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school improvement



Learner in Chief: 'walking the talk' of school improvement at Priory Witham

Pam Curtis, Headteacher of the primary campus at Priory Witham Academy, has a motto which will resonate with many school leaders reading this: "It takes three years to improve a school and six weeks to allow it to fail." For those who lead schools, they know that many years of hard work and success can very quickly be put at peril, and that school improvement takes time, perseverance and a strong dose of resilience!

When Pam joined Priory Witham – an all-through school - as head of the primary school in late 2013, the school had been judged by Ofsted to be 'Requires Improvement'. Student attainment at Key Stage 2 was poor and there was significant variability in the quality of teaching – with little clarity around expectations or any culture of identifying and sharing best practice. Staff were struggling to address challenging behaviour amongst some of the pupils and this was impacting on the quality of learning and staff morale generally. The school needed fresh, purposeful, leadership and Pam was well placed to provide it.

Pam's career until that point had been defined by headships through which she had led rapid improvement. As a young teacher – inspired by her first headteacher and early opportunities for research and leadership development – she quickly identified the role of headship as being not simply a job, but a form of mission. "I was inspired early on to see the role of headteacher in the broadest possible sense" says Pam, "I wanted a career where I could continuously learn from others, to create great teams and to transform schools that needed to improve. That has pretty much defined my career ever since."





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Pam’s early headship experience included stints at schools in challenging circumstances across the East Midlands. Those headships – all schools in very disadvantaged communities – involved common themes: raising expectations in terms of both educational attainment and behaviour; improving relationships and engagement amongst all members of the school community; building strong teams of leaders who model learning and improvement; and focusing relentlessly on improving the quality of learning in the classrooms. For Pam, this was about bringing learning to life: “I am very committed to making schools exciting places to be – places of wonder and inspiration, where there is aspiration and a deep commitment to learning amongst children and staff alike.”

The headship at Priory Witham spoke readily to Pam's strong sense of mission and her appetite for the positive transformation of school cultures. The school's circumstances also resonated with her previous experiences. "The first issue to address was the poor behaviour and the lack of expectations" says Pam, "and that was relatively simple to address. I was clear about the expectations and I was clear that staff would be supported in exacting those expectations. We couldn't move forward without that." Whilst Pam and the team did exclude some pupils, they were also clear from the outset that staff had a responsibility to model the expectations for learning: "we had to be enthusiastic learners ourselves and our teachers and other colleagues needed to know that they had my support in setting boundaries".

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The other pressing issue for Pam was building an effective leadership team and, through her team, raising the quality of teaching itself. The variability was just too high and many children were losing out as a result. "I spent a great deal of time in the first few weeks in classrooms observing staff because I wanted to identify those people within the school who could work with me in leading improvement. I also needed to identify those staff who urgently needed support. I thought it was essential that the best teachers had a big role, as early as possible, in taking the school forward – both through modeling best practice and also through providing a careful balance of challenge and support to their colleagues." Within a short period of time, Pam had promoted or externally recruited Lead Teachers to each year group, with the role of monitoring standards, quality assuring and troubleshooting. The Lead Teachers also became members of Pam's 'flat structured' senior leadership team.

At this point, the school's relationship with the Kyra Teaching School Alliance also came to the fore. "I had some initial conversations with Marie-Claire Bretherton" says Pam, "who from the outset of my role at Priory Witham acted as sounding board. That peer to peer support was essential for me personally and allowed me the space to step back and test my planning and strategy with a trusted colleague." Marie-Claire was also able to join Pam in undertaking some lesson observations to identify those high potential internal leaders and also played a role in helping Pam identify talented teachers from across Lincolnshire who were ready to step up to a leadership role.

Indeed, the relationship with Kyra broadened very quickly. The alliance's first formal role was to support Pam in her initial strategy of raising standards in teaching and learning. "Kyra was able to provide a teacher development programme which involved experienced and highly effective teachers from across Lincolnshire modeling lessons, providing observation and feedback, and delivering coaching and mentoring.

It was very powerful because it had a strong onus on 'peer to peer' support – the teachers leading the programme were from schools just down the road and they too were doing the job 'day in day out'. That gave our teachers some much needed confidence in the improvement process and overcame any element of fear that may have existed – it wasn't a judgment exercise." The programme also enabled staff at Priory Witham to visit other schools across the alliance – including Monks Abbey and Lincoln Carlton Academy - and to develop supportive and ongoing relationships with their peers in those other schools.

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Another key aspect of Kyra's support was the provision of leadership support, with SLEs providing support on the learning environment. The new (and relatively inexperienced) senior leadership team at Priory Witham also benefited from taking part in a joint leadership development programme with Lincoln Carlton Academy which enabled senior leaders to develop their competencies and capabilities, guided by experienced leaders from across the Kyra alliance.

Priory's new leadership team was further reinforced by the appointment of Josh Lane – as a maths consultant – and English-led, Ria Dunthorne– ensuring that the focus on quality and improvement in core subjects was a priority. "I saw the senior leadership team grow in confidence and ability very quickly" says Pam "and they quickly became adept at key aspects of work such as setting expectations, monitoring quality, and providing training and feedback to colleagues."

Two Assistant Heads, Ann Gridley and Amy Tallentire who had been with the academy for a longer period of time were key to establishing deep QA processes that new leaders could frame their work around. Indeed, members of the team also delivered specific training on maths and English to all senior leaders as a priority – particularly during transition to the new curriculum – which involved putting systems of planning and schemes of work in place, lesson observations to inform curriculum delivery, and learning walks.

The SLT have also worked hard to engage all staff in their vision for learning and in empowering colleagues to take forward ideas and to innovate. A practical handbook has been written, setting out the school's vision for the children's learning experience and setting agreed expectations for the quality and standards of provision across the school. The guide provides a shared understanding on the school's approach in areas such as planning, assessment and feedback, behaviour and the learning environment.

These shared expectations, supported by regular training and a developmental culture, have provided a strong basis upon which the entire school community can move forward. “We gradually moved from a culture where monitoring and observation was ‘done to’, to one where the wider staff community has ownership of improvement”, says Pam. “With common expectations, we can now encourage staff to innovate and to try new things – with a focus on improving the children’s learning experience.” One excellent example of this is the innovative way in which teaching assistants are deployed, not least through the school’s Beacon Rooms which were featured in a recent edition of the Kyra Journal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNIcFej8dAQ> . The Beacon Rooms have been created to provide children with the space to be ‘prepared to learn.’ Children using the rooms can access breakfast before the start of the school day, spend time with siblings or friends away from the buzz of the school environment, to have some ‘down time’ on calming activities such as drawing and painting, or to simply ‘have a chat’ with a member of staff. The school has placed a significant emphasis on developing interventions – led by teaching assistants – to meet children’s identified needs and to ‘be ready to learn.’ At the same time, the school has placed significant emphasis – through the leadership of Claire Logan – on building capacity and raising standards in the early years, ensuring children are receiving the highest standards of provision at a crucial point in their development. Children are prepared to be confident and enthusiastic learners at an early stage.

There has also been a big emphasis on developing a culture of creativity. Being an all through academy, the wider SLT has been fully committed to supporting improvements throughout Primary – and specialist teaching in Music, Spanish and PE have sustained high quality provision and opportunities across the wider curriculum. Andrew Madge, Academy Head Teacher has been visionary in enabling this to happen. The trust is now embarking on participation in a cross Trust Eisteddfod and pupils benefit from artists in residence 3 times a year. Our next goal is to capture the talents of our pupils in key areas such as creativity, culture, wellbeing, leadership and community by developing a primary baccalaureate programme.

In November 2016, the school was again inspected by Ofsted and was subsequently judged to be ‘good’ in all areas. The report found that “School leaders have a clear vision for school improvement. They have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and they are taking effective action to ensure continued improvement” and that “Pupils make good progress in writing and mathematics in key stage 2.” For Pam and her team, the report provides recognition of a long period of hard work and commitment to achieving ‘better learning’. It also, in keeping with Pam’s motto, comes three years after the school first set out on its journey towards improvement.

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When asked what made the difference, Pam's reply is clear. "We created a 'learning culture' and modelled learning from 'the top'. As a headteacher I consider myself to be 'learner in chief' and it only through looking outwards to colleagues within Kyra, across Lincolnshire and within our trust I have been able – with a great team – to realise this improvement. As a new senior leadership team there was also a big emphasis on learning from one another's expertise, and where our leaders didn't commit to being learners they quickly realised that this wasn't the place for them. As a result of this leadership culture, we see our teachers and support staff also modelling learning – and that has a very positive impact on the quality of learning and the aspiration for learning that is modelled to our children."



In April, Pam will retire from her role at Priory Witham – but will remain involved in supporting the trust to further develop and improve. As testament to her commitment to learning and improvement across schools, it is important to note that throughout the last three years and the pressures inherent with turning a school around, Pam has increasingly encouraged her own team to contribute to the work of Kyra. Members of staff have gone on to be designated as SLEs, for example, providing leadership development support and contributing to Kyra's middle leadership programmes. The school has also been actively involved in moderation sessions, headteachers' forums and other training.

As Marie-Claire Bretherton explains "where school to school support is most effective, it really does depend on the will and determination of the leader – however experienced – to be a learner. Pam quickly gained an exceptional grasp of what the key issues were, but that came not only from her experience – but also from her commitment to spending time so early on, on looking and listening. What Pam also did, was to look to her immediate community to work with her to create the solutions – she recognised the talent within and she looked to her networks and the social capital that exists within Lincolnshire's schools to help her move the school to where it is today."

There is little doubt that Pam's legacy will be sustained through the team of learners and the culture of learning that she has modelled and inspired at Priory Witham. Indeed, as testament to the growth of leadership in the school, Amy Tallentire has been appointed as the school's new headteacher and will begin the role later this year. We wish everyone at Priory Witham the very best as they move onto the next stage of their journey.

Key learning points for school improvement:

- Amongst the urgency to bring about change, invest time, early on, in 'looking and listening': do this, for example, through observation, reviewing the data, and speaking with staff, parents and with children about their experiences;
- Set clear expectations early on around standards, ensuring staff are aware that they have your full support in working towards and exacting those expectations;
- Look to identify internal staff who can have the talent and people skills to 'step up' to support you to lead improvement and bring people along with you;
- Look to your networks to identify talented teachers beyond the school who are ready to 'step up' and to enable you to lead improvement where you do not currently have capacity;
- As a headteacher, identify a trusted and credible peer who can act as a sounding board and provide a second opinion (and a degree of constructive challenge) when making key decisions;
- Invest in leadership and teacher development led by credible peers in other local schools – for example, a credible teaching school alliance. This will enable trust to develop quickly, and open up opportunities for colleagues to access wider professional development opportunities and networks;
- Ensure all senior leaders are committed to their own learning and that of others. Senior leaders need to model this to inspire it in others. Make the commitment to learning and self-improvement a 'non -negotiable'.



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