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Great Expectations: the journey towards success at Toynton All Saints

Visit Toynton All Saints Primary School today and you will see a school that is bursting with positive staff, engaged children, and inspiring learning environments. The school, which sits at the heart of this East Lincolnshire village, is valued and celebrated by the local community – not least by its children and parents – as a place of opportunity and aspiration. Yet it is sometimes too easy to assume that such cultures fall readily into place. At Toynton – as in all good schools – one only need dig a little deeper to hear the stories of resilience, hope, team effort and determination that underpin the school’s journey to success.

When Lesley Coulthurst became head teacher in 2011 the school had been experiencing what can only be described as the most challenging period in its history. The school had done well during the nineties and early two thousands under successful leadership. During that time, the school’s reputation within the community was good and parents were pleased with what was often described as a nurturing and caring environment. A new chapter awaited the school with a new head teacher taking up post.

Sadly that new chapter was set to become one of instability and uncertainty for Toynton – with the school experiencing a number of changes in leadership and personnel up until 2011, when Lesley joined. This lack of continuity corresponded with a general deterioration in pupils’ outcomes and behaviour. It also led to the school experiencing that all too common cycle of decline that comes with a drop in standards and fluctuating leadership - parents began to vote with their feet, with many moving their children into schools in neighbouring villages. In 2010 Ofsted judged the school as satisfactory ('requires improvement'). As one parent explained: "My daughter simply didn't feel happy at the school". Pupil numbers dropped to 39, the number of classes reduced to 2 and the turnover of teaching staff was high.



Lesley was very aware of the challenges when she applied for the role in 2011. Having moved into the area with her family a few years earlier (after drawing a close on a successful career as Director of a global business research consulting firm), she set about training as a teacher and enjoyed her first role at St Helena's in Willoughby under the leadership of Sue Belton. Lesley's development was rapid, as she benefited both from Sue's encouragement and her well known commitment to providing staff with development and 'stretch' opportunities. Sue encouraged Lesley to take on headship and to apply for the role at Toynton. Lesley was successful in her application for the post and took on the role in September 2011.

Lesley quickly discovered that a culture of low expectations had set in amongst many of the staff at Toynton, whilst others – though determined to give their best - were disillusioned with the school's lack of direction and expectations. "A significant number of the children who remained at the school had special educational needs and many of the pupils were from families where aspirations were traditionally quite low." says Lesley. "They needed our best, but it just wasn't a particularly empowering place to be. My first job, as I saw it, was to confront the low aspirations within the school community, for those children."

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Lesley's effort to change this culture took on various forms. She began by using both assemblies and staff meetings to reinforce the high aspirations and expectations that she had for everyone at the school. She believed that the school could and would improve, but convincing others of that change would initially require a great deal of time and energy on her part: "It was crucial that I constantly and consistently modelled my belief in others and what I expected of them. I knew that the children had the potential, and that there were adults who really believed that too. We had to identify and celebrate the behaviours that would enable our school to become a great place to learn and to challenge behaviours that were inconsistent with that."

Lesley began by using her first term to work with staff and governors to develop the school's six 'R's (Respect, Resilience, Risk-Taking, Resourcefulness, Relationships and Reflection). The 6 R's set out the values that the school community was aspiring to develop in all children, and these were displayed around the school through inspiring art work. These values provided the themes for assemblies and, gradually, have provided the context for delivery of the school's wider curriculum. The messages around the school's new and high expectations for pupils were, after only a matter of weeks, being made loud and clear. There was no doubt from speaking to Lesley that the school would be great again.

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Indeed, the setting of expectations not only began to generate some ambition and hope, but also began to highlight where there were inconsistencies in behaviour and standards. It quickly became clear, for instance, that some staff were simply not committed to the improvement work that lay ahead, particularly as Lesley set about identifying areas for development. “I began to spend a lot of time looking at the data, doing lesson observations and undertaking one to ones with staff because we needed to know where the strengths and weaknesses lay before we could seek to improve them. I wanted to give everyone the opportunity to play their part. Those who decided that the school and the new culture we wanted to achieve wasn't for them shortly after left.”

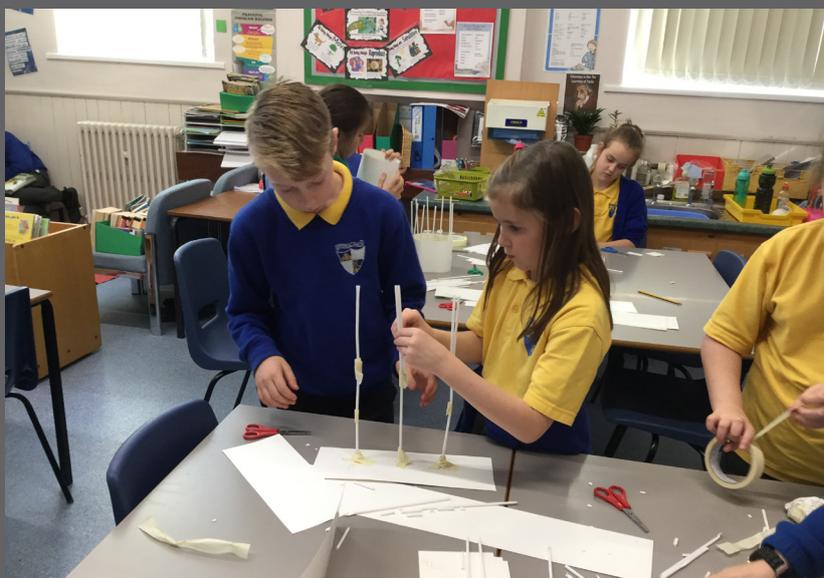


Once she had her established her expectations and identified the challenges that the school faced, Lesley set about working on addressing behaviour amongst pupils. “Without a calm and orderly environment we didn’t have the basis for learning or improving learning, so we had to get that right from the off” says Lesley. This ensured that pupils understood that there was a ‘zero tolerance’ approach towards instances of low level disruption, lack of respect for others and a refusal to work. The staff had a consistent message and followed through with appropriate sanctions. Alongside this, the staff gradually began to implement further ways of rewarding positive behaviours – including weekly celebration assemblies. A student council was established, providing children with more responsibility and a way of recognising those children who were modelling the positive behaviours. The school very gradually became a calmer and happier place to learn.

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Meanwhile, Lesley was also determined not to lose the focus on ensuring the development of a high quality staff team. She began by working hard to recognise the value of those staff who had been steadfast in their work and belief in the school (most notably a number of teaching assistants) through change, and who had not necessarily been given the support or training that they needed to thrive. These people were crucially important in providing initial capacity as the school grew, and were also essential in supporting Lesley to understand the needs of children and the community, and in building trust with parents during those early days.

A particularly key person here was the school’s SENDCo, Julia Greenfield, who had been with the school for a number of years. Julia was quickly identified as someone who had enormous potential to move the school on and was quickly appointed as job-share Year 6 teacher (working alongside Lesley herself). Julia’s precision teaching of the core skills and nurturing vulnerable children meant that she was well placed to support a cohort with a wide range of needs as they approached the end of Key Stage 2. She has gone on to be the school’s KS2 Senior Leader, with responsibility for SEND children, she is a Specialist Leader of Education for Kyra, and is currently supporting



another partner school. As pupil numbers grew and new staff were appointed, they were immediately encouraged to access professional development and networks and to further develop their skills and experience. The school's most recent involvement in the Mobilise project (led by the Lincolnshire Learning Partnership) has also helped to develop the role of the school's teaching assistants – providing them with a valuable evidence-informed training and development opportunity.

Over the past 5 years, each year, Lesley has recruited new staff in order to create capacity for the school to return to its previous number on roll. She was determined to have a keen eye on those candidates who demonstrated strong moral purpose, commitment to teaching, and who were enthusiastic about serving the children and community. But it was challenging. "Recruitment is a real challenge for us in East Lindsey" says Lesley ". Through our relationship with Kyra in particular, we have been able to offer access to high quality training and coaching. This has been crucial to bringing some very talented and enthusiastic people on board."

The relationship with Kyra and its School Direct Programme has supported the growth and development of several recent graduates, who had little experience of teaching but lots of passion and a determination to learn and make a difference. Recruiting inexperienced teachers requires an investment in their development, however having only been teaching herself for three years before taking on the headship at Toynton, Lesley knew that with access to high quality professional development, coaching and wider networks of support, these new teachers would be well placed to succeed. Again Kyra proved to be vital, offering new teachers access to the Improving and Outstanding teacher programmes and a range of professional networks.

“The powerful offering from our alliance with Kyra” says Lesley “is that its sense of moral purpose and the high expectations of outcomes for children are very closely aligned to our own. It is an important alliance in that it not only provided (and continues to provide) the professional development, but also reinforces our belief in and our high levels of ambition for children and staff alike.” The recruitment drive resulted in the support and development of a number of key members of staff, including the school’s Key Stage 1 and Early Years Foundation Stage Leader, Roxanne Gray, who has, through her unwavering commitment and passion, added real value to the quality of learning and teaching across the school.

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Alongside the work in improving behaviour, recruiting and developing staff, and in raising aspirations, Lesley and her team have also worked hard to identify and harness the potential of the school’s environment to enhance learning. For instance, Lesley has overseen the development of an area of land within the school grounds, in order to develop the Forest School status and the school’s own ‘Wild at Heart’ scheme. This has been a rich source of inspiration for pupils and has proved to be a highly effective way of engaging pupils with their learning across the curriculum. The conservation area is used for a range of activities, including observing wildlife, growing vegetables, building campfires, and for group reading and story-telling activities. Indeed, nature and wildlife have had a big influence within the school as children relate their learning both in core subjects and more broadly to their outdoor experiences. “The outdoor learning has really helped us to bring the curriculum to life” says Lesley, “it has made it more relevant, engaging and tangible for our children and that has also had a positive impact on their behaviour and their progress. However, it must be said that this has only been possible due to the quality of the teaching team at Toynton and the onus on high expectations and high quality teaching and learning.”

Five years on from Lesley's arrival at Toynton, and the school is going from strength to strength. In 2016, the school's end of Key Stage 2 data was in the top 10% nationally, with 73 per cent of the Year 6s meeting the expected standard in combined reading, writing and maths, compared to the national average of 53 per cent. Attendance now stands at 96.2% (having been as low as 93% in 2012) and there have been no exclusions for two years. In 2015, the school received a congratulatory letter from its MP declaring that the school was within the top 250 schools in England. The school was judged as "Good" at its last Ofsted in 2012 and there are now 5 classes, with 125 children and a strong team of 7 teachers. Parents too have found renewed faith, with the parent quoted at the beginning of this article not only enrolling her children again, but herself becoming School Business Manager at the school. The children themselves speak of a school that provides them with interesting and exciting opportunities to learn – from their experiences of Wild at Heart and the Forest School through to trips to London and the seaside.

For Lesley it has been a hugely rewarding – if often daunting – journey, not least as it is her first headship. When asked about what has made it possible, as with many heads who succeed in achieving improvements in a challenging context, she described the importance of support, collaboration and mentoring. The source of this has predominately been from Toynton's robust Governing Body and from Lesley's colleagues in the 'Fantastic Five' partnership (a local group of small, rural primary schools): "I must make special mention of Sue Belton (head teacher at St Helena's), who, as my former manager, has encouraged and supported me all the way. She has not only shown great faith in me – encouraging me to step up to headship when it would have been easier for her to have held onto me at St Helena's, but she has also been a helpful sounding board, as I've made some quite challenging decisions here at Toynton. We have – across the Fantastic Five partnership – shared resources in the truest sense: staff such as School Business Managers, Teaching Assistants and the SENDCo, as well as other training, CPD, residential and trips. Without that collaboration this role would have been a big ask. It has been a great team effort thanks to colleagues both within and beyond the school."



Key learning points for school improvement:

- Be clear on (and seek to constantly and consistently model) your high expectations from the outset. Seek to make use of available forums – such as staff and governor meetings and assemblies with pupils – to reinforce this.
- Invest as much time as possible up front in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Use observations, learning walks, review data and speak to a wide range of members of the school community. Know the school inside out before planning improvement.
- Improvement depends on a calm and respectful environment in classrooms. Ensure that there are consistent messages of expectations, and common and well understood policies and approaches towards addressing poor behaviour.
- Do not compromise on your high expectations and be honest with staff about the improvements expected (both at an individual and at a team level). Ensure that your discussions are fair and are driven by values and your ambition for children. Be prepared for the fact that some staff may choose to leave.

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- Look to identify high potential long-standing members of staff who can provide that crucial initial capacity in key roles whilst also supporting you to build trust with the community. Be mindful that they may need some mentoring and training support in order to 'step up'.
- It is characteristic of a school experiencing significant change and embarking on rapid improvement to initially see a high turnover of staff. Carefully choose alliances that are aligned with your values and expectations and who can support you to recruit and train high potential new staff. Ensure that new teachers are well supported through access to ongoing, relevant professional development and that they have access to coaches and/or mentors.
- Look to the potential of the school environment and the local community to enhance children's experience of school and to inspire new ways in which to engage pupils in learning. These opportunities can often be neglected, or go unidentified while schools are experiencing challenging times.
- Always ensure you have access to at least one supportive and credible colleague in another school who can act as a 'sounding board' during tough times. Encourage them to be a 'critical friend'.
- Seek to become involved in local collaborative networks which can provide you with access to resources, people, or advice during challenging periods.



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