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Raising standards through professional development: Perry Beeches the Academy

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Brief description

Perry Beeches the Academy adopts a radical approach to the professional development of its staff. The academy sees itself as a learning community and all members are expected to be acquiring further professional qualifications. All teachers are on MA courses and all teaching assistants are studying for foundation degrees. 'Student voice' is used to a great extent to develop the quality of teaching through an ever-expanding team of students, currently over 40, who observe lessons. The academy finds that the traditional model of training days and staff attending one-day INSET courses is simply not fit for purpose. These innovative approaches have led to rapid improvement in the quality of teaching and in turn to the achievement of students, which is outstanding.

Overview – the school's message

'Perry Beeches the Academy has been outstandingly successful in raising the attainment of students. Six years ago we were in the bottom percentile of schools, based on nationally recognised value-added measures. Currently we are in the top percentile.

There have been many key factors to our success, but none more so than the way we develop our staff. Every member of staff is on a learning journey; students see this life-long learning and it makes a huge impact on them. Staff constantly reflect on and discuss their practice. We are at the head of the queue for staff recruitment because staff know that they have a future here; we develop their careers. This development is at all levels, from senior leaders to administrative staff.



We have shifted our focus from one-day INSET courses to continuous 'action research'. Our focus is on improvement: there must be impact on our performance. As a result, the style and methodology of our teaching has been transformed and it is constantly changing. We

undertake a substantial programme of internal training each week. This is led by a wide cross-section of staff.

We have been fortunate in finding partnerships with external higher education institutions who share our vision. Our programme of professional development is expensive but investment in our future workforce is central to our success.'

Liam Nolan, Executive Headteacher

The good practice in detail

The improvement in the academy has been driven by:

- a new model for developing staff as a learning community
- coaching staff to foster improvement
- making extensive use of 'student voice' to evaluate teaching.

Developing staff – a learning community

Performance management processes apply to all staff, and in very similar ways. For example, a teaching assistant will be observed in the same way as a teacher. As the process of performance management has an impact on each member of staff's development, there is a strong sense of ownership. Performance management is not something that is 'done to' a member of staff, but a key element in helping them to improve. It is seen as win-win: teaching improves and staff career prospects also improve.

A [performance management development plan for a teacher](#) is in place, as well as another version [for all other staff](#). The [lesson observation form](#) is also a useful tool. But what happens next? How are staff helped to improve their practice?

Action research in degrees



Every member of the teaching staff is expected to gain a masters degree. Currently 22 staff have completed MA degrees. The action research elements of the degree are chosen with reference to the areas where the teacher needs to improve. So they support the teacher's development and are in line with the objectives of the academy. Currently 40 teachers are studying for the accreditation.

Foundation degrees and level 2 courses

In addition, 82 staff who are not teachers have completed level 2 courses, usually in English, mathematics or information technology. Two staff have completed foundation degrees and a further 25 are studying for foundation degrees. The resultant expertise among assistant teachers has made them much more effective: for example they understand much better the

relationships of letters and sounds to reading (phonics). Using this knowledge they are supporting students' reading skills in Years 7 and 8 to huge effect.

Other professional development opportunities

Teaching and learning workshops are held every Thursday evening. Also each half-term, the school day starts late on one day to allow for teacher development. In 2012/13, workshops have included:

- special educational needs
- gifted and talented provision
- literacy in the curriculum
- numeracy in the curriculum
- modelling and scaffolding
- student voice
- safeguarding
- dyslexia training
- creativity in planning
- working with assistant teachers
- class routines
- observing lessons
- assessment for learning
- differentiation
- developing discussion
- the development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural dimensions of the curriculum.



These sessions are led by a wide cross-section of staff, including at times newly qualified teachers. 'Staff studying for their MA use these opportunities to share their action research findings to impact on student outcomes', says Stuart Turnbull, associate headteacher.

'Often the best trainers are not members of the senior leadership team. Colleagues new to the profession, and those doing cutting edge research, give a fresh perspective,' adds Liam Cullinan, deputy headteacher.

Impact on staff

Joan Arnett, an assistant teacher, who started doing GCSE maths at the age of 36, said: 'This has really bolstered my self-belief. There are no glass ceilings here. If you are dedicated the school gives you back the same commitment that you give them.'

Teachers describe the fact that studying for an MA degree has fostered continual high quality dialogue about teaching and learning between teachers. Stacy Bott, head of Year 10, said: 'Children find it inspirational that I am also a learner. I lead by example.'

Staff explain the success of the learning community in the academy as being due to the following principles:

- There is an open-door policy with frequent learning walks, team teaching and discussion of effective teaching and learning. Observation of lessons is not a concern as all staff want to develop and they see sharing practice as a key part of that.
- All staff are seen as equal with no hierarchies: student teachers and assistant teachers are seen as equal partners with teachers.
- Leadership is distributed rapidly. It is not held back by a tight leadership group who are reluctant to share. Newly qualified teachers might well find themselves leading a training session.
- Leaders are committed to developing all staff, and staff respond with an enthusiasm to develop the academy and indeed their own careers.
- Student voice is actively encouraged.

A coherent structure for professional development

The academy runs a range of initial teacher training programmes with partner higher education providers. For 2013/14 the academy will be the largest provider in England on the



Schools Direct programme. An important feature is that professional development is coherent from initial training through newly qualified teacher (NQT) and then onto masters level. The academy has therefore arranged a system with higher education providers whereby the credits gained in initial teacher education and in NQT training can be carried forward towards an MA degree. This helps to emphasise the culture that learning is intended to continue, and builds in the expectation that every teacher will continue to

learn and develop and have that learning accredited. The academy has created a [diagram showing the culture of lifelong learning](#) to illustrate this.

There is a strong expectation that trainees aim to become long-term employees. Indeed, for the Schools Direct programme, the offer of future employment is tied in.

Coaching staff

The academy runs two coaching programmes: one for teachers looking to move from being good to outstanding, and the other for teachers whose performance requires improvement. Currently there are no teachers in need of this second scheme.

When the coaching programmes started three years ago, senior leaders made what they now see as two mistakes. First, they began with a scheme that was too large to manage, and with a shortage of good quality coaches. Second, they made the assumption that an outstanding teacher would automatically have the skills to make an expert coach. 'We thought that if we put colleagues together, it would just happen', explains Lucy Wardle, senior teacher responsible for teaching and learning.

The leadership team therefore simplified the scheme, and streamlined the paperwork. The scheme is now carefully targeted, with teachers linked up with high quality coaches. The aim is to produce a trusting relationship which builds on strengths and leads to further action. Part of the relationship is unannounced informal lesson observations to develop a feel for the consistency of practice. The scheme runs in each faculty. 10 staff have this year moved from good to outstanding as a result of the arrangement. The academy provides [guidance on the scheme](#) and [meeting recording forms](#) for colleagues to use.

Student voice in observation of teaching

The academy began a small 'student voice' pilot scheme three years ago. It has grown to the point where there are now 42 student observers who are themselves responsible for training each other as observers. Staff welcome this scheme as a way of developing practice: 'It makes sense to listen to your customers!' says Lucy. While students are trained to observe and discuss all parts of a lesson, they do not actually judge or grade teaching; teachers say that they find the process developmental rather than judgemental.

Students observe jointly with a member of staff, using the [students' observation form](#) and feed back to the teacher in private. At the start of the next lesson the students also feed back to the class, which gives an opportunity to discuss with the whole class how they also could improve their learning. Some students are now at the stage where they are observing lessons without a member of staff as co-observer. 'The impact on student learning is palpable. Students come to understand learning at a deep level and unpick what makes for high quality learning,' says Liam Nolan, Executive Headteacher.

School background



[Perry Beeches the Academy](#) serves a community in the north of Birmingham. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is high, as is the proportion with a statement of special educational needs or supported at school action plus. The academy converted on 3 May 2012. It was [inspected](#) in March 2013 and its overall effectiveness was judged to be outstanding. The Perry Beeches Academy Trust has been formed and its directors

share the governance of the academy with a local governing body. The trust opened a free school in the centre of Birmingham in September 2012, with a further free school due to open in September 2013.

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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