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KYRA CASE STUDY

ST MARGARET'S C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

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St Margaret's C of E Primary School, Withern

St Margaret's is a small Church of England school in the village of Withern, south east of Louth. The school has been on a journey of improvement in recent years, whilst also developing its relationships and involvement with the wider KYRA alliance. Here we talk to James Siddle – head teacher at St Margaret's and, for half of his time, teacher of Class 3!

James' career as a teacher began in cities across Europe – including Lisbon and Barcelona – where he taught English as a foreign language. It was this experience that inspired him



to become a primary school teacher and, in 2006, he took up his first teaching post in a small primary school near Boston. It was a role in which he would grow quickly, not only as a teacher, but as a school leader.

“I had no leadership ambitions when I became a teacher” says James, “but I quickly found that I was presented with roles and responsibilities that required leadership, such as whole school projects. Small schools very quickly present leadership opportunities – and the opportunities I received grew in breadth and importance quite early on.” Indeed,

within a few months of James joining the school, it received a satisfactory judgement from Ofsted and the head teacher identified James as being key to the process of improvement – with a focus on improving results at key stage 2. “I visited outstanding schools and good schools within the local area, to look at the strategies and interventions they were using. I looked very carefully at the use of data in those schools, approaches to planning, and the quality assurance of teaching – it was a rapid learning curve but essential to informing how we approached the process of improvement.” A re-organisation soon followed – based on

much of what James and his colleagues had learnt from other schools - and the school's results soon improved significantly.

Looking back, James believes that his growth as a leader so early on in his career was down to the encouragement and expectations of his head teacher and the opportunities to learn from and build relationships with colleagues beyond the individual school. “She placed a lot of faith in me and the expectations were high, but there was no other option but to rise to the challenge. In small schools that is so often the case. There is a need for everyone within the school to play some sort of leadership role.”

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After five years, James applied for the role of head teacher at St Margaret's. In the two years and a half years since then, the school has not only seen results improve rapidly, but has also seen attendance improve and its roll go up by around 52%. The school is small – with pupil numbers reaching fifty three this year (up from 32 in 2012). “When I joined St Margaret's I quickly realised that it was a very friendly and happy school, with good relationships throughout the school community. There were many things that the school was doing extremely well – particularly drama and performing arts. However, there was a need to focus on improving standards in numeracy and writing, and also to be clearer at all times about the data in terms of pupil progress.”

Within weeks of arriving at St Margaret's James again found himself in the middle of an Ofsted inspection. As a new head, and knowing that more needed to be done to achieve all pupils' full potential, this presented a key challenge but also an opportunity to be clear about where further development was needed. James' initial response to the inspection

is a key example of why, for him, being in partnership and developing close networks is so important: "I called another head – who I trusted and who could give me insight into what inspection meant for a head teacher. It could have been a much more lonely time than it was. After that conversation I felt better prepared." In reality James had not stood still since joining St Margaret's, and had already, before the inspection, put a number of immediate interventions in place – such as 'one to one' time for children who he believed were not making sufficient progress – whilst also developing a strategic timetable for improvement. This was recognised by Ofsted who considered the school to be good and as having the leadership capacity necessary to improve further.

Over the last year or two, St Margaret's has gone from strength to strength. James puts this down to a number of strategies. First of all, the school introduced new teaching systems which involved constant evaluation and re-evaluation of data and pupil progress, followed up by appropriate interventions. This has been made possible, in part, through the recruitment and training of teaching assistants who are able to provide the necessary 'one to one' time with pupils to assess their learning and provide bespoke programmes – such as support with phonics. Indeed, teaching assistants play a central role in a school where, because of its size and the need for mixed age classes, effective teaching and learning depends on an element of group learning. Teaching Assistants also play their part in contributing to the leadership of the school, with one teaching assistant, for example, managing the school's relationships with the local media.

Staff professional development and a focus on research has also been central to progress. Through the school's collaborative partnership, teaching staff – including James – are working with teachers in other schools on developing lesson plans, undertaking lesson studies (the observation of an individual lesson by groups of teachers followed by feedback and professional dialogue), and analysing the impact and learning from common teaching strategies to refine practice. This shared learning has enabled St Margaret's to learn from practice in other schools whilst also sharing their own knowledge and expertise with others. The school's NQT (James White) has found this to be particularly beneficial – providing him with access to a wider support network and an opportunity to learn from the practical strategies and general experience of teachers in a number of schools. Indeed, St Margaret's, as with other schools in KYRA has been developing a strong culture of research-based practice, working with other schools within the alliance and beyond to test the impact of different approaches to providing feedback for writing – the results of which are due to be published in the autumn term. It is already becoming clear, from the analysis of 'like for like' data, that the use of regular peer and teacher feedback, through the use of digital technology, is having a significant impact on pupils' progress in writing – particularly for pupil premium pupils and those with special educational needs.

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The school has also developed an inspiring outdoor curriculum which brings core curriculum subjects of maths, English, and Science together with opportunities to develop

pupils' enterprise skills, and relationships and emotional intelligence. The 'pollytunnel project' has seen children growing their own vegetables, working with local wholesalers and then taking the produce to market. Children are expected to reinvest the funds in growing the enterprise further. The school's grounds features a 'literacy garden' including a camp fire space for outdoor reading and storytelling, a 'maths garden' where temperature and rainfall data is analysed each day, and a vegetable garden. The outdoor curriculum has provided an opportunity to further involve the local community in the life of the school, with parents and others giving their time to contribute to the development of this exciting space for learning. The school's outdoor spaces are a source of pride for the whole school community.

James is clear about the importance of partnerships, with parents, with the community and with other schools to achieving the very best learning and outcomes for pupils. Working with KYRA he says "has enabled St Margaret's to develop relationships with other schools and other practitioners with a strong focus on learning and improving practice. It has opened up opportunities both for me and for my staff to develop our research into effective teaching and learning, to share and access best practice, and to access development opportunities led and delivered by some of the best practitioners in the county." James is excited by the future potential of the alliance and would like to see more opportunities for teacher secondments across the alliance – with teachers in larger schools gaining experience of teaching and leadership in a smaller school, and vice-versa. "There are some key differences in how you lead and teach in a small school and I think there is still so much we can learn from one another - we're only really beginning to realise the potential of this professional learning community."

James would be very happy to hear from colleagues who would like to learn more about St Margaret's or who may be interested in working together on particular projects. He can be contacted at: James.Siddle@st-margarets-pri.lincs.sch.uk



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