

Greater Expectations

SCHOOL PROFILE:
LOCATION:
 Forest Gate,
 London
PUPILS:
 1050, Yrs 7-11

TS visits a school where no one, from the head down, ever stops learning

When Simon Elliott took up the position of head teacher at Forest Gate Community School in the London Borough of Newham in January 2011 he found, in his words, an establishment “in hiatus; looking for direction.” The previous head, much loved and respected, had spent many years developing a strong and secure community feel in the school, which serves an area of high social deprivation – and her death following a two-year battle with cancer had left an inevitable sense of bereavement amongst staff, students and parents alike.

Like any good manager, Simon’s first self-imposed task as head was to look closely at the situation as it stood on his arrival, analyse the resources and assets available to him, and identify where immediate and achievable changes could result in improvements, without negatively impacting on what was already successful. And what he saw filled him with excitement – because, thanks in no small way to his predecessor, there was already a thriving culture of cooperation and support deeply embedded throughout the school.

“The behaviour here has always been good to outstanding,” he explains. “When I took over, we were in the middle of some pretty disruptive building work – and even this wasn’t stopping students and staff from getting on with their days as usual. Many of our children come to us with significantly lower than average starting points in terms of their abilities, but as a rule they are from aspirational families, they pay attention in lessons, and they want to get on. It seemed to me then, that what was needed was a more academic outlook – using the caring atmosphere, yes, but really working on improving teaching and learning. Anyone can stand in front of a receptive audience and deliver a good lesson; but put an outstanding teacher into the same classroom... and the quality of learning will skyrocket.”

The recent run of results achieved by FGCS students certainly indicates that Simon is thinking along the right lines. The year before he arrived, 47% managed at least 5 A*-C GCSE grades including English and maths. In 2011, this jumped to 54% - and last year’s Y11s scooped an impressive 62%, well above the national average (even after the controversial goalpost-changing that took place regarding the marking of English). “We’re pushing for 70% this year,” insists Simon, “and yet the intake hasn’t changed at all. Newham is the second most deprived borough in the country. 40% of our young people are on the free school meals register, and 66%



have been on it at some point. We have a high proportion of pupils with SEN, and very many with English as an additional language.”

Developing Ideas

So what, exactly, has Simon been doing to ‘improve teaching and learning’ – so quickly, and so dramatically? “We’ve worked with some top experts,” he says. “We had John Hattie’s team in for example – he’s investigated what works in education. And what works above all is teacher quality; educators doing the right thing. You look at South Africa, Indonesia and China – with buildings that are less than great, and class sizes of sixty, they’re still getting the results, because of the standard of teaching. So that’s what I’m investing in above all. I’m not sure that every teacher always thinks, ‘how could I do this better?’ but that’s exactly the kind of reflection I demand of my staff members, every day. The one thing that is not negotiable for me is that as teachers, we’ve all got to look to improve.”




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This insistence on intense and proactive CPD is an approach that, unsurprisingly perhaps, has been enthusiastically embraced by Simon’s team. It takes a lot of effort, of course, but at a time when so many educators are being forced to quell or redirect their natural instincts in terms of what works in the classroom, being encouraged to develop themselves as professionals first and foremost is an attractive option – and the proof of this is that there are now three advanced skills teachers and five teaching and learning coaches on the roster, all of whom are modelling and spreading best practice amongst their colleagues every day. “I believe that most individuals can move on,” Simon points out. “If you have 100 people, it makes sense that 10 will be at the bottom and perhaps 10 might be inherently outstanding. That leaves 80 in the middle you can focus on and really develop – and they’re the ones who have most effect on the kids.”

Areas of development that the FGCS teachers have particularly focused on include literacy across the curriculum; tracking students effectively and making best use of the resulting data; and assessment for learning, as championed by Dylan William (another big name in current educational thinking who has also spent time at Forest Gate). “I want the staff to be on board with modern ways of engaging learners,” enthuses Simon. “It’s about helping students

x4

= THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BEST AND THE WORST TEACHERS IN THE SPEED OF STUDENT LEARNING CREATED
 (DYLAN WILLIAM)





understand what they're meant to be learning; setting success criteria and getting feedback. Looking, listening and assessing. All the time. Every teacher gets one period off timetable each week to discuss ideas about teaching – like, say, how to encourage more independent learning – in small groups, facilitated by a senior leader. The children are stretched more, now. They have more challenging targets, and they're enabled to achieve and even overreach them."

Naturally, in order to maximise every student's learning experience, as well as having a cutting edge teaching team it's equally important to look at how and where their skills are being used. Thanks to the pupil premium, FGCS is "reasonably well resourced" at the moment (like the vast majority of Newham schools, it's under LA control), and so although Simon is in the frustrating position of not being able to guarantee staffing levels in the long term, he is not afraid to spend where it's most needed, while he can. For example, EAL pupils tend to do especially well at FGCS, partly because the teaching team genuinely – and unusually – reflects the cultural mix of the student body, but also because there are several intervention programmes in place to make sure they are properly supported.

Likewise with literacy and maths – struggling students are withdrawn from lessons to be taught in groups or individually; agency staff have been employed to deliver additional maths and English teaching at the end of the official school day; and in Years 10 and 11, it's not unusual for students to be offered home tuition if it's felt necessary. "It's expensive," admits Simon. "But it's reaping dividends. Because if someone can go up just one level in English, that has a knock-on effect on every single subject. It's why I make sure everyone understands that developing literacy is not just a job for the English department." Savings have been made, too – 'enrichment days', which used to take place every two weeks, now happen four times a term, freeing up valuable curriculum time. And, according to at least one pupil to whom I spoke during our visit, they are much more "special and useful" as a consequence.

Investment in action

The combination of a warm, nurturing environment, engaged students, and teachers who are constantly striving to outdo themselves, makes

walking around Forest Gate Community School an enormously uplifting experience. It's not a small school – there are 210 pupils in each year group from 7-11 – yet it feels personal and friendly. Wall displays – so often neglected at KS3 and 4 – are current, creative and inspiring ("Ah yes – I have a full-time member of staff on those," confirms Simon when I mention them in passing. "I sent her out to primary schools to see what they were doing."), and in every classroom the evidence of Simon's investment choices is there – in the interested faces of the young people, in their confident contributions to discussion, and perhaps above all in the enjoyment the teachers are clearly taking in their work, knowing that they are valued, that they are good at what they do, and that they will get even better in the future.

The buildings don't have the breathtaking impact of some of the new academies, but thanks to the BSF programme, have recently been significantly improved and are well maintained and equipped. A swanky fitness suite will, it is hoped, soon bring in a decent revenue stream as well as providing a valuable community service; and the climbing walls that were paid for with the memorial fund raised on behalf of the previous head teacher are both a valuable asset and a powerful metaphor. Because nothing for the staff and students of FGCS, insists the man who considers himself privileged to be able to work with them, is beyond reach.



▲ "I'M NOT SURE OF THE EXACT DEFINITION OF 'HEAD GIRL!'" SAYS ALICE WYBRON-KERFOOD, A LIKEABLE AND CONFIDENT TEEN WHO – AS WELL AS BEING IMPRESSIVELY ACCOMPLISHED ON THE TRAMPOLINE – CURRENTLY OCCUPIES THE AFOREMENTIONED POST AT FGCS. "BUT ONE OF THE THINGS I'M IN CHARGE OF IS TAKING STUDENTS' IDEAS TO MR ELLIOTT." THE SUGGESTION THAT PERHAPS SHE'S ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR BREAKING UP ANY FIGHTS AT STUDENT COUNCIL MEETINGS PROVOKES SHEER AMUSEMENT. "THERE'S NO FIGHTS!" SHE LAUGHS. "THIS IS A HAPPY SCHOOL. I'VE BEEN HERE SINCE Y7 – AND EVERYONE JUST... GETS ALONG."