

The Lowestoft Hub

Many see collaboration as being key to system-wide improvement. **Andrew Redman** discusses how one hub of schools is working together in Lowestoft, helping to overcome many of the challenges faced by their coastal communities

The coastal school conundrum, highlighted once more by the recent Social Market Foundation report (January 2016), is characterised by a lack of good teachers, low aspirations, educational isolation and difficulties brought about by changes to education policy.

At the Active Learning Trust (ALT), our learning hubs, based geographically in Cambridge, Lowestoft and Ipswich, are designed to create strong professional partnerships across all ALT academies, and to stimulate and support schools across all these challenges.

The coastal Lowestoft Hub is built on the foundations of a traditional partnership in the south of Lowestoft. Initially three primary schools, Grove, Red Oak (formally Fen Park) and Westwood (formally Whitton Green), formed the basis for the hub and, in the past year, this has expanded to include Pakefield and Reydon primary schools.

In recent years, employment levels in Lowestoft have declined at a more rapid rate than seen nationally, resulting in some significant areas of deprivation. Almost all pupils are from White British Families; the number of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above the national average, as is the proportion of Pupil Premium children and those with SEN. Children enter nursery and reception class significantly lower than national expectations and high mobility remains a significant factor.

Challenging low aspirations

To combat low expectations, significant changes in leadership and staffing have taken place in many of the schools. New headteachers are not only responsible for the outcomes for children and families in their own schools, but also for those across the hub. It is this collaborative approach to the education of the children in south Lowestoft that is making the difference. With high expectations in the quality of teaching and learning, pupil progress and attainment has significantly improved and the aspirations of the communities are being raised. Pupil behaviours are now a strength, and core learning behaviours such as risk-taking, resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and relationships, permeate through every school.

Yet low expectations are not just challenged through the students, the hub focuses also on helping parents be involved in their child's education. Engaging them is key and the hub regularly updates parents on new methods of learning. One parent told us: "It was good to learn about this new method of writing and the good results that are being achieved. It will give us a good insight when our child discusses his homework and we will know better how to support him."

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Collaboration, not isolation

Each school in the Lowestoft Hub is different and ALT has deliberately not imposed a corporate style or identity, but there is a common approach to maintaining the highest expectations through the provision of support, advice and challenge of the highest quality. A hub leader (experienced



Images: Active Learning Trust

A united approach: Pupils from primary schools within the Lowestoft Hub

headteacher) is responsible for co-ordinating this school improvement and there is emphasis on a distinctive leadership style that seeks to place the onus on schools to act to address both their own priorities and also take a wider view across all ALT schools. In addition, an external review in 2015 concluded that this role has enabled schools to develop a strategic view of what is needed, make connections and focus on the things best done together, across schools.

Schools are starting to benefit from economies of scale that enable expertise held within one school to be made more widely available across the hub. For example, speech and language therapist works between the five schools, a hub bursar provides financial guidance and support, and family support workers can collaborate as a team.

Several schools share the services of a clerk to governors, who also works to support the whole trust. The clerk offers both bespoke support for individual schools and hub-level training and development for all of the newly formed governing bodies.

At pupil level, the varied shared events, such as maths, spelling, able writing, computing days, were felt to be of particular value and allowed a showcasing of unique talents, so much so the children have asked to do this more often. Similarly, the programme for inter-school tournaments has grown significantly in 2015/16 with events in a range of sports and involving children from years 1 to 6.

In addition, the hub schools, in partnership with Norfolk and Norwich Festival Bridge, are currently actively engaged in a creative arts project focused on a diversity of illustration styles – this will provide the opportunity for children to use their imagination and, it is hoped, will result in an exhibition curated by children in a professional gallery. Finally, strong links have been forged with secondary colleagues and, as part of a year-long transition programme, all year 6 pupils and teachers will be involved in a two-week programme at local high schools at the end of the summer term.

Finding good teachers – and keeping them

All of this collaboration is supported and developed by our excellent teachers



and we are proud to say that recruitment in the schools in Lowestoft has been incredibly positive.

This year, joint recruitment resulted in the appointment of 15 NQTs who have benefited from a bespoke training programme of hub-based conferences in addition to their mentored school support.

Leaders within each school have contributed to shared high-quality training in order to develop their leadership skills. Training has included maths, literacy, SEND and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

There is a strong belief in the schools that “everyone is a leader”. An evaluation of the 2015 Subject Leader Development Programme, led and managed by the deputy headteachers, and involving every teacher in every school, concluded that colleagues valued:

- Meeting with like-minded people and sharing ideas – particularly across key stages.
- The chance to “make sense of their own role”.
- The opportunity to see and learn from different learning environments.
- The chance to share the workload in their subject.
- The opportunity to develop policy and practice as a group.
- Support with managing budgets.

Implementing and understanding policy changes

All of this takes place, of course, against the backdrop of continued change at policy level. This past year has seen considerable changes to the curriculum and assessment processes. Each school has been supported to develop its own curriculum that responds to the needs of its own children; at the same time systems are in place to build consistency and raise expectations over what “good” and “outstanding” looks like and what age-appropriate standards should be possible. Joint moderation (including work with year 7 colleagues), book scrutiny and sharing of data are now firmly embedded across the hub.

Teams of senior leaders across the hub schools have been identified and trained to complete Pupil Premium reviews in each setting. This process of peer review is a model that is being developed at a number of leadership levels and is seen as a key element of future hub practice.

The Leading Active Learning programme identified practitioners from across hub schools to take an individual teaching and learning focus based on school priorities. They then became part of a professional learning community within the hub, carrying out research, attending tutorials and engaging in focused in-school work. Colleagues from the first cohort have now extended their roles to share their expertise across the trust as well as providing support for the even larger group of professionals making up the second cohort.

True partnership

“Working in partnership” is an attractive concept, but for many schools this collaboration operates on a superficial level. In south Lowestoft, however, schools have opened up their practice, both in classrooms and in leaders’ work, to thoughtful scrutiny, debate and celebration.

The hub is based on a solid understanding of how this spirit of openness can lead to everyone raising their game. As a result, the children and their families have benefited from coastal collaboration that puts teaching and learning at the heart of every decision.

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- *Andrew Redman is the Lowestoft Hub standards advisor with the Active Learning Trust.*