

Deighton Primary School, Blaenau Gwent

Creating an aspirational culture to raise standards

Context

Deighton Primary School is in Tredegar, Blaenau Gwent. Most pupils come from the immediate surrounding area and a large housing estate, both of which are Communities First areas. There are 177 pupils on roll aged 3 to 11 years, taught in six classes with three containing mixed age groups. There is also a part-time nursery class.

Currently, around 51% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. This figure is well above the national average of 20%. Most pupils are of white British ethnicity and none speak Welsh at home. A very few pupils speak English as an additional language. The school identifies around 27% of pupils as having additional learning needs, which is slightly above the national average. A very few pupils have a statement of special educational needs or are cared for by the local authority.

An Estyn inspection in April 2011 placed the school in need of significant improvement. The current headteacher and deputy headteacher took up their posts in April 2012 and April 2013 respectively. In June 2013, a team of Estyn inspectors visited the school to evaluate progress. The school was judged to have made sufficient progress to be removed from the list of schools in need of significant improvement. A further Estyn inspection in June 2015, judged both the school's current performance and prospects for improvement as good.

The school's improvement journey

Strategic aims

The headteacher established quickly a set of strategic priorities to support effective and speedy school improvement from a very low starting point. These included actions to address:

- weak teaching
- the culture of low aspiration
- the lack of leadership capacity

To begin to address the first two issues, he initiated many challenging conversations with staff about their under-performance. The headteacher understood the significance of addressing weak teaching rapidly in bringing about an improvement in standards.

There were inconsistencies in the overall quality of teaching, which the headteacher identified immediately and took steps to address. However, there was reluctance and even opposition to change amongst a few staff. These staff believed that they were doing a good job and initially they did not respond positively to challenges to improve their practice. To resolve these issues took a great deal of time, effort and perseverance from the headteacher, including direct coaching and mentoring.

The school lacked an established and effective leadership structure. Those in leadership positions did not fully understand their responsibility for ensuring high standards for pupils in their own classes,

nor did they have the skills necessary to lead others. The headteacher identified the need to establish an effective leadership team to meet the needs of the school.

Levels of collaboration between staff were low in many areas of the school and staff did not work together effectively as a team. The headteacher recognised the need to transform the school's culture to become an aspirational professional learning community where all staff understood that they could improve and embrace positive change to bring about improvements for pupils. One member of staff could not accept the new culture and left the school. However, other members of staff began to change their outlook and became receptive to the new expectations. They started to work together to embrace the required improvements to raise the quality of teaching.

The immediate priority was to work towards meeting the recommendations from the Estyn inspection, which placed the school in significant improvement. The strengthening of the senior management team began when a new deputy headteacher took up her appointment in April 2013 and the school's additional learning needs co-ordinator began to develop her role successfully.

The appointment of a new chair of governors, with a background in the legal profession, led to greater levels of challenge and a more coherent relationship with the headteacher and staff. The appointment of a new vice chair, with expertise in education and data analysis, was also a vital move forward for the school. Her skills complemented those of the chair well and ensured that the governing body had the necessary expertise to challenge the headteacher effectively.

Managing the change in culture and improving teaching

On arrival at the school, the new headteacher established himself as a good role model for staff and pupils. He worked with staff to evaluate their abilities in order to develop a strategy to move the school forward. This began with lesson observations to assess standards of teaching and learning. In 2010, the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level across all core subjects in key stage 2 was very low. In April 2012, the new headteacher quickly identified that many pupils could attain better outcomes and he worked intensively with them and with staff to raise the expectations of both groups. Outcomes began to rise as staff and pupils began to change their attitudes and realise that they could achieve more.

At this point, there was no use of pupil progress data. The school introduced reading tests on a six-monthly basis and used the outcomes from these to hold staff to account for their pupils' progress. Six monthly formal interviews as part of the newly robust performance management arrangements enabled the introduction of much higher expectations for pupil achievement.

The headteacher put in place a set timetable for both key stages to ensure proper curriculum coverage. In addition, the creation of an intervention group timetable for literacy and numeracy support, with registers taken at each session, ensured that regular interventions took place. This was vital to raise standards of basic literacy and numeracy.

The introduction of a planning scrutiny by the headteacher on a weekly basis with feedback to staff proved effective in bringing about improved practice. However, initially this required persistence as not all staff were willing to make changes to their planning practice. In addition, the introduction of a monitoring cycle with lesson observations and regular book scrutiny led to performance targets linked to pupil outcomes being set for staff and many difficult conversations. After Estyn's first significant improvement visit, the headteacher increased the level of book scrutiny and reduced the frequency of lesson observations. He found this an effective strategy as it revealed pupil progress over time rather than just in a single lesson.

The school introduced a framework to support teachers to improve the quality of their professional practice. This was a central tool in developing staff as it set out clearly the required elements for achieving teaching of a good or better standard. This formed the basis of performance management interviews and lesson observations. All staff are now very familiar with the framework and it is an effective driver for distributed leadership.

Although the school had a computerised system to record pupil progress, it was ineffective as no use was made of the data. To address this, the headteacher took lead responsibility for assessment. He instigated termly meetings with each individual teacher to evaluate pupil assessment data and to agree targets for improvement. These meetings also focus on the performance of groups of pupils, including pupils eligible for free school meals and those with additional learning needs. This approach has been very successful and teachers now monitor the accuracy of the data themselves to ensure that pupil profiles on entry to their class are accurate and do not give a false impression of pupils' progress. Staff now have the skills to analyse their pupils' progress themselves and self-evaluate instead of the headteacher doing so, as was the case initially.

Implementing school-to-school working to raise expectations

Making teachers more accountable for the standards their pupils achieve has been a central part of the improvement journey. It has raised staff awareness of the standards that teachers and pupils should aspire to. Previously staff had no concept of what good or excellent teaching looked like as they were working in a very insular environment.

Between 2012 and 2013, the school focused on raising standards of reading for pupils eligible for free school meals. It paired with another local primary school to develop a best practice reading intervention programme. This was primarily a tool to ensure that this group of pupils attained functional literacy through one-to-one intervention with teaching assistants and trained volunteers. Part of the programme was to explore the effective use of tablet computers to stimulate greater interest in reading. Teaching assistants improved their skills by observing best practice in reading intervention and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support this in another school in the region. Outcomes in reading began to show considerable improvement.

The school's learning environment did not support effective teaching and learning. There were no stimulating displays and classrooms were untidy and poorly equipped. During 2013, staff visited another local school to learn about best practice in developing effective learning environments. As a result, staff worked to make classrooms and other areas around the school more vibrant places for pupils to develop their interest in learning.

These actions began to lead to a cultural shift in attitudes and self-perception. The headteacher and deputy headteacher modelled expectations around professionalism, empathy to learners, a continuing focus on high academic and behavioural standards and positive attitudes to the rewards of teaching very responsive pupils. A culture of teamwork began to emerge where previously this was sporadic.

Work with a Newport primary school enabled staff to observe best practice in teaching and learning, with a focus on raising standards in literacy. This included observations of best practice in lessons, professional development training from the partner school's headteacher and deputy headteacher and valuable joint moderation of pupils' work.

In spring 2015, the school joined its feeder comprehensive's 'Schools Challenge Cymru' project. The main focus was to work towards developing outstanding practice amongst teachers and teaching assistants. The project is helping to raise the quality of teaching by all staff across the school.

A professional learning community, with a focus on behaviour, in conjunction with other schools in the area has also helped to share good practice and improve parental links. As a result, parents are more aware of their children's' achievements both academically and socially, through the use of texts and emails. All teachers take part in weekly business meetings and professional development sessions. Staff have the autonomy and trust to lead their areas of responsibility and to address areas for improvement with confident leadership. The introduction of half-termly teaching assistant forums enabled all staff to contribute to the improvement journey and to make their views known. Teaching assistants have additional responsibilities as well as their daily roles and they have responded favourably to increased levels of trust.

Developing the role of governors

Governors now support and challenge the school effectively to achieve its strategic aims. Initially, this was through the post-inspection-action plan when the school went in to significant improvement. Specific governors were linked to each of the recommendations and took a lead role in monitoring and evaluating the progress the school was making in meeting agreed targets. The governing body's interest in training in areas such as safeguarding is developing well and this raises their awareness of best practice. There are now link governors for poverty, additional learning needs and health and safety. These governors not only support school leaders but also provide increasing levels of challenge to ensure that the school develops good practice in these areas.

Governors now have an annual involvement in self-evaluation and have regular oversight of progress towards meeting school development priorities. To assist this process, designated governors have link roles with core subject areas and they visit the school regularly to challenge and support subject leaders and to check on progress in their areas of responsibility.

They also support the school well by accompanying pupils on visits, such as to Oxford University as part of a raising aspirations initiative.

Involving parents and the community

Historically, there had been very little involvement of parents or the community in the life and work of the school. The headteacher recognised the importance of developing close links with these groups to improve levels of pupil wellbeing and to provide a better support mechanism for their learning.

The vice chair of governors agreed to oversee a new parent teacher association in 2012. This altered the direction of the organisation for the better, including more effective use of the funding raised by parents. The new organisation initially funded educational visits, which were an important part of enlivening the curriculum. This had a quick and highly visible impact on pupils' interest in their learning. A calendar of annual fundraising events is now in place. These help the school to purchase much needed new resources to enhance teaching and learning, including outside adventure trails.

The school trained volunteer readers to implement a range of initiatives aimed at improving reading standards. They continue to work regularly in school and contribute well to improving pupils' levels of interest and achievement in reading.

The introduction of a reward system where pupils earn time to spend on activities of their choice has helped to improve behaviour. It includes a popular knitting club run by a grandmother who is a governor and a gardening club, which parents help to run.

Parent helpers support with local visits, for example to the library and the local park. Parents and grandparents have supported the development of the outdoor areas. Several previously disenfranchised parents became involved in the school through this avenue. A large grant from Communities First, accessed independently by the parent teachers' association, enabled the central courtyard redevelopment and this is proving to be a valuable resource to support teaching and learning.

The introduction of open days, where parents work alongside their children for a lesson, is raising parents' interest in the school's aims to improve literacy and numeracy. The school also runs additional parent-learning classes, which focus on literacy and numeracy. Flying Start run weekly sessions for toddler age children and their parents, with a focus on creating rich literary and numeracy home environments for allowing children to learn through play. These initiatives engage parents more in their children's learning and are successful in enabling parents better to support their children at home.

Digital Leaders in Years 5 and 6 are pupils with well-developed ICT skills. They are responsible for training pupils, staff and the wider community as well as attending to minor technical ICT issues around the school. They are a particularly active group, for example running a half-termly workshop for parents and grandparents, to learn about tablet computers, 'apps' and basic computing skills. Regular celebration assemblies and public events engage with parents. Events at the cenotaph, class assemblies, Christmas concerts, Christmas church visits for carol services and bible readings, and public meetings on uniform, behaviour and bullying have all been used to raise aspirations and bring the community on board.

Transition events, including comprehensive school-based concerts and displays, have an excellent response from parents and carers. Valuable meetings between teachers and parents take place early in each term, to agree expectations around reading, homework and other school routines.

Motivating pupils

Although pupil behaviour was good overall, there were no consistent procedures in place to deal with the few pupils whose behaviour was unacceptable and disrupted the learning and play of others. To address this, the school introduced a set of agreed rules for application throughout the school day. These included the introduction of red cards for unacceptable behaviour and the withdrawal of privileges when necessary. The implementation of this strategy was consistent and pupils regarded it as fair and effective.

Establishing an effective school council was a high priority, including the election of a head boy and girl. Council members have helped to raise pupils' awareness of the importance of healthy living in all classes and have supported staff in implementing the new rules for acceptable behaviour. Council members helped to design the adventure trail in conjunction with the trail providers, the parent teacher association and school leaders. They represent the school at a variety of public events such as the local Remembrance Day ceremonies.

The eco-committee has weekly working lunches with the lead staff member and has developed an eco-charter to promote green strategies such as a community litter rota and energy saving.

The school is involved with an initiative to raise pupils' aspirations. Each year, all Year 6 pupils visit Jesus College, Oxford, to learn about the university and how they could achieve a place. This is successfully raising many pupils' aspirations of what they can achieve if they apply themselves to their learning.

Outcomes

Throughout the school's improvement journey school leaders measured progress through a range of mechanisms including lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and discussions with pupils, parents and staff. Performance management targets had a clear link to agreed priorities and helped focus staff effectively on the progress that their pupils made. Improved systems to collect and analyse pupil achievement data confirmed that outcomes were improving.

Between 2012 and 2015, the school's outcomes improved considerably, with the exception of the expected outcomes in literacy and mathematical development in the Foundation Phase. However, there are strong indications that outcomes at the expected level in 2012 and 2013 were inflated and this makes valid comparisons unreliable for this indicator.

- At the end of the Foundation Phase, performance at the higher than expected outcome in literacy rose from 29% to 43% and in mathematical development from 18% to 43%
- In key stage 2 at the expected level, performance in English and mathematics rose from 67% and 83% respectively to 97% for both subjects
- At the higher than expected level, performance in English and mathematics rose from 29% and 25% respectively to 41% for both subjects
- These levels of performance are well above those of other similar schools
- Attendance rose from 92% in 2012 to nearly 95% in 2015 and places the school in the top 25% of similar schools

In June 2015, the school received another full Estyn inspection only two years after its removal from significant improvement. This confirmed that:

The school's current performance is good because:

- By the end of Foundation Phase, many pupils achieve the expected outcome in literacy and most achieve the expected outcome in mathematical development
- By the end of key stage 2, most pupils achieve the expected level in English, mathematics and science
- Pupils eligible for free school meals often make rapid progress from their individual starting points, and achieve as well as their peers
- Nearly all pupils behave well and attend school regularly
- The quality of teaching is good
- Teachers and teaching assistants care for their pupils well, especially those whose circumstances may make them vulnerable

Prospects for improvement are good because:

- The strategic approach taken by the school has significantly improved the achievements of disadvantaged pupils
- The headteacher and senior leaders have a good track record of rapid improvement since the last inspection
- Leaders have high expectations of staff and pupils

- Leaders use data very effectively to inform future priorities for improvement
- The school works effectively within a range of partnerships, which benefit pupils well