



TEACHING
SCHOOL
ALLIANCE



Kyra supporting
school improvement



When Benjamin Adlard Primary School in Gainsborough received a 'good' inspection grading from Ofsted in June 2016, it represented the culmination of 18 months of hard work by staff and children and wide-ranging support of colleagues from across the Kyra Teaching School alliance. Here we document Kyra's role in contributing to a fabulous story of school improvement and better learning for children.

When Mount Street Academy in Lincoln was first asked to take on a formal role in supporting Benjamin Adlard, Executive Headteacher Marie-Claire Bretherton knew that the process wouldn't be just simply about 'one school helping out another'. Mount Street already had a connection with Benjamin Adlard as they are both members of the same multi-academy trust, CfBT Schools Trust (CST). CST were keen to see the school make strides forward and Mount Street was considered to be the perfect partner, not least as the school is a National Support School – a national designation for schools delivering external 'whole school' support to other schools in need of significant improvement. However, it has been Mount Street's ability to draw on the skills and capacity of teachers and leaders from across Lincolnshire, through the Kyra alliance, that has made the transformation at Benjamin Adlard's possible.

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“I was very clear” says Marie-Claire “that our relationship with Benjamin Adlard was not going to be a transactional one. The school needed support, but long-term success depended on it being part of the alliance and for other schools in the alliance – including Mount Street – to view this as a long-term partnership too. We were in this together and for the long haul!” Indeed, the work was going to bring each of Kyra's hallmarks – not least moral purpose, being ambitious for children, and the alliance's commitment to being a learning community – to the fore.

Benjamin Adlard had been considered to be 'requiring improvement' for some time, before finally being judged as 'inadequate' by Ofsted in November 2014. Teaching and learning was not consistently good and Ofsted were of the view that "too little action had been taken to improve teaching or pupils' achievement since the last inspection." Indeed, there was little observation of teaching and a lack of professional development or sharing of good practice between leaders and teachers within the school. Standards at Key Stage 2 in particular were too low and information around children's progress was unreliable and inconsistently captured. Poor leadership and management was found to be at the heart of many of the school's issues.



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“The school was drifting fast” says Marie-Claire “the headteacher had resigned, and the acting head teacher was working hard to begin to make changes and raise staff morale – but she also had huge day to day responsibilities and needed support.” There were also no systems in place to enable teachers to monitor children's progress and identify best practice: “Every classroom teacher was using their own assessment framework and marking policy. There was also no culture of professional support or challenge between teachers – people had retreated into their classrooms and were doing what they could. Staff were doing the best they could, but the school was rudderless and - ultimately – both children and staff were losing out because of that.”

The context for children at Benjamin Adlard's is challenging enough. Nearly six in every ten pupils at Benjamin Adlard come from disadvantaged backgrounds, which is well above the national average. The school was, at that stage, doing very little to overcome the lack of faith in education and schooling amongst parents and the community. "Parents liked the school – but they had no hope or belief in education generally. Too many had themselves had been let down by their own experiences of school, and their expectations in terms of the quality of learning were low. We had to quickly turn that perception around. The staff were also lacking in confidence and understandably felt quite disempowered" says Marie-Claire. However, what Marie-Claire soon discovered was a staffing team who were, "beneath a surface of hopelessness", very driven to change things for the better.

"I found a school that lacked vision and hope" says Marie-Claire. "I also found a very caring culture, a culture where people wanted to make a difference but were not equipped or properly supported to make a difference. The hopelessness really had set in – some just didn't think improvement was possible. We had to begin by combatting that view."

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The first step was to meet with the staff and to talk to them about what the process of improvement would look like. "We had to begin with that conversation about why we were all there and why we all do the jobs we do. We went back to basics and found that there was a deep drive amongst staff to improve children's lives."

However, there was also an apparent need amongst some staff to hold on to comforting isolation and the familiar ways of doing things: "We asked teachers to stop marking and assessment because the variety of approaches being used simply weren't working for children. That was a big cultural shock for many because they had become so used to the 'way things were', although there was a lack of systemization or common approaches to planning and assessment. Again, it was back to first principles."

Alongside the return to values and simplicity, there was also a need to quickly undertake a thorough diagnostic of the school's weaknesses and needs. However, as Marie-Claire knew, that was only the first step. 'You can have the most thorough diagnostic - and our observations and the Ofsted report itself told us a lot - but it was then knowing what to do with that information and make sure we had the capacity to improve that was so key.' Marie-Claire put in place a structure and process for school improvement, which included establishing a strategic school improvement team and a commitment to bringing in the best talent from across Lincolnshire to help the school to improve.

"This is where the external support came to the fore" says Marie-Claire, "from the beginning Helen Barker joined our strategic school improvement team. Helen's role was to listen to our conversations around our improvement needs and to help us identify external support from across the alliance." With 30 Specialist Leaders of Education and 11 LLEs associated to Kyra, the team were able to bring in a range of talent to work with the school and its staff.

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For instance, Simon Clark (then Deputy at Monks Abbey Primary School) and Theresa Peacock worked with the school to develop its marking and feedback policy – ensuring that assessment systems became far better aligned and supported children’s ongoing progress. Meanwhile Suzi Balasz from Dunholme St Chad’s Primary helped to support teaching staff through coaching and ongoing book scrutiny, whilst Daniel Ballard from St Hugh’s Catholic Primary supported middle leaders on areas such as curriculum development and teaching and learning in maths. These SLEs, together with numerous other colleagues from across Kyra, supported middle leaders in a sense of partnership – enabling them to become more confident in observing the quality of learning within their subject areas and in coaching those on their teams to improve.

“There was a strong sense of ‘we’re all in this together’” says Marie-Claire, “headteachers from across the alliance really did stand true to the values and were ready to share key staff. Also, by having the Kyra central team involved, we were able to signpost the right people from across Kyra to where they would have most impact within the school. We really did hit the ground running.

Probably the most significant appointment, however, was that of Sam Coy who became the Head of School in September 2015. Indeed Ofsted described Sam’s appointment as ‘a turning point for the school’. Sam was yet another recruit from within the Kyra alliance, coming from a lead practitioner role at another school which has seen significant improvements – Priory Witham in Lincoln. Sam had overseen some big improvements in behaviour and teaching and learning practice at Witham, and was encouraged to apply for the post by another Kyra head, Pam Curtis.

One critical factor in Sam’s work and his ability to step up to headship so successfully, has been the mentoring he has received from Kyra colleague, Kate Rouse who was headteacher at Bishop King Primary School. Kate had recently led a similar turn-around in her own school, which also serves a disadvantaged community. “Kate was able to provide a strong critical friend role” says Sam, “she was always on hand to listen and to help me reflect on some of the challenges and when the job felt quite lonely. She provided a great balance of support and challenge when I needed it and helped me to connect into wider networks of support such as Kyra wellbeing and some of the networks. It made a huge difference.”

When Ofsted published its judgment in June 2016, the outcome of 'good' was testament to the hard work and commitment of an alliance of leaders and teachers from across Lincolnshire. It reads: "the school has received excellent support from the Kyra Teaching School Alliance. While this support has been very intense and 'hands on' when necessary, leaders from across the alliance have worked with senior and middle leaders to develop their skills and the school's capacity to improve from within." To reinforce the scale of improvement achieved, Benjamin Adlard has also achieved remarkable results at Key Stage 2 this year, with the school now being in the top 5% of all schools in England for pupil progress!



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The emphasis on peer to peer support and the openness to learning and improvement amongst staff has been transformational. Marie-Claire explains that this is as much about culture as the direction given by the school's new leadership. "When leaders, subject specialists and teachers from other Kyra schools came in, they brought with them an openness to working in partnership, to sharing good practice and a permission to be vulnerable and to ask for help when needed. That was a big cultural shift for the school. That sense of professional dialogue and peer to peer support was not there before and now it is. That's not down to me or Sam telling colleagues to be like that, it's down to the relationships and the culture that exists within Kyra permeating this school. It's been an extremely powerful and positive process and it's great to see the children benefiting as a result."

Key learning points:

- School improvement is not transactional; it is based on long-term partnerships and a shared culture where professionals are committed to one another's improvement;
- School improvement requires us to go back to first principles, to ask 'why' we do what we do, 'how' we should do it, and 'what' we need to achieve it.; We must not justify anything on the basis that 'we have always done it this way.'
- School improvement requires thorough diagnosis of the issues at an early stage. However, this is not enough in itself to achieve improvement. It also requires us to access and draw upon those with the key skills and capacity to act on those identified needs. Being part of a wider alliance of experts and commissioning those experts to provide coaching and achieve cultural change is key to improvement;
- School improvement should not be 'done to'. Experts should work with schools with a strong sense of 'professional partnership'. Those receiving support need to be able to feel vulnerable, to confront their weaknesses, and to be confident to ask for help;
- Every school improvement project should have very clear targets and oversight. We must be able to recognise success at each stage of improvement and be able to identify, at an early stage, where improvement is not taking place.
- Ensure the headteacher / person responsible has good mentoring support from someone who has overcome similar challenging circumstances. Allow that relationship to be one of 'critical friend' – ensuring it is separate from any relationship involving formal accountability.



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