

A new model for Special Schools: holistic support for children's development



Overview

Essex Local Authority's new model for Special Schools outlined an adventurous programme. To meet the challenge, six schools in Essex are working with EdisonLearning in a network for accelerated progress through an intensive exchange of ideas. A specially-adapted school improvement programme is now being implemented by the network.

“We feel much more optimistic and well-prepared, having worked with EdisonLearning. We've been able to grasp the initiative as a school through this relationship, and push ahead to specialist school status. The work we are doing is securing our own future, and improving the future of our children.”

– Sandra Winter, Headteacher, Oak View Special School, Loughton

In some respects, Special Schools are in the vanguard of the drive for a better education system. Because they need to tackle every aspect of a child's development, both inside and outside school, they have to take a more all-embracing approach to education than most mainstream schools currently do. The holistic view that is the cornerstone of EdisonLearning's school improvement work therefore suits Special Schools particularly well. 'The Special School approach is itself a much more holistic one, working with the child's complete development,' says Sandra Winter, Headteacher of Oak View Special

Key points in this case study

This case study looks at the particular challenges facing Special Schools, and how a collaborative network in Essex is helping six Special Schools develop a new, more effective approach.

- Meeting the extra demands faced by new model Special Schools
- Working in a formalised network with similar schools
- Structuring and organising for rapid progress
- Developing teaching and learning in a Special School context
- Implementing a key-skills curriculum as a key component in the drive for improvement

School. 'There is more of an emphasis on agencies working together and it's become much more focused on what families and children need.'

Some of the more adventurous and effective schools in the mainstream are taking steps down the same route and learning the benefits, but for Special Schools the clear necessity to engage closely with the wider environment influencing a child's development led to a specific approach, in response to the Education for All green paper. 'The green paper contained a lot of ideas that steered us the way we

wanted to go,' says Steve Horsted, Headteacher of Pioneer School. 'Multi-agency working, developing a key-skills approach, becoming an integral part of the community – these were all important factors. A pathfinder group of headteachers and LA officers worked up a new model for providing for children with the most complex needs. The document became the foundation for how they wanted Special Schools to go.'

“Part of the performance criteria for a new model Special School is the idea of Key Working. This has an impact in many different areas, often outside the school itself. It may be something in the wider sense of education that's very important to the family, such as the child being able to eat out with the family without behaving disruptively. The whole approach is much more child-centred and family-centred than the individual education plan that a school would normally produce,” Sandra Winter explains.

Key Working makes a fundamental difference, according to Steve Horsted, with its formalisation of multi-agency contact and co-ordination in order to work with all the available levers in a child's environment. It's also a very demanding strategy to implement.

'As a Key Worker, an individual member of staff is linked to several families and acts as an advocate for them,' says Sandra. 'The Unified Plan is a plan for the individual

child put together by all the agencies working with the child, and the Key Worker's role is to liaise with the parents and facilitate their contribution to the plan. This involves a varying amount of outreach – sometimes happening in after-school hours and at weekends, and in other instances being worked into the school day. But going out to the family home involves stepping outside the conventions that govern behaviour in school, and this is just one aspect of the new model that places extra demands on the school.'

It was the search for help in meeting the requirements of the new model that led Special Schools to seek a relationship with EdisonLearning in 2007. 'Oak View is a small school with only 62 pupils, and a high gearing of very specialised staff. There's not much money left out of the budget to buy in the services of a body like EdisonLearning, but we felt it was worth it if we were really going to turn the school round, because there isn't access to that quality of assistance anywhere else. I do think that Special Schools have been left out on a limb a bit.'

'Changes in the LA's senior management team and special needs section led us to seek extra help, since it became clear that the level of support we needed was not going to be available,' says Steve Horsted. Pioneer School was the first new model Special School for children with complex and severe learning difficulties, and had

created a lot of interest from schools in other parts of the country. Steve felt anxious about living up to expectations: 'We knew that despite the label *new model* we weren't there yet, and we needed to go at a more rapid pace of development. We knew the advisers at EdisonLearning who were specialists in our field, and we were sure that EdisonLearning could provide the kind of assistance we were looking for in 2005. So we spoke to governors about working with an external partner, and this led us to sign up, together with one other school, for a three-year support package. It was understood from the start that it would be a two-way relationship in this pilot phase of the project, and that EdisonLearning would use their experience with us to develop a package of support and materials that they could subsequently offer to other similar schools. This specially-adapted programme has now become the basis of the work with all six schools in the network from 2007.'

Structuring for progress

The early stages of the pilot project involved Pioneer and Columbus School & College. The aim was to develop a school improvement package for Special Schools with structures and systems that would help staff deal more easily with the demands of the new model, as Steve explains: 'We had a clear vision of what we wanted to put in place, and EdisonLearning helped us with organising ourselves in learning teams that gave us the

management structure to support the developments we wanted to make. Once those were in place and working well, we worked on the other main priorities with their input on teaching and learning, and collecting and using pupil data to record pupil progress and feed that back into teaching.'

Children in Special Schools are generally identified at an early age with very low cognitive abilities, or severe and multiple learning difficulties. Many are in very poor health, some are wheelchair bound: 'They have serious physical and medical needs too. Some do not speak, and some have conditions such as autism. All this adds up to extremely specialised requirements,' says Steve.

"But certain principles of teaching and learning are universally applicable – as much to our children as to others. We looked at the different frameworks for identifying the component parts of a good lesson, and we assembled this in a way that is usable for us, focusing on five key areas. We produced a set of very specific documents describing good practice for the kinds of children we work with. We fed into this all the research evidence on teamwork in the classroom, which EdisonLearning pulled together for us – something we just don't have time to do ourselves."

Once the pilot project had produced and tested a specialised adaptation of EdisonLearning's

school improvement programme, other schools in Essex joined in the initiative, working in a network organised by EdisonLearning to accelerate their progress through constant exchange of information and expertise transfer.

Sandra Winter, headteacher at one of the second-phase schools, describes what happened next: 'We came in at this stage with four other schools, and EdisonLearning assessed each of the four, taking the criteria for the new model as a starting point. They had done a lot of work with the pilot schools by the time we joined, developing the sort of materials and management tools the schools needed to support them in their work. We found things like the handbooks for improving teaching and learning, and using data for feeding into pupil progress really useful. These are the sort of things every school has to have, but you can spend months trying to produce your own version. To have something already developed that you can just take and customise is really useful – it saves so much time.'

'The relationship is working very well, particularly in the areas of supporting leadership and management with systems that can make things more effective and efficient. Systems really help: my school development plan was done in a fraction of the time it would normally take, simply because there was a bank of statements we could take and add

to where necessary. Not that you have to take the template and use it as is, but it gives you a great starting point. It's almost like having another senior manager on hand, who can go away and work on a project for you.'

'By the end of one year we had very effective SEF systems set up, a very tight school development plan, and a vision for the school in three years' time. There are systems for analysing pupil performance data that we didn't have before, and all the staff are involved in that process, rather than it being just something the management team did. We have different layers of staff looking at different aspects of the performance data. Each teacher has a personal improvement plan for CPD, with teacher partnerships set up with another member of staff for working on their development. Quite a lot of progress for one year!'

Networking with colleagues

Working closely with the other schools in the network has been a big plus, too: 'The heads of these six schools were already part of a corporate learning network, but within that network we've never really had the opportunities facilitated to share good practice. But that is what's happening much more now through the partnership with EdisonLearning.'

Sandra outlines how the collaborative framework helps, taking the example of key

working: 'A couple of schools did a presentation on how key working runs in their schools, and that was followed by a couple of other schools responding to describe how far they had got with it. Then each school put its own action plan together to take it forward. Part of the work has been to share between the schools the protocol that define the boundaries of the key working relationship with parents. One of the schools had been key working for four years, while ours was only just starting, so that exchange of experience was very useful.'

"It means we don't have to spend a lot of time reinventing the wheel – which is what was happening before, with each of the Special Schools facing the same issues, but dealing with them separately. This new framework has saved us a lot of time because some schools are further down the road with some issues than others. And it's definitely a two-way process, with each school offering something as well as taking something from the collaboration."

Saving time and accelerating the rate of progress is a major benefit, Steve Horsted agrees: 'Working this way has got us rapidly to a point we wouldn't have reached without that support. There's still work to do, and areas that EdisonLearning can help us with, but as Ofsted noted: "The strategic vision and drive for the school's continued development is outstanding and its

capacity for further improvement is good." That drive they refer to has always been there in the school – but the difference is that the capacity to realise our aims much more quickly has been provided by our work with EdisonLearning.'

Ian Boatman, Headteacher at The Edith Borthwick School, another of those to join in the second phase, calls the work the school did with EdisonLearning 'tight, cohesive and completely focused on the school's needs. We came into this because we sensed as a school that we were going round in ever-decreasing circles without really hitting the mark. In real terms we were probably going backwards, because we weren't doing the right things at the right time. Working with EdisonLearning has given the school a roadmap and staff now have a very comprehensive and appropriate set of tools that we wouldn't have been able to put together ourselves.'

Having identified the curriculum as a key area, Edith Borthwick School introduced a key skills curriculum based on EdisonLearning's package, which has now been implemented throughout the school. 'What EdisonLearning has quite cleverly done is produce a set of constructs and skills to support teaching and learning, and that served as a jumping off point for us to add our own material. It's not prescriptive: we worried that the school could lose its identity, but that has not turned out to be the case. It's

provided us with skills and philosophies, and we've tailored it to suit our own purposes. We have seen some very positive and powerful outcomes from our work with the company, and the new curriculum has played a big part in that.'

After their first year's work with EdisonLearning, Oak View was taken out of its 'Cause for concern' category, and in Spring 2009, Ofsted found it 'a good school that has made significant improvement since the last inspection,' noting that 'pupils' personal development is good, and parents and pupils alike feel that "this is a lovely school" where every child is valued and nurtured. Pupils are "proud to be here" and say they are "like one big happy family" who help each other.'

'We feel much more optimistic and well-prepared now,' says Sandra. 'We've grasped the initiative, through this relationship, to push ahead to specialist school status. The work we are doing is securing the future of the school, and improving the future of our children.'



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