



Secondary School Real Story

The Downs School, Berkshire

BlueSky



Working together for improvement

The Downs School has the evidence it needs to measure the impact of its initiatives and satisfy inspectors.

About the school

The Downs School is a comprehensive school for almost 1200 pupils from the rural community of the Berkshire Downs. All groups of pupils progress at higher than national averages in maths and English and the school has achieved some of the highest GCSE and A Level results in West Berkshire for the last five years. In June 2013, inspectors found the school to be Outstanding in all four judgements.

What were the challenges?

Deputy Headteacher, Carol Butler explains the shortcomings of the school's previous paper-based system to manage staff performance, "In 2007 teacher performance reviews were recorded on paper and filed away, making sharing and analysing the outcomes very difficult. We wanted a system that would bring the information together to ensure consistency and allow us to measure the impact of our initiatives and training on the quality of teaching."

How is BlueSky helping?

"We began managing teacher performance in BlueSky and later, associate staff. It was a simpler process with the teaching staff as they have defined roles, pay and conditions and performance management structures. For associate staff, we began by ensuring

they all had an accurate job description and these formed the basis of their performance management."

CPD Leader, Mandy Alexander explains further, "We focus on using BlueSky as a tool to improve performance management and spent a lot of time supporting staff to understand objectives and what quality objectives look like. We have used the floodfill option but now have exemplar objectives available within the system."

Were there any teething problems?

Carol explains, "Initially, and with both groups, staff saw BlueSky as the focus and not as a tool to support them. It was important to shift this viewpoint and we deliver lots of training on performance management so that staff see the distinction and view the process positively. BlueSky is the framework for us to monitor and evaluate and for staff to record their progress.

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Carol Butler, Deputy Headteacher

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“As a school, we need to take people with us so we take our time with new initiatives. We do not want people to feel threatened so there is lots of dialogue. We pride ourselves on being reflective practitioners and are willing to challenge ourselves. We enable this by dedicating alternate Monday afternoons to CPD activities and discuss and develop new practices.

“We link lesson observations with performance management which can worry staff as we like them to take ‘risks’ in their practice by using new ideas to have a positive impact on learning. We counteract this by identifying a maximum of three observations for review purposes. If a member of staff has two ‘good or outstanding’ lessons, for review purposes, there is no further need for additional performance review observations. This means we can run developmental coaching alongside the performance management process, bringing it all together under the CPD umbrella, and staff are more confident to try new teaching methods.”

What is the impact?

“Working with all staff in this way is blurring the lines between teachers and associate staff, some teachers appraise associate staff and associate staff attend training that would previously have been for teachers only. It’s about identifying the best training to meet an individual’s needs and not simply about their role. The analysis in BlueSky supports us to understand this.

“BlueSky ensures everyone is working towards our school improvement priorities. For example,

‘raising attainment in boys’ is a focus. With BlueSky, we monitor this is happening through lesson observations, analysis of training needs and measure the impact of relevant training. Another is to ensure we are ‘meeting the needs of all groups of pupils in every lesson’, again we capture this through lesson observations and it is a performance management objective for all staff. BlueSky confirms we are focussing our resources in the right places, ensures consistency and we can measure the impact of what we introduce on achieving our priorities.”

Providing evidence for inspection

“During our 2013 inspection, BlueSky was key in us demonstrating that what we consider as good and outstanding practice actually is. The evidence was available for the inspectors to see.”

The inspection report highlights this, “Highly effective systems to support teachers’ professional development have led to outstanding teaching. The school’s records of teaching closely matched the inspection team’s findings.” Ofsted inspection report 2013.

What’s next?

Mandy explains the school’s plans, “We are trialling the use of tablets to enable staff to enter information directly into BlueSky. This will free up time to focus on further analysis of the information within BlueSky and for strategic and operational planning.”

Carol outlines plans for the self-evaluation module, “We use BlueSky’s self-evaluation module to record our improvement priorities so they can link through the system. We are exploring the module to see if it would benefit us to move the whole self-evaluation process onto BlueSky.”

Mandy concludes, “We really value the relationship we have with the BlueSky team; they really listen and respond to the needs of schools. As we develop our processes, BlueSky has developed with us, we wouldn’t be where we are today without this relationship.”

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