

Improving progress at KS4, focusing on meeting the needs of disadvantaged students.

Overview

Progress of disadvantaged pupils at KS4 in the East Riding of Yorkshire has been identified as a system weakness, with significant numbers not making expected progress or not making progress relative to their non-disadvantaged counterparts. This project aimed to improve the capacity of school leaders, and implement a structured programme to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in local secondary schools. The programme supported the implementation of a proven and successful methodology for identification and intervention with disadvantaged pupils and subject specific support through an established and effective system leader network.

The project aimed to ensure that schools are better equipped to identify barriers to achievement for disadvantaged students and put in place a targeted menu of intervention, based on the needs of the individual cohorts. Focus was placed on improving senior leaders' capacity to identify and scrutinise the progress of disadvantaged students, improving middle leaders' capacity to develop appropriate menus of intervention for these pupils, improving classroom teachers' understanding of the needs of pupils and improving governors' ability to hold to account senior leaders for the progress of disadvantaged students. Attendance was one of the key determinants of success for disadvantaged pupils, therefore, a specific aim of this project was improving attendance for those students.

The expected outcomes for the programme were an improvement in attendance for disadvantaged pupils, an improvement in the progress made by disadvantaged students in the targeted schools and a narrowing of the gap in target schools between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

Good practice to share with others interested in running school improvement projects to ensure projects deliver the intended outcome.

The main thing that helped to deliver the project successfully was flexibility to adapt the key principles underlying the intervention to the context of the different schools within the project. The schools were widely variable in size and location. This meant that the initial plan needed to be able to flex in order to be successful within the wide variety of contexts. We also needed to win over the leadership teams in the school, otherwise there was a real danger that a number of the schools would feel that they were being done to rather than partners in the project.

A number of the schools were working under a range of external pressures that meant their bandwidth to accommodate another intervention was limited. One way we found successful in overcoming this, was to adapt our action planning process and work alongside the designated SLT link to joint plan.

This sense of involvement in the process was really important for these schools. We also had a central methodology in the delivery that we found it was really important to keep returning to. Each strand of disadvantaged student experience linked back to it and we always brought the conversation back to the central point - how does this link to the tiers structure?

What the project may do differently in the future.

We would look for a stronger element of external QA at more points in the process. The QA element was useful in identifying where schools needed to work on key parts of their delivery - the middle leader understanding of key elements of the planning process for example. This spotlight from an external agency was helpful at a number of points and we will seek to build this in at an earlier point in future projects; we would also involve project schools in the initial planning process.

As mentioned above, getting enthusiastic buy in from schools was not easy and making them feel involved was crucial to making headway in the project; we would look to not add a large amount of additional testing and administration for the schools as the amount it added to workload was not worth the results it potentially gave us.

We would also look to provide a wider variety of school improvement strategies - we were focused too heavily initially on SLE-led delivery and this was not always appropriate, as externally provided CPD sometimes was more useful for members of staff in the project schools.

Sustainability measures taken by the project to ensure improvements are sustained beyond the funding period.

We have provided additional support for schools moving forward to pay for the role of PP Champions in schools. This role has proven to be a crucial one in helping schools to build relationships with the students and families of disadvantaged pupils. Each of the schools within the project have now got a sustainable role of PP champion that will run for at least another academic year - providing consistency in the level of support that each school is able to offer to the disadvantaged students on roll.

Our project has always been predominantly training and support based - this means that the existing leadership team in each school understands the tiered process that underpins the project and is able to hold staff accountable through these measures. We trained middle leaders also and they have a good idea how to plan and run intervention sessions that are aimed at the needs of PP cohorts. Governor training was also a key part of the project and through this, governors are able to hold school leadership to account for the performance of disadvantaged students in a much more focused manner than was the case previously.

We have also worked closely with the Local Authority in the monitoring of the project and this has given them a clear sense of how the project and strategy

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should work. As a number of the project schools are maintained schools, they will have the capacity to continue elements of the project with these schools moving forward.

Finally, it is worth noting that the systemic improvement that will derive from a sustained focus on the tiered approach will result in improvements over time rather than in the short term.