

Developing a 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

'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.

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 educational policy changes makes it difficult for schools to keep up, especially when budget cuts affect their capacity to respond effectively. Kenton School has addressed this through the formation of a flexible learning community and the development

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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:

- 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.

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

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 give them dedicated professional personalised learning time. It has evolved into a 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

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.

Professional Learning Programme – Wednesday 18th April 2012

Teaching Staff				
Time	Focus	Staff	Location	Lead
2.40-3.20	1 Self Evaluation: Successful walkthroughs	Middle Leaders and TLR Holders	North Hall	
3.20-3.50	2 Data: Using trackers to identify intervention	Middle Leaders and TLR Holders	North Hall	
3.50-4.30	Data Collection time in recompense for change to programme on 28th March 2012	Middle Leaders and TLR Holders		
2.40-3.20	1 Self Evaluation: Successful walkthroughs	Main Scale Teachers, NQTs and GTPs	Main Hall	
3.20-3.50	2 Data: Introduction to RAISEonline and school outcomes leading to accountability	Main Scale Teachers, NQTs and GTPs	Main Hall	
3.50-4.30	Data Collection time in recompense for change to programme on 28th March 2012	Main Scale Teachers, NQTs and GTPs	Main Hall	
Teaching & Associate Staff				
2.40-4.30	Co-coaching for identified staff. Developing a repertoire of skills and strategies and a deep understanding of the theories of Co-coaching	Teaching & Associate staff	North Gym	
2:40- 4:30	Mini Bus Training: Any members of the Associate team who are registered to drive the school minibus must attend one of the three sessions available	Associate staff	Theory session in Conference Room followed by practical	
2:40-4:30	Leading & learning from other schools in action. Associate staff will have the opportunity to visit a school/business to enhance their practice.	Associate staff		
2:40-4:30	Private study session for associate staff working towards postgraduate or undergraduate qualifications	Associate staff		
2:40-4:30	First Aid Session 3	Associate staff	Flexi Rooms	

learning, is vital.

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 strategies, identified through performance management, departmental self-evaluation, lesson observation feedback and departmental supportive reviews. See timetable, above.

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 from 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 identifies which sessions are the most popular and so allows adjustments to the number of sessions. It's satisfying to know that certain sessions have to be repeated because they have proven so effective in colleagues' development.

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.

For more materials see the web version of this article <http://bit.ly/MekXh6>

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