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## Creating a voice that counts for pupils with special educational needs: Bennerley Fields Specialist Speech and Language College

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### Brief description

The development of 'pupil voice' was a key part of Bennerley Field's journey to improvement. Far from paying lip service to what pupils thought and experienced, the headteacher placed pupils' voices at the heart of the school's work. Pupils are now involved in everything from curriculum planning and interviews for staff to classroom design and youth councils. This has had a very positive impact on their academic as well as their personal and social progress.

### Overview – the school's message

"I started working at Bennerley Fields, my first headship, in January 2012. We were inspected three weeks later and, quite rightly, put into special measures. The report commented that 'pupils are not given the opportunity to manage their own behaviour as they are too closely controlled. This strategy does not encourage the development of their independent personal skills.' Pupils were not expected to contribute or take responsibility within the school. Older students in particular were not enabled to express the views and opinions that young people of secondary age are usually allowed to.

Now out of special measures, we are an ever-improving school – and pupils have played a large part in this journey. Bennerley Fields is a school where pupils are constantly encouraged and enabled to have a pertinent, enthusiastic, listened to, heard and influential voice. Our latest inspection report notes, 'Pupils' involvement in school life is excellent and they take a lot of responsibility'.

William's comment on the impact of pupils' new involvement in school life sums up, for me, what we have been trying to achieve: 'My learning is improving and we have the values, the pupil values and I know them and I think Mick (my teacher) makes me work harder. All the time. It is the best school experience.'

We are really proud that pupils have genuinely helped to shape policy and provision."

## The good practice in detail

### The background

The morning after Bennerley Fields had been placed in special measures, the headteacher gathered all staff and pupils together. 'Whose school is Bennerley Fields?' she asked the pupils. She was surprised by the responses she received. The most common response was that it was the headteacher's school, or maybe the teachers' school. Perhaps, speculated some pupils, it was the government's school. After some discussion and probing, pupils began to wonder whether maybe, just maybe, the school 'belonged' to everyone in the room – the staff and pupils who were in the hall together.

This discussion crystallised for this new headteacher one of the reasons why things were as they were in the school – but also how the school could move forward. When reflecting on the journey out of special measures, and the improvements that have been made since, the head considers this moment as the one where 'the school' became *our school* and how together they started to explore everyone's responsibility in this. "Together pupils learnt to 'rise up', be involved and have their say. We all agreed to make *our school* the best it could be. A tall order indeed – we embarked on an exciting and challenging mission!"

### A clear vision encompassing pupils' values

The headteacher was determined that developing 'pupil voice' in the school would mean placing pupils at the heart of the school's work and not just paying lip service to their views. In April 2012, the school held an INSET day to explore their values and set a new vision for the school. All staff across school were involved along with representative pupils, governors, family members and community stakeholders. Together, they set a clear and agreed 'vision' for *our school*.

The pupils' voice in this process was moving and insightful. Their views were shared with fervent enthusiasm and great clarity. They came up with the idea of working on their own set of *pupil values* so that everyone could understand and sign up to them. The group took this forward to the wider school through presentations at assemblies to get their *pupil values* shaped by all, agreed and adopted. This was the beginning of pupils taking an increased, very direct responsibility in shaping *our school*. As the head says, at this point it was clear that 'action had begun!' Now, a visit to the school shows clearly that pupils across school know, are guided by and 'own' these values.

### Expectation and opportunity

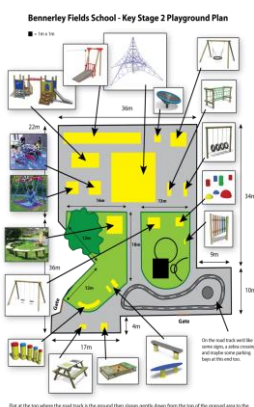
The school now had increased expectations of pupils – they had shown what they could do. Pupils themselves now had higher expectations not only of what they could achieve but of the school. As the head explains: 'We now had to look at giving more chances for their voices to be heard. Expectation, accompanied by opportunity, is a powerful force for change.' Pupils seized the opportunities on offer, carved out and created opportunities of their own and change evolved.

The following are some of the many ways in which the new culture is evident.

- All pupils greet each other, staff and any visitors with a 'good morning' as they arrive in school.
- All pupils have moved from being expected to 'answer for themselves' to gradually finding their own confidence to do just that.
- Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 pupils choose where to sit, and with whom, at lunchtimes.
- Pupils have chosen the paint colours for newly refurbished areas of school.
- A head boy and head girl have been elected with clearly defined roles in their job description. They chair the school council and have a 'working lunch' with the headteacher each month to discuss pupil issues. They present their views on school improvements and pupil issues to the governors' Annual General Meeting. Emma, the head girl, relishes her responsibilities: 'I like being head girl and it's made me an important person in school. I do the assembly sometimes and watch out for little ones'.
- A pupil panel is part of all staff recruitment. Their voice counts as part of the scoring process used to appoint new staff. Alex, in Year 10, summarised the views of many of her peers about this aspect of their involvement: 'One of the best things is when the students get to interview the adults for new jobs. I felt grown up when I had a turn and I chose Maggie and she is a very good teacher.'
- Pupils accompany the headteacher around school while showing new pupils and their parents or carers to add their perspective. New families have found this insightful and useful.
- Pupils meet and greet parents and carers arriving for open days, and parent/carer evenings and show them to the appropriate classroom.
- Pupils independently show other visitors around school.
- Pupils are involved in learning walks with staff and governors – focusing on how well pupils are developing their skills of working independently.
- Two students are elected to represent the school on the Derbyshire Youth Council.
- Bennerley Fields has held the inaugural meeting for a newly formed County Special School Forum.



*Maddie casts a vote*



Ethan and Shannon work together to plan the playground



- Pupils have attended further INSET days, revising the whole-school curriculum.
- Key Stage 2 pupils are actively involved as part of the local Youth PE Partnership. They have worked with companies to design themselves a new play area. They were involved in putting this into a bid to *the People's Millions* for funding.



Matthew has 'respect for all'

- This led to these pupils working directly with the local Borough Council, influencing their plans for a new park to be inclusive of children with additional needs.
- Following consultation with students, the Key Stage 3 enrichment offer now includes computer programming and robots.
- Key Stage 4 students are given 'options' to study alongside the core offer, such as motor vehicle

maintenance and horticulture. This offer has increased this year and been shaped through consultation with students.

- An annual 'prize day' is centred around celebrating pupils' achievement inspired by their own *pupil values*. Trophies include – *the team worker of the year* shield and *respect for all* cup.
- Key Stage 4 pupils thought of, organised and finally enjoyed their first school 'prom'!

## Impact and success

The impact of this work has been very wide ranging. Feedback from parents and carers on changes within the school refer to their children:

- offering opinions at home
- taking more responsibility and wanting to be more independent at home
- having a new 'I can do it' approach and attitude.



One parent commented 'my children are more weary when they get home but I think it is encouraging to see them taking ownership of their daily lives'. This has been frequently echoed by other parents and carers.

The impact on individuals has also been profound. One example is particularly striking. A Key Stage 4 student, who previously seldom spoke to peers or adults, works alongside mainstream peers on a 'facebook page project' for Erewash Museum. Staff and parents know that he has had this level of confidence because he was encouraged. Another pupil summarised the impact of this work on his life as follows:

“I come to school again now and the teachers and Debbie (the headteacher) talk to me and they asked me about things. . . it's about doing all the good things in school. I'm good at cookery and animal care and gardening. I like being good at things and I am good at things and I work hard and in a team.” Matthew (Year 11)

The headteacher has many more ideas about how this work can be extended further. Overall, though, she is clear that 'Bennerley Fields is a better school for the voice the pupils bring – often thought-provoking and insightful. We will continue to harness and actively listen to their wonderful, fresh thinking and keep considering ourselves lucky that they influence practice to make *our school* the best it can be.'

## The school's background

[Bennerley Fields Specialist Speech and Language College](#) caters for children and young people with special educational needs, aged from 2 to 16 years. All pupils in the main school have a statement of special educational needs. The nursery offers part-time places for up to 12 children, whose needs are still being formally assessed. Almost half the pupils have autistic spectrum disorder. Some have severe or moderate learning difficulties, physical disabilities and speech, language and communication difficulties.

The school has also produced a short film illustrating how they have developed pupil voice. Please contact the school directly for further information at:  
[info@bennerleyfields.derbyshire.sch.uk](mailto:info@bennerleyfields.derbyshire.sch.uk)

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