of funding/partially funding applications for further courses, including BA, MEd and MA degrees, GTP, NPQH, NVQs, Leading from the Middle, Future Leaders and the Teaching Leaders programmes.

## Partnerships

Kenton has developed some invaluable partnerships to help 'water the plants'. For example, Julie McGrane, director of Leading Learning (Education), has supported the delivery of innovative teaching for learning, using collaborative enquiry to investigate the impact of initiatives, including differentiation without burnout, questioning strategies, parental involvement, inquiry-based learning and training day facilitation. This is building capacity within Kenton for high-quality professional learning, greatly improving the quality of teaching.

### **Northumbria University Partnership**

We have developed a unique partnership with the School of Health, Community and Education Studies at Northumbria University, built on a collaborative view of professional learning provision.

An impressive 10 per cent of our staff are working towards postgraduate or undergraduate qualifications with the university, with numbers equally divided between teaching and associate staff.

Northumbria's Professional Practice Award (PPA) programme, a work-based learning programme, perfectly suits the professional needs of individual learners and the development needs of the school. Very different from a traditional university course, it gives individuals personal, professional and organisational benefits and promotes the development of expertise which feeds back into Kenton's PLP. Individualised flexible programmes vary in scale from as small as 10/20 credits to full awards such as BA (hons) support services or MA in educational practice.

Examples of work-based projects have included: Improving Effectiveness of Induction for New Staff; Parental Engagement Strategies; and Narrowing the Gap for Free School Meal Students. These

projects germinate within the school, giving staff the opportunity to explore and share new knowledge and develop new skills through practical strategies that help to grow Kenton's leaders of tomorrow and boost student progress.

## **CUREE**

The Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) has been an amazing support, helping Kenton review cost-effective approaches to professional learning by analysing what really works. CUREE has also delivered a co-coaching programme, increasing the interest and skills of practitioners in the use of research to underpin professional development, which has enhanced teaching and learning.

## **Author details**

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