

# Priory St. Cluster - Peer Review Case Study April 2018

## Context of the Partnership

- 8 schools in the partnership (plus 2 not yet in peer review cycle).
- One 6 form entry secondary school, one small preparatory school, one small school, four 2 fe schools, one 1.5 fe school and two 1 fe schools.
- Cluster established 2 years ago although several schools within the partnership had already been working together as part of the TSA, ITT or the Diocesan group.
- Almost all schools have been through the peer review cycle twice.

## Key Issue/s that your partnership identified to overcome?

The need to:

- Build trust and openness between the HTs in order to get the most from the partnership work as some HTs didn't know each other and the conversations were quite 'closed' and therefore planning was difficult as colleagues were not ready to open up about their needs. One school was reluctant to join any partnership in case it added to the workload rather than support the workload and one school was part of a MAT that limited the participation in anything external to the MAT.
- Get to know the schools – their strengths and weaknesses as we didn't know much about some of the schools in the partnership, planning for the year ahead wasn't as easy as it could be.
- Work cross-phase – there was limited experience and with only one secondary partner it was more noticeable. Primary colleagues were initially reticent about cross-phase work believing they did not have the experience.
- Plan all the partnership activities out for the whole year and stick to a rigid timetable and recognise the potential knock on effect of people cancelling/postponing.
- Provide 'Buffering' by having a reserve reviewer plus extra Improvement champion available.

## What did the partnership learn from undertaking the peer review?

We got to experience each other's schools first hand which provided yet another opportunity to share good practice. It built the trust between the HTs as they had to expose the more vulnerable aspects of the school. We found we learnt so much more from each other on the review where conversations ran much deeper. The initial review meetings were conducted as directed with the evidence/data, preparation for the review and a proposed timetable usually pencilled out to aid discussion. However on the review itself the HTs and senior staff in the school began to open up during discussions, talking about matters beyond the review such as staffing issues, governance, pupils, curriculum difficulties and more. This sharing of perhaps the more vulnerable areas of the school was often reciprocated in the discussion enabling the 3 schools present at the review to hold, deeper conversation which helped build openness and trust. In one school the HT had long been troubled by the way in which instructions and directives came from above and felt powerless to object. She reported that the review helped her to formulate a response to her line managers and attempt a dialogue. HTs were also nervous about cross phase working, citing a fear that their subject knowledge both up the years and down was not good enough. It became very obvious early on that teaching is teaching regardless of the year group, good teaching and high standards are easily recognisable and confident discussions can be had with HTs, SMT and as part of the Improvement Champion meeting. Some members of staff took a little longer to appreciate that skills operate cross-phase

but this only took 2 cycles. It is difficult to use other specific examples without identifying the schools but suffice to say the peer review is also an opportunity for HTs to gain personal support from colleagues.

### **What was the Impact and benefits**

- **For the Partnership as a whole by undertaking peer review**

It provided opportunities for: Teambuilding, support, sharing of ideas, collaboration, building trust, growing positive relationships, openness, identification of strengths in order to provide a support network. Some examples of these were given in the last section and as a result we are now able to plan joint CPD activities which benefit more staff in more of the schools. One of the most positive results has been the relationship and trust that has built up between the Improvement Champions as a result of being put in quite stressful and challenging situations. Although most meetings run well and are very productive, there are moments where not all staff are on board and diplomacy is needed.

As a whole, although initial meetings and conversations were a little 'strained' between the HTs the group is now very focused, lively and driven. This is largely through persevering with the reviews through a second cycle and continuing with very frank, supportive and open dialogue.

- **For individual school leaders**

It provided opportunities for: positive cross-phase working, leaders to see progress to date and how far a school improves between reviews, external validation/moderation, middle leaders to moderate their judgements of a subject area linking progress to their subject leadership, leaders to see that staff can be more receptive when involved in the change process. In one school the HT reported a 'Eureka' moment when the subject leader actually realised that what was happening in the subject was down to her leadership (or lack of it as it turned out!). In almost every school the HTs have decided to stay out of the Improvement Champion meeting with the aim of encouraging the staff to be proactive. This has resulted in the staff taking on more responsibility for any actions agreed as they were catalysts in the change process. It was a non-threatening process that provided valuable CPD. It also helped one school to become Ofsted ready by working on the Key Issues. The school was able to use examples of cross phase working, share targets from the Improvement Champion staff meeting and Senior Leaders were able to articulate how a review of the Math department had helped them to identify next steps. Overall leaders talk very positively about cluster work and appreciate the strengths it can bring.

- **On the staff of the process**

Staff speak highly of the peer review process. They appreciate the workshop being led by excellent practitioners and without senior staff present (HTs) as it enables free flowing dialogue and a genuine opportunity to steer change. The ICs report the agreed targets/action plan back to the HT straight after the meeting. It is also expected that any SMT at the meeting will do the same. They have enjoyed the collaboration and have realised that success or failure of an idea is down to their own involvement. Although initially worried about an impending review they found it to be, 'a mutual culture of support'. It was also an opportunity to showcase the school and to freshen practice as well as an opportunity for some colleagues to engage in school improvement dialogue cross-phase.

- **On school improvement/outcomes of peer review**

It provides a helpful way to identify improvements/links to the SDP as well as providing a method to evaluate new projects. This way it does not make extra work. Where a review confirms that hard work is showing benefit; there is the impetus to continue.

**What is your partnership going to do next based on the learning/impact of the Peer Review?**

**Continue with the planning day ensuring that the work of each reviewer is spread so that the reviews do not come at once.**

**Introduce a follow up meeting 8 weeks after a review. Currently the IC leaves the school with an action plan and this is discussed at future cluster meetings between the HTs. This is the only progress measure we have. HTs have requested an 8 week follow up meeting in school to ensure expected actions and progress are on track.**