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Good practice in A-level politics: The Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School

URN: 101934

Local authority: Middlesex

Date published: 13 June 2011

Reference: 130078

Brief description

This example explains how a large, ethnically mixed comprehensive school achieves excellent examination results in politics and sends a very high percentage of students to study politics at university. It focuses on the high expectations of the teachers; the tracking of progress and a range of intervention strategies; the innovative subject enrichment programme; and the strategic use of 'assessment for learning' techniques.

Overview – the school's message

'Politics was added to Advanced Level options in 2009 and is already one of our most popular courses. The team responsible for delivering politics has applied whole-school systems, built around high expectations, to great effect. Results in 2010 were outstanding. A particular feature of the politics course is the variety and depth of enrichment opportunities available to students; it is this aspect of the course that sets it apart, and underpins the successful introduction of the subject.'

Michael Kiely, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

High expectations

In Year 12, students move rapidly to understand the demands of A-level politics, to develop their political vocabulary and to begin to make politics a part of their everyday lives. Students are also expected to demonstrate a keen interest in, and understanding of, current affairs. To help students to develop these skills, for the first lesson of every week, they all prepare a news review on a story that is relevant to British or American politics, depending on what they are currently studying. Students refer to this as 'Newsround'. As there are too many students in the class for all of them to go into detail about their news story, a few are

selected at random to describe their story in detail; which means they all must be fully prepared. At the start of 'Newsround' the teacher checks that all students have completed the news review task and asks them to name the source to ensure that they use a wide variety of sources each week, including a range of newspapers and websites. Students are expected to summarise in fewer than five words their chosen news story. The teacher then selects a few to expand on their stories while questioning them to assess their levels of understanding and to encourage them to link the story to the politics curriculum. Other students who have completed news reviews on the same story are also questioned. The Head of Department explains the rationale for this activity: 'Politics at this level is not a study of the history of British or American politics but is learning about politics today. Students must use up-to-date examples to support arguments and to illustrate points in essays. The news review improves students' subject specific vocabulary, deepens their understanding of the working of the British and American political systems and makes the complex theories covered in the curriculum more accessible.'

Students speak about the challenge of keeping on top of political issues and the amount of work it involves; reading newspapers and watching the news and documentaries out of school hours. One student said of 'Newsround': 'It was really hard at first but now I look forward to it because we have really good discussions and challenge each other.' Another said, 'At the beginning I was surprised at how hard we were expected to work, but now I am used to it – and I don't have time to doodle!'

Effective assessment

Students' achievement is monitored and tracked effectively to ensure that they are making good progress. Schemes of work are regularly reviewed and teaching strategies are developed and modified in line with the demands of individual classes and students. Where there are concerns about a student's level of attainment or progress, intervention strategies are put in place.

'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) is the cornerstone to raising achievement in politics. It is entrenched in all schemes of work and regularly used as a strategy to support students and raise achievement. Teachers believe that peer assessment using the examination board's mark scheme has proven to be the most effective way for students to develop their examination technique; however, it takes time and careful scaffolding to ensure that they are completing the activity effectively. Students' confidence is built gradually by firstly engaging in whole class assessment of a piece of work using examination board's mark schemes; moving on to self-assessment; and then on to [peer assessment](#).



Students' progression is well planned across the ability range. Targets for improvement are set for all assessed pieces of written work and appropriate strategies are used to ensure that students are pushed to achieve the best grades and become independent learners. Students' notes are checked regularly to ensure that they are up to date with all their work and their targets. Examination questions are set regularly for homework and in lessons, under timed conditions. Essays are thoroughly marked in accordance to the examination board's mark scheme. Students are made aware of where they gained marks for each assessment objective and clear targets are set for improvement.

Rigorous tracking of students' progress

Students' predicted grades are reviewed twice each term and target setting is based on minimum target grades. Students know what their target is and how to achieve it. Where there are concerns about attainment or progress, students receive appropriate additional support.

In these circumstances, a range of interventions are used including:

- referral to the sixth form team, which may lead to further overall monitoring
- support provided by the SEN team
- targeted one-to-one meetings and tutorials
- booster and revision sessions
- 'target' pieces of work incorporating extra reading
- support and encouragement to take part in enrichment opportunities
- differentiated classroom materials and schemes of work
- support materials to meet the individual's needs.

Innovative enrichment opportunities

Students are offered a wide array of enrichment opportunities to foster a passion for politics and for learning. The programme promotes a sense of responsibility and citizenship, and increases students' interest in current affairs. These enrichment opportunities improve achievement and prepare the students well for a higher level of study. The programme includes:



- an annual trip to Parliament to see the work of both chambers
- 'meet and greet' the local MP
- opportunities to join *Question Time* on BBC TV and on Radio Four
- guest speakers, such as Mike Wendling who spoke about American politics, and Anthony Little, a Conservative councillor
- 'speed dating' with local councillors
- question time with the Mayor of London
- mock elections and referendums
- visits to the 'debating chamber' at the Oxford Union and the Oxford Women's Political Chamber
- leading sixth form assemblies covering issues such as the importance of voting (ahead of the 2010 General Election)
- a trip to Washington
- work with the London School of Economics (LSE) where students attend the politics conference and are able to attend the summer school and support sessions about how to apply to a Russell Group university.

So what about the students?



Some 80% of the current cohort of students intends to study politics at university. They have high aspirations including those who want to become MPs, politics teachers, corporate lawyers and work in the diplomatic service. And the [examination results](#) for politics are excellent.

Their enthusiasm for the course is infectious and is communicated to others in the [school newsletter](#). Among many comments, students say that: 'Studying politics has changed me and has made me more globally aware...the subject helps to break the stereotype of a politician...my debating skills have improved – I argued with a member of the House of Lords!...and, I am really getting into the habit of reading newspapers and watching *Question Time*.'

The school's background

The [Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School](#) is a larger than average Catholic school in the London Borough of Ealing. Approximately 40% of the students are White British and 60% are from a diverse range of minority ethnic heritages. Predominant groups are of Caribbean, Irish or Eastern European heritage. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is higher than average. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is average as is the proportion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities. The proportion with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The school has specialist technology status and a second specialism in humanities. It also has an International School Award.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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