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Kyra supporting  
school improvement



# “Forward as Three: Working Together to Achieve Improvement for All”



Tracey Bowman has been Head Teacher of Birchwood Junior School in Lincoln for ten years. However, in recent years, her role has changed significantly, as – as Executive Headteacher - she has overseen a deepening partnership between Birchwood and its two other local schools, the Lancaster School (an infant school) and Woodlands Infant and Nursery School. The three schools have worked in loose partnership for some years, bound by a desire to work together in the best interests of the community they serve. However, in recent years, Tracey, as Executive Head has worked with governors, staff and the community to bring about a more formal and deeper approach to partnership

– driven by a need to achieve school improvement and to better serve all children, many of who are eligible for pupil premium funding.

This journey of more formal collaboration began three years ago when the Head Teacher of the Lancaster School retired. Tracey had overseen a period of sustained success at Birchwood, and Lancaster required an experienced and able leader to help to overcome the challenges it was facing and to drive improvement – so it was a natural step to ask Tracey to take on the Executive Head role. “The schools had worked in partnership” says Tracey “however, it was clear that so much more could be done to share school improvement expertise and to work in a co-ordinated way to serve the children and the local community. Lancaster needed support, and it felt natural and right that we should work together and that Birchwood should support Lancaster to take improvement forward.”

Since Tracey has taken on the role of Executive Head, according to Ofsted, “the speed of school improvement at Lancaster has increased” and the school’s outcomes in terms of performance have improved significantly. So how did Tracey and her team bring this about?



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## **Building relationships**

“I began from a strong basis of support from within the school community” says Tracey. “The Ofsted report reflects that and it’s right that it does so, because it was key to enabling us to make the changes and it also reflects that parents and the community can see the improvements that are happening – which is positive.” Indeed, the reception from parents to Tracey’s new role as Executive Head teacher of the Lancaster school was very positive, as they felt that sharing a head with the junior school would allow for more effective transition for their children. There was also an existing basis of trust and confidence in Tracey and her team, as many parents knew them as a result of having children or friends of children attend the junior school and understood that she had the best interests of the community at heart.

Building effective relationships with staff was also key, and sharing stories of success about the children at Birchwood Junior School, who had previously been to the Lancaster school, helped to establish rapport and trust. The fact that Birchwood had such a strong reputation also helped to inspire confidence in the staff that Tracey would be dependable leader. “I spent a lot of time building relationships and setting out my belief that things would get better. I knew the community, I knew the children and I knew what was possible. The staff just needed me to believe in them and to tell them it could be done – with support and, of course, high expectations for all.”



## Firm foundations

One of the first challenges for Tracey at Lancaster was dealing with difficult and disruptive behaviour from a small number of pupils, which was affecting the learning of other children and staff morale. Tracey tells us, “there was a culture at the school of rewarding behaviour which should be the norm, such as sitting well and listening quietly. The most effective way of improving standards of behaviour came from having higher expectations, and communicating the message that we were not in the business of rewarding good behaviour, as good behaviour is the expectation.”

Where pupils demonstrated behavioural difficulties, Tracey and her team made sure that support was put in place, including support from educational psychologists and more recently through the use of art therapy, to help pupils to deal with the difficulties that many face in their lives. Tracey has been particularly impressed by the positive impact of art therapy on pupils, having seen for herself the effect it has had in improving the behaviour of a number of different pupils. All this helped to create an atmosphere of stability and calmness at Lancaster, setting a firm foundation for all other progress and improvements.

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## **A focus on teaching and learning**

Tracey and her team set about improving teaching and learning from the basis of high expectations, and through establishing a shared belief that the pupils of the Lancaster school can do really well and achieve great things. Tracey – despite her Junior School background - spent a lot of time in early years classrooms, teaching nursery and reception classes, “this helped me get a deeper understanding of what it’s like to teach early years, and helped me to pick up on any issues really quickly.”

Alongside this, Tracey quickly put into place a system of regular lesson observations, book scrutinies, and constructive feedback which helped teachers to pinpoint areas to develop. This approach was coupled with half-termly meetings with class teachers about each pupil’s individual progress and attainment, with teachers regularly completing assessment records to monitor pupils particularly vulnerable to underachievement. Ofsted has commented that this close monitoring of each pupil is ensuring that any drop in their performance is addressed quickly through well-directed additional support, preventing these pupils from ‘falling behind’.

Tracey also made sure that school development targets became more specific and focussed in order to drive forward improvements more precisely and promptly. She tells us, “an example of this was the specific focus on boys’ writing, which data and observation had shown was a significant issue for the school. This was addressed and improved through actions such as the introduction of topics within the curriculum to encourage boys’ participation, and the purchase of books specially designed to capture boys’ interest.” As a result of the work done on this development target, boys’ progress, and attainment of the boys in early years has substantially improved and is continually increasing. Tracey has also ensured that staff meetings are now put to better use at Lancaster in supporting development targets such as this, rather than on general ‘housekeeping matters’. Staff meetings are now centred around teaching and learning, and sharing and developing best practice, and are prepared for by staff accordingly.

## **Building the team**

Tracey was also eager to recognise the talent and potential that lay within the existing team at Lancaster, not least that of the deputy (now Head of School), Naomi Haughton. By working closely with Naomi and supporting her ongoing development, she was able to instigate change at Lancaster in both a rapid, but also sustainable, way.

Knowing that she could not be in both schools at the same time, Tracey made it a priority to support Naomi to extend her role and spread her influence, she tells us, “Naomi is an excellent teacher, but I saw within her potential to develop even further. Naomi’s skills were key in leading the improvement of standards at the school, particularly in teaching and learning; she just needed development and support to focus on this and lead improvement across the school”. This development has included guiding Naomi in areas such as dealing with parents, delivering training to other staff, and completing the National Professional Qualification for Headship. Tracey now knows that during the times she is at one of the other schools in the federation that the Lancaster school is in capable hands.

## Looking outwards

It has also been Tracey’s goal to make the Lancaster school more ‘outward facing’, engaging teachers in the process of educational collaboration and sharing best practice. This has helped the staff to become even more enthused about professional development. It has included joining the Kyra group, and sharing best practice in teaching and learning with the other schools in the federation, especially Woodlands. This mutual support also includes sharing pupils’ work with teachers from Woodlands, to help to accurately assess pupil progress and attainment. There is now also a greater onus on CPD and learning from other schools across the county, which has had a significant impact both on teacher development and their motivation.

Since Tracey became head at Lancaster, the evidence of improvement at the school is clear. Outcomes for pupils have improved significantly, and the number of pupils achieving the expected level in the national phonics screening test now exceeds the national figure. In writing and mathematics, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard for their age or above is higher than the national average and the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving that standard is in line with non-disadvantaged pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. Tracey, Naomi and teaching staff alike are proud of the progress which has been made so far, and are full of enthusiasm to continue the journey of improvement and build on the current successes.



*“it is incredibly useful for all the schools to be able to work together in order to challenge each other and help each other improve; all the schools have different strengths, and that can be used to everyone’s advantage.”*

## **Two become three**

The next stage of the journey of collaboration across the schools began in October 2016 when Tracey was asked to take over as temporary Head Teacher of Woodlands Infant and Nursery school alongside Kate Rouse (Consultant Headteacher at Lincolnshire County Council). This subsequently led to Tracey becoming the head teacher of the school not long after. Woodlands had experienced a particularly challenging period and Tracey tells us that, when she first arrived, there was a significant turnover of staff at the school, as well as poor standards of teaching and learning. “I started out with the very important basics of connecting with parents and teachers. There were many parents who were very concerned about the school, and – as at Lancaster a year or so earlier - I made sure to get out into the playground every morning and at the end of the day to talk to parents and to listen to their concerns. It really helped to be visible and for the parents to feel heard. It also helped that many of them already knew who I was; they felt reassured that the school was in a safe pair of hands.”

Indeed, in many ways, Tracey’s approach to improvement at Woodlands was similar to the one she had taken at Lancaster, while also adapting her model to the specific context and needs at Woodlands. The staff needed a great deal of encouragement and positive reinforcement from Tracey, including communication of the belief that standards could improve, and that they could help to make it happen. Tracey began by working with staff to improve the school environment to make it a more positive place for pupils and teachers alike; “the school instantly became a more vibrant, positive, and safer place, as a result of some simple changes to the environment. Through small but significant changes such as organising and tidying classrooms, cloakrooms and corridors, and creating colourful and decorative noticeboards and displays, pupils began to take more of a pride in the school environment, which in turn meant treating it with greater respect and developing a more positive attitude towards school.”

Tracey shared the school's results data with staff and compared the data to other schools and the national average, as it had become apparent that data and scrutiny had not driven the school improvement conversation for some time. Staff were shocked by the implications of the data, which they were previously unaware of, which demonstrated that the pupils were significantly underachieving; "the analysis of data created an even stronger desire within the staff to turn things around and improve results for the pupils." Attainment and progress were particularly low in EYFS, and Tracey put an urgent focus on this area, especially phonics, in order to give pupils a solid foundation on which to build.

## Spreading the model

Since Tracey became Head of the school in 2016, pupil progress in the early years is already improving, as, she believes, is the quality of teaching throughout the school. This improvement has again been underpinned by Tracey's commitment to pinpointing areas for development and sharing best practice, achieved through learning walks, regular observations, constructive feedback, and book scrutinies. It has also been supported by staff training and visioning days, and through collaboration with other schools in the federation, particularly the Lancaster School. Tracey has utilised the growing leadership skills of Naomi Haughton, Head of School at Lancaster, for support for Woodlands; for example, Naomi has done lesson observations and given feedback to teachers at Woodlands, and has led CPD and training sessions there.

Staff from both schools have also taken part in school-to-school moderation sessions; Tracey tells us "it has been really useful for staff at the Woodlands school and from the Lancaster school to share the work they are doing, comparing pupils' books and sharing best practice, and it has been really motivating for staff at Woodlands to work to raise standards." Matthew Davies, Head of School, and Sam Jackson, Deputy Head Teacher from Birchwood Junior School have also come into Woodlands to share best practice on questioning techniques which enable deeper learning to take place. This collaboration has gone both ways, with the deputy head of Woodlands offering SEN knowledge and support to the Junior School. Tracey tells us, "it is incredibly useful for all the schools to be able to work together in order to challenge each other and help each other improve; all the schools have different strengths, and that can be used to everyone's advantage."

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## **Securing good governance**

There has also been a great deal of development of governance since Tracey became head of Woodlands – a crucially important aspect of school leadership that must be secured if improvement is to be sustained in the medium to long-term. Governance was not strong when Tracey took over the school, and support was requested from Kyra by Kate Rouse. Kyra contacted Sean Westaway, a National Leader of Governance, who led an external review of the school's governing body. The external review revealed some key issues, including a lack of training for governors, too few governors, and inefficient deployment of governors' skills.

Sean began to help the governing body to improve by mentoring the chair of governors so that he was in a position to effect positive change from within; this included attending training courses through the National Governance Association and Lincolnshire County Council. The governing body's clerk was also supported with mentoring and training. A skills audit was carried out to ensure that skills within the governing body were put to best use, and that highlighted skills gaps which needed to be filled. Subsequently, more governors were recruited by the chair with the relevant skills to maximise the efficiency of the governing body. Following the external review, Sean attended governance meetings in order to help support and model best practice, particularly around questioning. This included support to ask the right kind of questions of school leaders, which would enable sufficient challenge and accountability.



## Progress continues

There is evidently still a way to go in seeing all of improvements at the Woodlands Infant School take full effect, as the February 2017 Ofsted inspection judgement of 'requires improvement' reflects. However, these things take time, and the evidence of improvement is certainly emerging. Ofsted commented on a senior leadership 'highly committed' to improving the school and have commended the clear action plans in place to achieve this. Improvement in teaching has also been recognised, as well as improvements in progress for disadvantaged pupils. Developments in governance have also been acknowledged by Ofsted, with the report observing that governors are becoming more fully informed of the school's work, are sharing information more effectively, have an improved understanding of where their focus needs to be, and are increasing the level of challenge and accountability which they provide. Overall, it seems that real change for the better is taking place at Woodlands Infant School, and Tracey is confident that this upwards trajectory of improvement will continue, with more and more visible results as time goes by.

What is clear is that the three schools now have a much deeper and more focused relationship than ever before – with school improvement activity being placed firmly at the heart of this partnership. This is not only down to Tracey's leadership and her determination to achieve the very best outcomes for all children across the three schools, but also down to the growing sense of belief and commitment amongst staff to securing improvement for all. It is clear that partnership between the three schools, and between them and other leaders and schools across the Kyra alliance, is opening up opportunities to secure improvement for the long term – which should, and must, ensure that no school is left behind again in future.

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