

Schools in North East England improving pupil performance

Using nationally acclaimed learning and teaching framework to boost standards

Schools in North East England are among the latest to improve pupil performance using a nationally acclaimed model which boosts standards of learning and teaching.

Tanfield Lea Community Primary in Stanley, Co Durham; Chiltern Primary in Hull and Martin Frobisher Infants in Wakefield have joined the growing list of schools signed up with school improvement specialists EdisonLearning and its Quality Framework for Learning and Teaching.

The framework is the outcome of extensive research into best practice and provides a comprehensive programme to ensure that teaching consistently meets the highest quality standards in all subjects, to all students, at all times. Nationally the system is used by over 3,000 teachers in 130 schools in their drive towards continuous improvement. But until now most of the schools celebrating success with the system have been in the South.

In Essex for example, the framework helped turn around the RJ Mitchell Primary School which, seven years ago was rated a low 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, with below average SATs results and attendance and under threat of closure because of falling numbers. Now, SATs and attendance are up, the school has achieved a 'good' Ofsted rating and is working towards 'outstanding', and recently picked up Edison's international school award for improvement. Various changes that were made include new strategies for staff team working, partnering with parents, tracking pupils' progress, developing pupils' personal, social & thinking skills, and improving classroom teaching.

The Framework essentially sets out the behaviours that characterise learning and teaching in classrooms every day, for learners, for teachers and for support assistants. It is unique in its approach as it details the 'how' as well as the 'what'. The main focus is on pupils' learning and colleagues visiting colleagues, rather than being a 'top down' monitoring programme. Instead of simply being 'observed', class teachers share best practice with a colleague who watches a lesson, after which there will be a coaching session to help the teacher reflect on what needs improving. "Some teachers describe it as "lesson planning with knobs on," said Helen Todd, an achievement advisor with EdisonLearning. "It's a sharing, rather than a judging, experience."

The key point of difference between the QFLT and other such schemes is that it offers sustainable improvement. "It's not a quick fix, but a way of life that becomes central to all the teachers' discussions," said Helen. "A dedicated achievement advisor will work with a school to offer all the support and coaching necessary to make the model work, rather than just providing a kit and leaving schools to get on with it."

Usually first phase implementation takes 6/9 months, resulting in the first measurable impact on improvements. The soft data from teachers is that they understand what 'good' and 'better' looks like in the classroom and become energised and reflective, which enhances their practice. The hard data is pupil progress and other quality of learning and teaching data. The most significant result of the Framework nationally has been a rapid rise from 'in need of improvement' to 'good' teaching in school.

"The framework has been developed for teachers, by teachers and consequently it is detailed and user-friendly," said Helen Todd achievement advisor with EdisonLearning. "But while the model is the same throughout the country, its implementation is always customised. Schools can choose which elements to focus on and can work alone, in partnership with another school or as part of a cluster of schools. We are totally flexible over the way it's rolled out – a school may want to gallop ahead, or go more slowly, it's really up to them."

In Durham there's been a particular focus on developing middle leaders, with schools using the framework to improve both an individual teacher's performance as well as that of a team. At Tanfield Lea Community Primary, in Stanley, near Durham, headteacher Kay Hemmings has used the framework to develop her middle leadership programme, following modeling by her leadership team. "The reaction has been extremely positive," she said. "Teachers like the fact that it is very supportive of them. They are getting lots of ideas from each other and becoming really engaged in professional discussions."

Year three class teacher Tanya Davis rolled out the programme at Tanfield Lea and has found the QFLT particularly helpful in supporting her studies with the National College Middle Leadership Development programme. "Normally teachers have to deal with initiatives that are given to them. The difference here is that you really feel ownership of it. It's personalised and innovative and has made us all think of lots of different development ideas.

"One teacher found a great way of engaging the rather physical boys in her class who come back in from break time still full of energy by getting them to practice phonics in a physical way, using 'heads, shoulders, knees and toes' rhyming actions. Another teacher began making her own personalised teaching resources of laminated words for boxes in the middle of teaching tables which is working really well."

At Chiltern Primary School in Hull, headteacher Lynne Clarke has introduced the model as part of her effort to support teachers in need of improvement. "They have found the framework clear and concise and like the fact that it can be taken step by step," she said. "It doesn't ask for huge changes in practice, but supports them to identify which changes to make – often it's something they can introduce and see results from immediately."

Although local authorities now provide professional development for schools and their focus on getting to 'good', typically these courses are only a few days long and offer no sustained support. EL on the other hand is renowned for its 'Follow Up, Follow Through' philosophy – or FUFT for short. "It's become a noun and a verb in the schools we advise, with teachers saying they have been fuffed!" said Helen.

The framework is also proving a boon for schools looking for a route to maintaining 'outstanding' performance. "As an 'outstanding' school we were not coming from a position of weakness," said Jonathan Sharp, Headteacher of Martin Frobisher Infants in Wakefield. "We were looking for a sustainable level of rigour and impact to help us maintain our position and offered the framework to our staff as part of their professional development.

"The co-coaching has worked very well for us, particularly in clarity and quality of assessment of learning. Some of the changes have been small and idiosyncratic rather than life-changing. But put them together and it really adds up – as British cycling coach Dave Brailsford says; if you take everything you do and improve everything by one percent then that adds up to a big increase in performance. We have improved across a number of areas, sometimes marginal gains, which come together as something which has a demonstrable impact on learning.

"While we knew that assessment and feedback was key to further success, EdisonLearning helped us capture and analyse what we needed to do and really move it forward. For example, placing an onus on feedback time for children in their writing has had a massive impact on children

working at lower levels. Our marking was already where it needed to be, yet we realised we were not giving the children the time to digest and understand it. So at the start of every session we began to give the children time to really look at their comments and engage in what they needed to do to improve.

“There are lots of examples of where EdisonLearning has stopped people in their tracks and really made them think. The initial investment may sound a lot of money, but divide that between 12 staff for a year and look at the impact on teacher’s CPD and on our pupil outcomes and it’s great value. Just be aware it needs a high level of rigour and investment in staff time.”