

‘Beyond Outstanding’: the student voice inspires Shenley Brook End School



Overview

How do you move a school up and beyond an ‘Outstanding’ rating from Ofsted? Shenley Brook End School in Milton Keynes chose to work with EdisonLearning’s *Personalised Learning in Practice* (PLiP) programme as a key part of its ambitious strategy.

“The inspectors told us that the depth of the debate about improving learning and the way it is articulated here is exceptional. EdisonLearning’s work with us has played a significant part in this achievement.”

– Chris Holmwood, Senior Deputy Headteacher, Shenley Brook End School

Founded in 1997, Shenley Brook End School is located on the western edge of Milton Keynes with a mainly white British student roll but above average proportion of students from minority groups. Growing rapidly from 120 students and eight full-time staff to its current roll of around 1500, the school has simultaneously maintained high standards. Such rapid growth is not uncommon in Milton Keynes, one of the fastest-growing towns in Britain, with the highest proportion of under-fifteens in Western Europe. Rapid growth inevitably creates its own pressures, but as Deputy

Key points in this case study

This case study looks at how Shenley Brook End have developed a response to the challenges of Personalised Learning by working with EdisonLearning, and covers:

- Moving up from a ‘plateau’ of high achievement
- Incorporating preparation for Personalised Learning into a school improvement plan
- Energising a school leadership team to take risks
- Creating a framework in which students and staff can agree a joint approach to teaching and learning
- Developing a common language of learning

Headteacher Chris Holmwood explains, Shenley Brook End had established itself as the highest performing school in the borough, regularly scoring over 80-90% 5 A*-C at GCSE. In fact, at the time of its 2006 Ofsted, in which it was rated ‘Outstanding’, the school had nearly trebled in size over the previous five years. For Holmwood and his colleagues, the inspection was welcome confirmation of the progress they had made, but something more as well: “We had already decided on a SIP (School Improvement Plan) for the next three years and moved our thinking forward before the 2006 inspection,

and so the timing was very fortunate: we found that Ofsted's rating actually supported our assessment of ourselves, and gave us further impetus to push on."

"We felt we were an outstanding school but we also knew there was more we could do to promote independent learning. The Ofsted felt like the validation of nine years' hard work building up the school, and the report gave us a mandate – we felt – to focus with much more clarity and vigour on the teaching and learning."

Chris points out that one of the factors contributing to the school's success up to 2006 was the advantage of starting with a blank sheet, as a new school. "We never felt there was a tension between sustaining and growing. The management style of the school changed to accommodate the growth, with a lot more devolution of responsibility from the Head to the growing leadership group. The school's founding Head left in 2007, and she did a very good job of establishing leadership roles, leaving her free to lead the financial and logistical aspects of the building programme. We also had the ability to attract staff who knew what they were coming to, and that this was a school where things were changing over a period of time. We were also able to attract a lot of NQTs and train them in our own way."

Part of the school's planning for growth was a focus on quality

induction, with attention to creating very good systems to support teachers in the classroom. "But as the head used to say, there's no blueprint for this. Keeping an openness to discussion and change was a challenging part of the journey".

Defining a new SIP

Wide-ranging consultation was therefore a key part of the process of creating a new School Improvement Plan. "We'd talked about personalised learning and the nine gateways through which a school could arrive at a genuinely personalised approach. We brainstormed how we could implement them in our school at leadership level and then with the whole staff, comparing the two sets of results." Having completed this stage of the process, Chris set about drawing together a three year plan with a focus on: developing successful independent learners; becoming more flexible to meet individual needs; developing student voice; restructuring the curriculum; introducing learning to learn; and appointing learning mentors.

"Originally, our approach had been much more traditional: our curriculum was purely GCSE-based. We'd developed from there by starting to diversify, introducing more vocational courses but we felt we needed to do more of this."

It was at this point that a dialogue with EdisonLearning began. "At this stage I didn't know whether we

needed or wanted to work with an external partner, but we were great believers in the mantra that 'you don't know what you don't know' and we wanted to keep focused on the big picture. Particularly we thought we could benefit because back then personalised learning was a pretty new idea. We thought we'd benefit from seeing how it was being developed in other schools."

Chris Holmwood is forthright enough to point out another reason for involving an external partner. "There was some tension at leadership group level about how creative we could and should be in the next phase of the school's development. The previous head's style was successful because it was rigorous and clear, but we were at a point where we knew we wanted to evolve in order to move beyond our current model, even though it was successful. We were asking: had we plateaued? What's next?"

Having a third party involved helped channel the tension about introducing a new teaching and learning plan, says Chris: "When I showed EdisonLearning our mission statement, they said it looked like the product of an argument – an insightful comment that immediately made me think they would be worth working with." In keeping with the school's approach up to that point, the mission statement tried to balance innovation and tradition, but there was the sense among the staff that a new approach was needed for the

next stage. At the same time, there was trepidation about deviating from a successful formula. “I called it creative friction, and I think perhaps it’s one of the hallmarks of a successful school. It’s good to thrash out different ideas before committing and moving forward together.”

“A telling phrase in the informal feedback provided by HMI resonated with us. They said: ‘It’s time to lift the lid off this place.’ We were being given some advice about loosening up, being more creative, taking a risk. But how do you lift the lid without opening Pandora’s Box?”

The three-year exercise of researching, consulting and agreeing a new SIP required honesty, but was also characterised by fear, says Chris: “Fear of falling results, of getting it wrong, of deteriorating behaviour, and of falling off the plateau. To get over this, we decided there were two things we needed to concentrate on: changing the relationship between teacher and student, and establishing a common language of learning. It was in these two areas that we felt EdisonLearning offered exactly what we were looking for. But is it harder to go from good to outstanding than to move from unsatisfactory to satisfactory? There’s a school of thought that says incremental shift at the top is harder to bring about, and that’s one of the reasons why outside help, with an objective viewpoint and reflection informed by wider

experience was useful to us. Very few school leaders have an objective relationship that’s external to the school but supportive, where there can be that discussion and reflection.”

Practical Personalised Learning

The *Personalised Learning in Practice* (PLiP) programme provides a practical framework for introducing personalised learning into schools, with activities that guide staff and students through the process of agreeing and defining the common ground in a shared approach to teaching and learning.

As the first stage in the PLiP project at Shenley Brook End, the team worked with students in a series of exercises designed to help them define how they like to learn, what helped them learn, and what stopped them from learning well. “At the same time I was working with staff on some of the reflective activities provided by EdisonLearning, asking the staff to think about priorities of aspects of Personalised Learning, and gradually raising awareness.” The most valuable outcome of this exercise was the empowerment of the school council to become an advocate for quality teaching and learning, according to Chris. “It moved from being about toilets, pizzas and lockers to being about the quality of classroom provision.”

As for the awareness sessions to prepare staff for the consultation

with students, Chris found that reaction was “generally very positive: we were coming off the back of a very successful Ofsted and people were welcoming the opportunity for drive on for further improvement. The sessions were very effectively managed so they went well. There were some misgivings at times during this stage from one or two individuals, but the general reaction was overwhelmingly positive.” In part, the confidence and appetite for the PLiP project was a reflection of the positive culture built up at the school over the years.

The student presentation to the staff on teaching and learning is a key part of the PLiP process. The EdisonLearning team works with each school so that the exercise is carried out effectively and tailored in a way the school feels comfortable with. “We decided the worst thing we could do is have the students talk at the teachers, because that’s what the students didn’t like if the staff did it in lessons. The students wanted to deliver the presentation in a way that was lively so that staff could see the kind of learning the students themselves liked best. So they had a different member of the school council at each table, and the seating plan mixed up staff from different subjects.” In the session the students explained how they reacted in different classroom scenarios identified earlier in the process as being conducive or obstructive to learning, and asked the staff to

record their responses in each scenario, collating and comparing the two sets of results from staff and students.

“The session was a huge step forward for us, helping us to focus strongly on the student voice. It moved the students forward a lot too, because they were now thinking much more about their learning, and we felt this was a step on the road to promoting the kind of teaching that would produce more opportunities for independent learning.”

By now, both staff and student enthusiasm for the PLiP process was high: “People were enjoying the projects that they had started with EdisonLearning, and that meant students and staff were much happier to collaborate. They could see that this model of working had a lot to offer.” Chris describes a PLiP exercise called *Eureka*, aimed at helping staff capture when the penny drops in a lesson. “The thinking is that learning is all about those moments when there’s a sudden leap forward in a student’s understanding, so let’s look at those moments and think about how they work, and what we can do to create more of them. How do they come about, and how do we know they’ve happened?” Students and staff recorded *Eureka* moments in a series of lessons across all subjects. “There were some similarities across the board, and some subject-specific differences.

The important thing is that we all started talking about these things, staff and students – we were developing a common language of learning.”

Outcomes from the completed PLiP project included the decision to bring Learning to Learn lessons into the curriculum for years 7 and 8. “We also introduced the new KS3 curriculum with much more cross-curricular activity, which links well with the learning-to-learn skills. There’s now more of the active, engaging, less didactic learning that promotes reflection, in which students become much more aware of their strengths as learners. This is the kind of culture we were trying to move towards back in 2006.”

“Another outcome was that we worked hard on this common language of learning. We used the phrase ASK: Attitude, Skills and Knowledge. This seemed to me to sum up our work with PLiP and a way of pulling it together. Each subject team worked with an EdisonLearning adviser to define a list of attitudes they would most like from their students, the skills that would be most required for them to be successful learners, and the knowledge that would be the priority for the students. Finally all the ASK leaders agreed on a single set of broad definitions that would apply across the curriculum. We did two things as a result. First, we changed the school reports so that in the advice given there would be

three targets – one each for attitude, skill and knowledge. Then we started using the PLiP software to help the students track and reflect on how they were progressing in these areas.” Again the comparison between student and staff evaluation was an important contributor to the successful implementation: “A student might say my attitude was excellent, but the teacher might disagree and you can collate those two scores and then facilitate a conversation and reflection from that disparity.”

The 2009 Ofsted inspection, with its overall Outstanding rating (with the previous ‘Good’ for Teaching and Learning now raised to ‘Outstanding’), was the immediate outcome Chris and the school were looking for, but is by no means the end of the road. “It’s an endlessly evolving thing: we are continually refining our approach. We are mindful of Ofsted of course, but an Outstanding rating is not an end in itself: it’s a by-product of what we are doing and we have to continue moving forward. What we are looking for now is what’s beyond outstanding.”



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