

Raising the Game

If your aim is to improve standards from top to bottom, your best bet is probably to start in the middle, as **Alison Beisty** explains...



SCHOOL PROFILE
LOCATION:
OLDHAM
PUPILS:
750

I joined The Oldham Academy North in September 2011 – one year after it became an E-ACT sponsored academy. I'd been working at another school in the area for nine years before that, as head of English and then assistant headteacher. I was ready to stretch myself and looking for a new challenge, so being appointed assistant vice principal at TOAN, with a specific brief to 'improve the quality of teaching and learning', was an exciting prospect.

On arrival, I found a mixed picture – from outstanding practice and progress, to areas where teaching clearly needed to be brought up to the expected academy standard. Common practices and a TOAN house style were not evident, which I quickly realised was the main issue that I needed to address. Strong individuals with creativity and flair thrived in the academy environment, but those who perhaps needed more personalised, focused professional development were struggling to reach their full potential.

The language barrier

Around 90% of the 750 or so students at TOAN are British Bangladeshi. The rest come from a mix of ethnic backgrounds, including Pakistani, European and African, as well as other local Oldham pupils. The majority of our



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children speak a language other than English in their homes and whilst being bilingual has many advantages, it can present challenges, particularly when the pupils' understanding of the grammatical rules of their home language is not necessarily strong. Our students have good English speaking and writing skills but many have low reading ages and literacy is therefore a

key academy improvement priority. In the past, their EAL status was used as an excuse for their low attainment, especially in English. Happily, it's now clearly understood that students don't need to be sold short in this way. We've developed a variety of comprehensive literacy and reading programmes – we have six or seven targeting specific skills to raise literacy standards. It means that we are able to identify gaps in academic ability much more easily, identify talent and potential more quickly, and nurture it appropriately. Behaviour at TOAN is very good, but in September 2011, it



Edison's Quality Framework for Learning and Teaching, we provided teachers with a simple and sturdy structure (it takes up a single side of A4 paper) to enable them to think about lesson planning and delivery – increasing consistency, improving standards, and enabling really

constructive monitoring of progress. At the same time, Ian and Lee helped me to develop a 'Times and Teams' review structure and we now have a standardised, clear cycle of assessment and improvement, with all faculties understanding what needs to happen and by when.

It's been a fascinating journey so far. Tough at times, yes – but also incredibly rewarding. I've been most surprised, I think, by how interested the middle leadership team has been in the theory behind the changes we've been making; they have been not only open, but genuinely eager to embrace new ways of doing things. In March 2013, the Academy will move to brand new, state of the art premises, which is immensely exciting. We've achieved a lot so far, but there's plenty still to do and it's both satisfying and empowering for me to reflect that, as I continue to push for improvements in achievement, I'll be working with a team that is totally committed to pushing forward with me to deliver outstanding education.

was clear that accelerating improvements in teaching and learning had to be a priority.

I began with some whole-school training sessions, but I knew that working closely with middle leaders would have the most impact on overall teaching standards, more quickly than any other approach. It was important for them to be key partners in the school improvement process and feel involved in all aspects of strategic decision-making. So, from September to January, I worked on various ways to achieve this.

Sharing the journey

Being the lead member of staff responsible for rapidly improving the quality of teaching and learning across the whole school was an exciting yet scary prospect. The principal realised that I could become isolated in this role and so engaged education consultants EdisonLearning to support me and this aspect of TOAN's improvement work. As well as the solid framework, structures and systems Edison was able to offer us, the personal intervention of achievement advisers Ian and Lee was invaluable to me. I had people with whom I could share my thoughts and bounce around ideas. I never felt they were imposing their 'product' on me, or following the 'Edison formula'. Instead, they brought their considerable knowledge and experience to the table and used it in a responsive and flexible way. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they kept me sane at times!

It's always tempting to reinvent the wheel in order to achieve dramatic results. But in our situation, following a great deal of recent change, that would have overwhelmed staff and been counter-productive. Instead, with the help of

6 STEPS TO SUCCESS

This is the basic framework that has helped to revolutionise teaching standards at The Oldham Academy North – often referred to at EdisonLearning as a 'recipe for good teaching' (find out more at edisonlearning.net):

- 1 RICH AND RELEVANT INFORMATION** – Using progress data. What does my information tell me about how well my students are doing?
- 2 THE END IN MIND** – Outcomes planning. For them to make great progress in this lesson (or series of lessons), what do they need to achieve by the end?
- 3 FRAMING FOR LEARNERS** – Establishing the 'big picture' of learning. How do I frame the start of the lesson to reflect the 'big story' of what they'll be learning?
- 4 A LEARNING SEQUENCE** – Lesson shape and organisation. How am I going to get them to those outcomes? Where do we start, head next, and where do we end? How do I know this is the right order and sequence?
- 5 PROGRESS CHECKING** – Assessment across learning sequences. What can I build into the lesson to check on progress and ensure my learners know how they're doing both during and by the end of the lesson?
- 6 ADAPTABILITY** – Flexibility in meeting learners' needs. What can I do if they don't get it, get it quicker than I thought, or take us down sidelines that may or may not be relevant?