SCHOOLS OF TOMORROW – RE-DEFINING OUTSTANDING

Community engagement changes schools for the better. Schools can help to change communities for the better. Schools and communities working together can radically transform the futures of young people.

It was these three core beliefs that brought a group of school leaders around the country together to establish Schools of Tomorrow (SoTo) as a research, development and support network for schools and school leaders who wanted to look beyond the narrow, restricted confines of much of the current education agenda.

Schools of Tomorrow was formally launched at the RSA in London in October 2013 as a community interest company owned by its members, who are all schools or school leaders. Membership is open to any school that shares that vision and wants to engage in doing something to turn it into reality in their context and situation.

Through the work undertaken by member schools, supported by input and research from leading thinkers, the work of the group crystallised into a model of four inter-locking quadrants for understanding the outstanding school of tomorrow, captured in this image.

Understanding of the implications of the four quadrant model has been developed since 2013 through a series of working groups, events, and publications which are available for free download from the website www.schoolsoftomorrow.org.

The next stage of development involves working through a different understanding of sustainable change and new model for school improvement and leadership to support that. The group believe, with the support of a growing body of evidence, that these insights hold the key to effecting long-term improvement in educational outcomes for our country.

So, working closely with SSAT and with ASCL, Schools of Tomorrow will launch in 2016 the Schools of Tomorrow Fellowship through which member schools commit to an ongoing and rigorous partnership, peer review and stakeholder evaluation of their progress in effecting change. The Fellowship model builds on the work of 12 Trailblazer schools who are currently refining the underpinning processes and trialling them in day-to-day practice.

In the two case studies which follow, the heads of two Trailblazer schools describe how they have been using the Schools of Tomorrow Framework to effect real long-term improvement in their schools aligned to a broader vision of school purpose.

If you would like to know more about Schools of Tomorrow membership or the new Fellowship, email Malcolm Groves - malcolm@schoolsoftomorrow.org.

Using the SoTo framework in school improvement – two case studies

Case Study 1 – Bedford Nursery School Federation

1.   Introduction

Isabel Davis is Executive Head Teacher of the Bedford Nursery Federation, a federation of three nursery schools, of which she has led the formation, and is also Chief Executive of the Peter Pan Teaching School Alliance.

Isabel first became involved in Schools of Tomorrow in February 2014 as a member of the Well-Being Working Group. Well-being was a strategic priority at the time for the emerging Bedford Federation of Nursery Schools. Whilst the focus on "highest levels of well-being" was the initial attraction of SoTo, she recognised in the four quadrants of the Framework what she considers '*to be the most important part of teaching and learning*'. Almost immediately she decided that she wanted to make practical use of the Framework, but '*I did not want it to be an add-on…….. another thing that staff were having to think about or another thing we were trialing for a year, but to make it part of something we were already doing*'.

2.   The Federation Learning Plan

For Isabel, it is always important to keep OFSTED in mind, so she decided to make the four quadrants of the SoTo Framework the four main areas of the Federation Learning Plan and to '*make the four OFSTED areas fit in with each one*'. In the Federation Learning Plan, the SoTo quadrants relate to the previous OFSTED criteria as follows (revised OFSTED headings are shown in brackets):

•   Highest levels of achievement relates to OFSTED's Attainment (Outcomes for children and learners)

• Highly effective preparation for adult and working life incorporates what OFSTED includes under Teaching. (Teaching, learning and assessment)

• Highest levels of Well-being incorporates what OSTED includes under Behavior and Safety (Personal development, behaviour and welfare)

• Highly effective Family and Community Engagement includes OFSTED's Leadership and Management criteria (effectiveness of leadership and management).

One of the main benefits of this approach is to incorporate into the strategic development of the Federation a much broader definition and shared understanding of what will achieve continuous improvement, an understanding which informs their planning to move '*beyond outstanding*' as defined by OFSTED.

3. Improving Performance through Staff Well-Being

Using the highest levels of well-being quadrant as an example, Isabel described how their starting point had been to consider well-being from a child's point of view. However, it quickly became apparent that the highest levels of well-being of staff should also be part of the approach. As a consequence, the Federation's appraisal system was '*adapted to make sure that well-being is one of the targets*'. Each member of staff sets a target about their personal well-being, which is then reviewed at the end of the year. Staff are expected to be able describe what they have done to '*ensure that they are even more engaged, have high levels of well-being, and low staff sickness*'. In Isabel's view, if the well-being of each member of staff is high, then they will achieve their other performance targets because '*they are feeling so good about themselves, about the school and about the children.*'

As this approach to appraisal has been introduced this year, what Isabel has found is that staff have been thinking about the well-being of other staff before their own and saying things like, '*I know if I do this for a member of staff it is going to make them feel better and then I will have an easier time as they are not going to be feeling so stressed'*. The caring and collaborative values of the Federation, and accepting personal responsibility both for oneself and for others have been extended by staff through a focus on well-being.

Isabel also observed that, *'Staff use the language of well-being and involvement, but they are also beginning to use the SoTo language as well.'* By using the language, they not only show understanding but also begin to apply the SoTo Framework in their discussions and to what they do. Isabel believes that by applying the four quadrants they are making '*deeper and deeper*' improvements to their performance so she knows '*we are going to out perform any criteria that OFSTED may give to us*'.

4.   Governors and the Framework

As the strategic plan has been structured using the Framework, the understanding and thinking of governors is developing with the same perspective.

Governors' Reports are written under the four headings which form the strategic priorities. These are then easily incorporated as up-dates to the SEF (Self Evaluation Form) for the Federation.

Since April 2015, the sub-committees of the Governing Body have also been structured around the four quadrants with terms of reference defined by each of the four quadrants.

5.   Self-Evaluation and the Framework

The four quadrants are also used as the starting point for all self-evaluation and to help the schools identify what needs doing to achieve greater improvement.

It is the practice across the Federation to evaluate all the time based on evidence from a wide range of sources, including classroom observations, data, take up of parental workshops and the long-term sustainability of the school.

The focus for the next year in all the nursery schools of the Federation is the Family and Community Engagement quadrant.

The recently adopted strapline for the Federation is "Every Child's Choice Counts". The next training day will explore what that means to the individual child, for the nursery school, and for families. Just as staff are expected to take responsibility for themselves and to make choices, so the same principle is being extended to children and their parents. Children are given choices but are then held accountable for the choices they make, expected to 'stick by them' and then reflect on the consequences and outcomes. For the coming year they are considering how that will be developed for parents as well.

6.   Insights from using the Framework

Perhaps the most priceless outcome from using the SoTo Framework that Isabel identifies is that '*People are happy and relaxed and can talk openly about their issues and about their problems and can disclose things if they need to*'. Isabel believes this would not be the case if they had just applied the OFSTED Framework.

Another example is that they now consider the community as part of the leadership resource available for the school. Next year they intend finding ways

in that families can contribute and shape where they go to next.

The focus on well-being has meant that they have moved a long way beyond considering behavior and safety. They recognize that it is essential to focus on how people talk and behave towards each other – adult to adult, adult to child, child to child. In Isabel's view, *'If that is right then behavior and safety will be really, really good because people are well in their skin'*.

As they have used the Framework, staff have also come to recognize the interconnections between the four quadrants, which can operate in different ways. One example is creating a number of different environments to achieve different outcomes. Consistent between them are environments that are welcoming; safe; encourage engagement and collaboration; give choice and support; and stimulate learning.

Another example is how using the Leuven scales for Well-being and Involvement has affected views of achievement. Comparing the well-being and involvement rating of each child on the Leuven scales with their scores of attainment has been found to provide '*a much more well-balanced view of achievement*' and has resulted in improvements in attainment.

7.   Creating a Life-long Learning Culture

The quadrant "Highly effective preparation for the future", Isabel describes as being '*really enlightening for staff*', as it made them consider what they are preparing children for and to think about how *'to make them confident in their approach to life skills, helping each other and playing an active part in their learning'*. Isabel believes that if they are trying to do that in their teaching, then everything else will follow. She aims to ensure that all children know how to take turns; know how to listen to each other in a conversation; are confident to say, *'I've done this before and I know how to do this, and now I want to know how to*

do this.' When they are able to do that they are able to take their own learning forward.

Teaching in the Federation is expected not just to be outstanding but ever-improving, so the children can also continue to improve. As a consequence, there is an emphasis on staff taking responsibility for their own learning, supported by a range of professional development opportunities, including peer-to peer coaching, continual staff training and shadowing each other across the Federation. All of which is underpinned by a focus on values and the expectation that lifelong learning applies to everyone.

8.   Conclusion

Isabel suggests that one reason why some schools can never get to outstanding is because the OFSTED criteria and framework is too narrow. Using the SoTo Framework is much fuller and richer and provides a basis for producing the evidence to show that the work of the school is 'truly outstanding.'

Becoming the head of the Federation has convinced Isabel that improvement will only come from all staff contributing their very best and constantly seeking to improve their performance to do their very best for every child. Professional development is the responsibility of each individual, with Isabel making sure that they are provided with the support and resources they require. In Isabel's own words:

> *"Everyday as a member of staff you have to think, 'Have I given these children the best possible chances to do their very, very best?' And if you can answer that question as, 'Yes', then you have done a good job.*
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> *For me as a leader, if I know that every child has made the best progress they can, then I am doing my job and are my staff are doing the best they*

can. If they are not, I take it as my responsibility to show them, to help them to be able to do that. So it is all inter-linked really."

Case Study 2 – Thomas Deacon Academy, Peterborough

1. Introduction

The Thomas Deacon Academy (TDA) in Peterborough opened in 2007 and was one of the first academies to be created. It is currently the largest, single, sponsored Academy in the country offering a very modern learning environment for students from the ages of 7 to 18 years old.

Julie Taylor took over as CEO and Principal in September 2013 just after the school was put into a 'Requires Improvement' category by Ofsted. Inheriting such a large school, Julie realised that using the four quadrants of the SoTo framework would enable her to drive through an agenda of school improvement in a way that did not create a narrow focus on GCSE outcomes. *"Although there was a clear task ahead to improve GCSE results, I felt it was important to acknowledge that school is not an end in itself but a preparation for future life.*" The SoTo quadrant gave staff a language to use outside of the Ofsted framework that allowed them to explore what they thought was important in order to equip students to make a success of their future.

2. The Academy Improvement Plan

Like Isabel, Julie used the four quadrants in conjunction with the four Ofsted headings. This allowed staff, students, parents and governors to articulate and develop a much clearer vision of what they valued about TDA and what kind of education they wanted for the children and young people. It encouraged a range the range of stakeholders to agree a set of values on which to base all decisions

and to develop a clear vision of what they wanted for themselves and for the wider school community.

As a result, the Academy Improvement Plan was highly ambitious and led to the need to totally reorganise the structure of the Academy.

3. Improving Performance through community engagement

Whilst understandably focusing on 'Highest Levels of Achievement' Julie wanted to develop what was, for her, a key missing component at TDA: highly effective family and community engagement. Julie's previous two headships had taught her the benefit of successful engagement with the wider community and as a graduate of the SSAT's Community Leadership programme, she knew that this aspect, crucially often overlooked by struggling schools, was a key component in school improvement. Julie approached a member of her Senior Leadership Team with the task of completely rethinking the way in which TDA engaged with families and the wider community. This not only included some very practical aspects like developing a successful Parents' Forum and working parties comprised of parents, students and teachers, but also building and maintaining a TDA international student programme. Additionally, establishing a 'STEM Scholarship Programme' also enabled TDA to engage effectively with higher education and business.

Julie has not only witnessed first hand the benefits of this for students but has also noted the improvement in TDA's reputation in the community. *"Local people did not feel that they were part of what was happening at TDA. By working more openly with the community and with parents, they understand better what we are trying to achieve for the children and young people. As a result, they criticise less and help more".*

TDA serves a very ethnically diverse community and the Board of Directors (Governors) is clear that this quadrant of the SoTo framework remains a high

priority if TDA is to continue to improve. Dr Richard Barnes, Chairman of the Board, believes that greater community engagement will bring greater success for TDA students and their families.

4. Whole School Reorganisation

At the end of Year 1 at Thomas Deacon Academy, it was clear to Julie that there needed to be a complete reorganisation of both the staffing structure and the way in which students were organised if standards were to improve. Reflecting on the quadrants "Highest levels of Wellbeing" and "Highly effective preparation for the future", Julie decided that within the Academy structures there needed to be clearer systems for supporting both academic achievement and student well-being. When Julie took over the Academy, she inherited a "college system" of 6 colleges within the Academy, each with its own College Leader who was responsible for pastoral welfare as well as achievement and progress for specific groups of subjects. Whilst the basic concept of a 'school within a school' as a means of pastoral support was sound academically the blurring of lines of accountability for standards and progress had seen Thomas Deacon Academy sitting below standards that are accepted as 'national average'.

Using the SoTo framework as the underpinning model, Julie redesigned the Academy staffing structure (both teaching and non-teaching staff) to enable a definite line to be drawn betwe3en accountability for curriculum and academic standards and pastoral support. At the heart of this, Julie placed her commitment to the well-being of students and staff, creating a structure and realignment of responsibilities to allow students to be supported well and to bring greater clarity to the roles and responsibilities of members of staff. "*There was an overwhelming sense of 'thank goodness' from staff, students and parents – bringing greater clarity to the organisational structure has led to a real belief in well being: if students are supported well, they will be able to achieve the best they can*".

5. Insights from using the framework

An unforeseen outcome of using the SoTo framework that Julie has noted is that, even at times of extreme pressure during the process of reorganisation, it has given senior leaders and staff a positive structure to use to talk about school improvement. "*Being in a 'Requires Improvement' category meant, at times, that staff felt forced to focus on a narrow set of data that did not either tell the whole story of education at TDA nor did it allow staff and students to develop what mattered to them*". Julie believes that the SoTo framework enabled staff and students not to lose sight of what was important. As a result of adhering to these principles, staff and students had the resilience to face Ofsted's re-inspection in July 2015 which resulted in a 'Good' judgement. This, coupled with another set of improved examination results in August 2015, is a clear example of the framework's success.

6. Conclusion

Julie recognises that this is only the beginning of the journey at TDA and that the SoTo framework will be critical not only in consolidating the work undertaken so far but also in developing a quality culture as the Academy continues to progress. The next challenge is to achieve a greater understanding of the power of the interconnections between the four quadrants, not only amongst governors and senior and middle leaders but also students and parents and the wider community. Developing even stronger links with our community is a clear priority for the forthcoming year.

"As the CEO and Principal at TDA, I am ambitious with a clear sense of purpose for the children and young people who attend our Academy but you have to have a balanced view that values the needs of both the individuals and the wider community".

The next stage of the journey promises to be challenging, exciting and hard work but above all, rewarding. Julie concludes: "*As teachers and adults working with young people, it is those great qualities of self-confidence, perseverance and openness to new ideas, a readiness to take the initiative and to innovate that will enable students at TDA to achieve both inside and outside the classroom and it is our responsibilities as adults to model those qualities to our students*".