

# Learning Journey: Abbs Cross School and Arts College

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## Encouraging and Managing Change

Abbs Cross School is an 11–16 co-educational comprehensive school of 840 pupils on the outer edge of East London. Many of its buildings are typical of the late 1950s. Perhaps a time traveller from the 1950s might at first glance see little that's different from the past. Of course, the reality is far from that. "The trouble is," says head teacher Glenn Mayoh, "we suffer from an agricultural-age organisation of the school year, housed in industrial-age buildings while living in an information age. If we are to enable young people to cope and succeed in a globalised economy, we need to begin to do

things differently. We need to take a broader view of our role in creating successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens." Glenn acknowledges that although the focus on performance at end of each key stage is "desperately important" it can stifle "creativity and risk-taking." For Abbs Cross School, therefore, the challenge is to innovate appropriately while at the same time succeeding within the accountability framework.

The school is a specialist Arts College and has made use of the additional funding to improve its arts facilities, alongside the development of

ICT resources to equip pupils with essential ICT skills. Funding and facilities are important but a key focus is to embed the value of the arts throughout the curriculum – values that include creativity, imagination, empathy, autonomous decision-making, critical thinking, team-working, expression, confidence-building and communication. It's no easy thing to achieve this in departmental subject areas, and in ways that provide students with challenge and excitement.

## Practical Steps towards Change

Abbs Cross has focused on teaching & learning methods and the use of time, to create an annual Arts Week. In this, the timetable is suspended and a different range of teaching methods is employed. Subject departments take the opportunity to offer students stimulating topic-based tasks centred on the subject but presented through drama, role-play, music and so on. In science, for example, students gathered forensic evidence at the scene of a 'crime' while teachers acted in role. It was, says Glenn, "A sensational instance of teaching and learning." The skills and competences learned through such activities as performing songs in a foreign language (the 'Abbsvision Song Contest') or complex maths challenges ( 'Die

Hard with a Pair of Compasses') have begun to be transferred to whole curriculum. Students' confidence has grown – as has their willingness and ability to participate, whether it's a discussion in English or a role-play exercise in humanities. Working within the arts is helping to develop a greater awareness and understanding of others, with a positive effect on behaviour and school citizenship too.

'Student Voice' has become a major driving force in the school. The aim of the Student Voice programme is to encourage students to become actively involved in their own learning decisions; centred on questions of how, what, when, with whom, and what type of environment. To support the practical implementation of this, the programme was developed in partnership with students, staff and the University of East London. For example, 90 students visited and worked with the university to learn how to conduct research, to gather opinion, to analyse and synthesise data, and to conclude and recommend action. Students have conducted whole-school questionnaires and research on topics that include: what makes a good learning environment and what makes a good lesson. These aims and this practical work have translated into a well-developed Student Voice agenda that comprises:

- ▶ Pupil Progress and Development Voice – Red Voice.
- ▶ Environmental Voice – Green Voice.
- ▶ Teaching and Learning Voice – Blue Voice

Respectively, each voice provides a clear and simple focus on behaviour, learning environments and lessons.

The Teaching and Learning Voice, for example, has been co-constructed between teachers and students. One result of this is an invitation for students to work with the QCA on the design of teaching and learning materials. Guided by the Green Voice, classrooms were recently refurbished and, as a small but significant example of this, student representatives ensured that each classroom had a clock to enable pupils to manage time. "We have taken some risks with this," says Glenn, "but the rewards have been considerable and student voice is beginning to transform our school significantly."

### **Building Capacity**

The process of change does indeed require some risk. Abbs School is a foundation school, which gives it a degree of freedom and control. Because of this, the school was in the position to sell some of its land to fund the building of a sports and leisure centre. It was a bold decision that caused some local controversy. Today though, the centre is a focal point for the whole community with over one thousand members.

Managing such a complex venture to a successful conclusion requires a number of things to be in place. As Glenn points out, "Building the capacity of the leadership team is essential. Having good routines and processes in place enables day-to-day operations to operate smoothly and enables staff to manage their own areas. All this frees capacity for schools to manage change."

So how does Glenn view the process of encouraging and managing change?



"I wouldn't want us to sound conceited in all of this," says Glenn. "We have got some things wrong and there's a lot we still want to do. The new secondary curriculum offers a lot of potential but the size and geography of the school puts constraints on curriculum design, and we're just getting to grips with the implications of the 14–19 curriculum reforms for an 11–16 school. Partnership will be an important part of the future and our partnership with other local schools, the University of East London and 14–19 providers is promising. Overall, I'm optimistic that our arts specialism and our focus on student voice enable us to provide teaching and learning that's appropriate for the 21st century."

To find out more, visit the Abbs Cross website at [www.abbscross.havering.sch.uk](http://www.abbscross.havering.sch.uk)

# Learning Journey: Grange Primary School

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## Encouraging and Managing Change

Situated in Long Eaton, Derbyshire, Grange Primary is a two-form entry school of 420, drawing its pupils from a mixed socio-economic urban background. Head teacher Richard Gerver joined in 2001 at a difficult time for the school. Pupil attainment was low and the school was causing the local authority serious concern. The school had been subject to many initiatives and,

as Richard comments, “Teachers were tired of being told what to do with little regard to the needs and nature of their pupils.”

## Let’s talk about it! The role of dialogue in managing change

It was clear that if the school was to succeed, it needed to do something to engage all its members in the process of transformation. “We

didn’t have a fixed agenda for change, or any kind of predetermined plan,” says Richard.

“Instead we went back to first principles and asked ourselves questions like: ‘What kind of world are we preparing children for?’”

What evolved over the subsequent months was a process of research and dialogue that involved the active participation of teachers and parents. Richard, for example, spent some time outside

of education researching the likely consequences of economic change in the 21st century. Regular meetings brought teachers and parents together to debate such things as: the changing nature of family structures, the likelihood of today's children having many different jobs, the complexity and speed of modern communication, the earlier physical maturity of children, and the intense commercial environment in which children grow up.

But in recognising the demands of modern life, there was also recognition that modern life could not be rejected. As Richard notes, "We also asked ourselves, 'How can we make education matter to our pupils?' Part of our answer was to embrace and employ the same technologies and techniques used by advertising and commerce. In a way we wanted to rebrand and remarket learning to our youngsters."

The process of dialogue led Grange Primary to two major strands for development:

1. **Purpose.** To develop in each pupil: flexibility, creativity, independence, team working, self-confidence and a well-developed sense of their individuality and personal capabilities.
2. **Making It Matter.** To make learning as engaging, as exciting and as compelling as the world is to pupils.

A subsequent audit showed that little in the curriculum experience matched these strands. In deciding what to do in response to this, the process of dialogue was again central. Key questions at this stage of debate included:

'What do we want our pupils to look like when they leave us?' And, 'What are we doing that seems to be taking away children's natural

instincts to learn?' From these questions, the school evolved a series of *Learning Profile Policies* that then translated into curriculum practices. In a bold move, the school decided it needed to suspend the national strategies, QCA schemes of work, the national curriculum and the focus on KS2 SATs. "We wanted to build a foundation of learning to learn and learning to live but," as Richard comments, "the last thing we wanted to do was impose yet another new system and top-down initiative."

### **Building a curriculum, building a community**

Once again, research and dialogue informed decisions. In this case, to develop the principles of early years learning through the entire school and build realistic learning experiences. The result was a curriculum that has at its core, four strands: Communication, Enterprise, Culture, and Wellbeing.

The most challenging step for the school was to reinvent the delivery mechanisms, the timetable and most importantly the reorganisation of a curriculum that was not to be punctuated by subject, but by skills and competences.

Positioned between Nottingham and Derby, Long Eaton has a strong community identity. Could the school harness this in anyway? Could the school build on this strong sense of belonging and raise aspirations? The answer seemed to be 'Yes' and led to the creation of Grangeton.

Grangeton is the school's own town run by pupils. It's headed by an elected council and town Mayor. It has its own newspaper, library, museum, craft

shop, healthy-eating shops, a language cafe (only French spoken here) and a television and radio station. Recently, Grangeton has launched its own online trading channel, Grangeton Aces. With practical support and training from local businesses, the local community and parents, Grangeton quickly became embedded in the life of the school and in teaching and learning experiences. Children have developed a strong sense of ownership for Grangeton and participate enthusiastically and eagerly. Grangeton has brought real experiences into the curriculum and raised aspiration and ambition significantly. There's been a positive impact on measurable outcomes too. For example, within a year of its inception, KS2 SATs results had improved by up to 30 percentage points.

### **Sticking to principles**

The process of change at Grange Primary School has been one based on research, dialogue and communication. As Richard comments, "I wish I could claim that this was all part of a plan but it was never a question of presenting a *fait accompli*. Change has been by consent, it's always been within our comfort zones and as a result it's never felt radical. Having developed our vision, we've stuck to our principles and it's these that have driven our decisions."

To find out more, visit the Grange Primary School website at

[www.grange.derbyshire.sch.uk](http://www.grange.derbyshire.sch.uk)