Parkland Primary School, Swansea

The role of staff development in raising standards and aspirations

Context

Parkland Primary School serves the Sketty area of Swansea, to the west of the city centre. There are 529 pupils on roll aged between 3 and 11 years. The school has 17 classes and a nursery for 120 three and four-year-olds who attend school on a part-time basis. A specialist teaching facility provides full-time education for up to nine pupils who have moderate to severe learning difficulties.

Eleven per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is below the national average of 20%. A minority of pupils speak English as an additional language. There are 18 different languages spoken by pupils at home, although no pupils speak Welsh as a first language. The school identifies around 9% of pupils as having additional learning needs, which is well below the national average. A very few pupils have statements of special educational needs. There are currently a few pupils who are looked after by the local authority, and a very few who are asylum seekers.

The headteacher took up her post in January 2011.

The school's inspection by Estyn in September 2013, judged both current performance and prospects for improvement as good. The headteacher and senior leaders provide effective leadership and have appropriately high expectations of all stakeholders. There are effective links between self-evaluation and school improvement. The governing body works strategically and acts well as a critical friend to the school.

The school's improvement journey

Strategic aims

The key factors having the biggest impact on improving standards at the school include:

- all stakeholders sharing the same vision
- a focus on developing a whole school pedagogy
- understanding and using pupil data to inform teaching and the composition of intervention groups for pupils requiring additional support
- the effective continuous professional development for all staff
- a thorough cycle of monitoring and evaluating activities
- building capacity within the school through the effective distribution of leadership roles in both key stages

Prior to her appointment, the headteacher analysed the school's performance data, which suggested to her that the school was not doing as well as it could. Upon taking up her appointment, standards in books and lesson observations provided additional evidence to confirm that this was the case. Overall, rates of pupil progress and outcomes were too low as not enough pupils were making the progress of which they were capable. Teaching staff did not use pupil data or ongoing assessments to inform their planning. This often meant that teaching did not support different

groups of pupils effectively enough to make good progress in learning. Teachers worked hard with high levels of commitment but they worked in isolation. There was no collaboration to plan the curriculum or units of work and this limited pupils' progression in learning.

In a majority of classes, teachers' use of assessment for learning strategies was appropriate, but in other classes this was inconsistent and there was no shared understanding of this methodology. As a result, assessment for learning was not effective enough. The new headteacher also realised that good quality resources to support teaching and learning were at a premium.

The school lacked strategic direction in relation to staff's continuous professional development. As a result, staff training and development did not have sufficient impact on improving standards of teaching and learning.

Upon taking up her appointment, the headteacher planned initially to revisit and revise the school's vision, mission statement and school aims. However, an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats highlighted that staff felt there were other more pressing priorities, for example to address the lack of a planned curriculum. The senior leadership team decided to act on staff concerns and this led to an immediate sense of shared purpose.

Actions

Motivating staff through support and challenge

The headteacher and senior leadership team outlined their expectations explicitly to all staff. Leaders next created additional leadership responsibilities for staff, such as subject co-ordinators. At the same time, teachers began to design a new curriculum during staff meetings. This was a powerful tool in giving all staff a sense of ownership and responsibility to move the school forward.

Senior leaders planned whole school continuing professional development events linked to the outcomes of the school's self-evaluation. As a result, all professional development opportunities supported the school improvement plan effectively. Leaders monitored the impact of professional development on the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils. For example, through the successful use of the school's performance management system, teachers became accountable for implementing specific, agreed approaches to teaching, such as effective assessment for learning techniques.

All staff engaged in regular target setting and moderation meetings. This was a major priority as it helped develop a shared understanding of the standards and skills expected from pupils. Teachers used pupil data and teacher assessment information robustly to identify pupils in need of additional support and more able pupils, who needed greater challenge in their learning. Staff evaluated a variety of intervention techniques and implemented those which were most suitable. They received appropriate training to deliver these programmes successfully. Such measures increased staff involvement in setting the school's overall direction and strategy and proved motivational. Nearly all staff were enthused by these collaborative ventures and their subsequent impact on standards.

The school purchased new and attractive resources to support literacy and numeracy. This had the effect of raising pupils' self-esteem, as they felt valued. The headteacher reinforced the status of learning at every opportunity, for example during assemblies and frequent visits to all classrooms. At the same time, the school invested in improvements to the physical environment. This added greatly to the sense of pride in the school felt by staff and pupils.

Developing a culture of monitoring and evaluation

Teachers became involved actively in monitoring activities and the scrutiny of data to help them to identify improvement actions. Leaders allocated specific roles to appropriate staff for monitoring and evaluating work in their areas of responsibility. The senior leadership team used data consistently and effectively across the school to inform pupil progress meetings and to hold teachers to account for improved pupil outcomes. Class teachers now use data consistently to inform their planning for cohorts, classes, groups and for individuals. The school uses online self-evaluation questionnaires to collect stakeholder views. For example, the 2011 parents' survey results indicated that only around 64% of respondents felt well informed about their child's progress. As a result, the school established a 'Meet the Teacher' event in the first week of September to share information about the curriculum, approaches to teaching reading, writing and maths. During these events, parents receive valuable information about the intended learning for the year and have the chance to ask any questions they feel will help them in supporting their child's learning at home. To develop this partnership work further, the school took the decision to share all test data with parents during the first half term in a consultation meeting to evaluate progress and identify next steps for learning. The subsequent consultation evening focuses on the progress the pupils are making in relation to these next steps and in their work across the curriculum. All teachers follow a structure outlining the essential information and discussion points that must be included in the consultation meetings. In 2013, the percentage of survey respondents who felt informed about their children's learning rose to around 86%, and in 2015, this rose to 90%.

A governor self-evaluation and data group ensures that governors have the knowledge and understanding to challenge the headteacher effectively in relation to school performance. Self-evaluation involves all staff. For example, teaching assistants monitor and evaluate the progress of pupils in receipt of intervention. The additional learning needs co-ordinator monitors their work and reports outcomes to the senior leadership team and the governors. Leaders ensure that they consider all staff, parent and pupils' views in monitoring and evaluation processes and when identifying priorities for improvement. For example, the school responded to pupils' requests for a wider variety of opportunities to write. They adopted a writers' workshop approach in literacy lessons, where pupils have structured opportunities to write about a subject of their own choice, in their chosen style and genre. This greatly improved the quality of writing and the length at which many pupils, especially boys, wrote. Initially the approach was trialled in one year group. However, the feedback from pupils was so positive that the school decided to adopt this approach across the school, providing opportunities for freedom of choice across all age ranges and leading to an improvement in the quality of writing across the school.

Developing capacity

Senior leaders identify staff strengths and areas for development effectively by evaluating their professional practice. As a result, they plan effective personal and professional development for staff at all levels. This is fundamental to the success of the school because staff develop the skills and professional competencies required to fulfil their roles successfully. This is particularly effective for those staff with leadership aspirations. All teachers are now an integral part of whole school improvement planning through developing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing action plans for their areas of responsibility. The school's culture encourages staff to take on additional responsibilities when they feel ready, for example by leading training sessions and team working to move forward on agreed priorities. Through this, they develop the skills and knowledge to lead others.

The performance management process focuses on the future aspirations of staff, in addition to school priorities. The school has implemented the ethos of the Welsh Government's 'New Deal for the Education Workforce', for example to identify where staff are on their career path and what opportunities they need to be able to make the next steps. A significant number of staff are now lead practitioners for literacy and numeracy. They have led staff training and mentored and coached teachers in other schools successfully.

Since January 2013, the school has a very good record of developing leaders. Three teachers are now deputy headteachers and another four teachers have phase or key stage leader roles in other schools.

Working with others

The governing body challenges the headteacher consistently and effectively in relation to school performance. All governors take their roles seriously, and focus well on improving standards. Governors are working currently on a new structure to maximise the impact of their strategic role in ensuring continuous improvement through developing closer links with subject co-ordinators.

Initially, the school worked closely with the local authority to develop staff skills as reflective practitioners. Staff then worked collaboratively within school to share effective practice. This led to more consistent approaches to teaching. Staff have joint reflection time built into their weekly working patterns. This enables them to consider the outcomes of their practice collaboratively and to identify possible improvements.

At the beginning of the improvement journey, leaders were very willing to look beyond the school for examples of good practice. Now, having developed its own strong practice, the school frequently hosts teachers from other schools to share the staff skills acquired as a result of its journey.

Outcomes

- The school has an effective vision that supports consistently good standards of teaching and learning
- There is a shared understanding amongst all staff of effective approaches to teaching and they implement these consistently
- Standards in most indicators have risen consistently over the last four years
- Assessment arrangements are effective in moving nearly all pupils on to the next stage in their learning at a good pace
- The school is well placed to move teaching from consistently good to excellent
- There are successful arrangements to support pupils in developing and applying their literacy, numeracy, thinking and ICT skills, for example in well planned rich learning tasks
- There are effective arrangements for the continuous professional development of all staff
- There is effective distribution of leadership throughout the school
- Leadership roles are all related to improving the quality of the school's work, for example through effective self-evaluation activity and the successful use of pupil data