

One Direction

SCHOOL PROFILE
 LOCATION:
 Clacton
 PUPILS:
 1850+ (including
 300 in the sixth form)

TS visits Clacton Coastal Academy – an evolving school where staff and students know exactly where they are going...

Of all the human-interest stories that emerged as a consequence of last year's GCSE English grade boundary debacle, surely few can have been as heartbreaking as the one that tells of the impact that particular piece of bureaucratic sleight of hand had on the staff and students of the Clacton Coastal Academy – not to mention the community of which the school is firmly at the heart. Because until those goalposts were so suddenly and starkly rearranged, the collective efforts of everyone at CCA (and the other school that serves the catchment) had meant that in 2012 the percentage of children in Clacton due to meet or exceed the government's targets at GCSE was due to come in at above 50, for the first time. Under the national average, yes, but nonetheless a tremendously significant milestone on a journey that everyone involved knows is far from over. It would have been officially sanctioned proof that in an area where young people's barriers to learning are many, varied and often forbiddingly high (over half of CCA's register is made up of pupil premium students, and the two schools that merged to create the academy in 2009 had final 5+ *A/C EM results of 13% and 18% respectively), a combination of a clear and vivid vision from its Executive Principal, Stephen Chamberlain and the Executive Team; raised aspirations and expectations; innovative and empowered staff members; comprehensive data collection and proactive use of it; and strong sponsorship from the AET and governor support can make a phenomenal difference to learners' outcomes, regardless of environmental factors.

For the record of this achievement to be so arbitrarily taken away was a cruel and unfair blow, then, for the whole town.

However, it's the 'what happened next' part of the narrative that most clearly demonstrates the ethos that drives CCA forwards. Of course there was disappointment, but it wasn't dwelt upon for long. Negativity, resentment, self-pity – none of these are given houseroom in this Academies Enterprise Trust establishment that takes the AET motto 'to make our best better', and uses it as the foundation for everything it does. "59 students out of a cohort of 300 were downgraded, from Bs and Cs to Ds," says head teacher Tracey Hemming, wincing slightly at the memory. "You can imagine how this affected our overall results. So what we did was to reach out to as many of those young people as possible. We offered them extra classes and a whole raft of support. 30 of them came back and did retakes, and of those, 28 successfully regained a C or above. What we are very good at here," she concludes with a smile, "is



recognising how we need to move forward; putting a plan in place for it; and following that plan through."

As it turns out, when we visit CCA for ourselves, it rapidly becomes obvious that there are many things that the school is very good at indeed. From the tutor group participating in an energetic drama and literacy intervention session first thing in the morning; to the Y10 mixed ability history lesson in which some students are analysing a peer's essay in order to identify how it could be improved and others are simultaneously assessing why an A-level composition has been given an A grade; to the Y8 English class that bursts into genuinely appreciative applause when a fellow student successfully spells out 'claustrophobic' (after identifying it as a word that might contribute to his first impressions of the United States) on the whiteboard, we see vivid signs everywhere that we are in a school where pride, enthusiasm, determination and positivity dominate the atmosphere. Uniforms are remarkably unmodified; relationships between teachers and learners are affectionate and respectful; and between visits to classrooms to see learning in action, we speak with a succession of staff members whose passion, intelligence, and concern for the students in their care are matched only by their confidence in their own ability to give those students the education they deserve, and prospects not



remotely restricted by the social problems facing the local area.

CCA is a large organisation, with more than 1500 students as well as 300 sixth formers (who occupy a superb second campus, a couple of miles away from the main campus). For both parents and children, moving from the small-scale, nurturing environment of primary school to such a massive establishment can be a daunting prospect – but there is no need for anyone to worry about getting lost in the system here. The academy promises a personalised educational journey for every student, and delivers it thanks to its state-of-the-art data management system (Go 4 Schools) and, crucially, staff members who are both able and keen to take that data and use it to shape teaching and learning. Instead of forcing children into fixed ‘streams’ based on an initial assessment of ability that’s updated annually at most, learners’ progress is minutely monitored so that their individual needs can be met as soon as they are identified, whether that is responding to a change in home situation that’s negatively impacting school work, or providing opportunities to extend achievement when a student is flying. Staff responsible for academic standards and pastoral care work closely together, collaborating on particular systems and interventions and just as concerned with broadening the children’s long term horizons as maximising their imminent



“YOU CAN’T POSSIBLY DRIVE A SCHOOL FORWARD JUST CONCENTRATING ON YOUR ENGLISH AND MATHS – EVERYTHING IS INTEGRAL TO STUDENTS’ SUCCESS IN EXAMS. THEY NEED TO HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN ABILITIES, AND WE’RE TRYING TO GIVE THEM THAT.”
**HEAD TEACHER,
TRACEY HEMMING**

exam chances – Tracey’s approach as head (inspired and still supported by Executive and founding Principal Stephen Chamberlain, who is now responsible for several other AET academies as Regional Director of Education), is very much one of distributed leadership and creative synergy.

There’s much more that could be said about what is happening at CCA – and we very much hope to make a return visit at some point – but the overall feel of the place is probably best captured by something Tracey Hemming says towards the end of our time together. “On the whole, people enjoy themselves here,” she observes. “They’re under pressure, and they work extremely hard – but they’re excited. There’s a buzz, because we all feel that although there’s a long way to go, we’re moving in the right direction.”

Dramatic Action

Emma Kirby is English AST at CCA, and responsible for literacy across the curriculum, which is a key area of concern for the academy, given the unusually high proportion of students who arrive in Year 7 with reading and writing skills that are considerably below the national average for their age group. As well as teaching, training staff, helping develop the school’s use of its Accelerated Reading programme, and auditing schemes of work and lessons – along with her



“WE ARE IMMENSELY PROUD OF THE WORK THAT GOES ON HERE AT CCA. STAFF, STUDENTS AND THE ETHOS AND REPUTATION OF ACADEMY ITSELF HAVE COME A LONG WAY SINCE 2009 AND ALTHOUGH THERE IS MORE TO DO, WE ARE WELL ON OUR WAY TO ENSURING THAT EVERY CHILD HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED AND TO MAKE THEIR BEST BETTER. I HAVE A HIGHLY COMMITTED LEADERSHIP TEAM AT CCA WHO HAVE A RELENTLESS FOCUS ON ENSURING HIGH STANDARDS OF ACHIEVEMENT, BEHAVIOUR AND MOST IMPORTANTLY TEACHING AND LEARNING. IMPROVEMENTS HAPPEN EVERY DAY, DAY BY DAY TO ENSURE THAT WE STAY FOCUSED ON THAT IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY AND THE OUTCOMES FOR OUR STUDENTS.”
**EXECUTIVE PRINCIPAL,
 STEPHEN CHAMBERLAIN**



colleagues – she has recently been focusing on transition activities for local Year 6 pupils.

“We started with a reading and writing superhero project with one of our feeder primaries,” she explains. “It went very well, so this year I planned something rather more ambitious around a ‘crime’ topic for another school, focusing on level three learners. Every week I would visit for an hour-long literacy session on a different aspect of the theme, bringing in cross-curricular elements, such as science, when we did ‘crime scenes’ and art, to create a photo-fit of our suspects. The whole thing culminated in a pantomime courtroom drama, which the children performed for staff and parents after just two hours with the script. It was close to Christmas, so we served mince pies, and the atmosphere was wonderful. And to our delight, 42% of the participants made a level’s progress as a direct result of what we were doing together in those specific areas. We’re looking to go even further next year, running a competition for all our feeder primaries, where they’ll be able to book creative writing workshops to enable pupils to produce work that can be selected for a CCA

anthology (we’re already planning a glamorous launch event!)”

This kind of innovative, yet totally evidence-based intervention – trialling ideas gradually and using closely monitored data to ensure that genuine progress is being made as a result before rolling them out to benefit as many students as possible – is typical of CCA’s approach to raising standards. And now, Emma is in a position to take what’s been learnt from working with Year 6 students to address the literacy gap that is still an issue for many of the academy’s KS3 students with an immersive learning move that some might see as bold – even risky – but in which she has total confidence, thanks to solid experience.

“We’re going to suspend the timetable for the first half term of Year 7,” she reveals, “and all staff will be teaching literacy. The cohort will be divided into three groups, according to ability as assessed on arrival: those at the top end of the scale will do a murder mystery project; middle level students will have a zombie apocalypse; and the less able or struggling learners will be given an alien invasion theme. A team from across the curriculum will write a skills-based scheme of work, to be delivered by specialist subject teachers, and there will also be what I’m calling a ‘adventure day’; we want to take the first group to a hotel for a murder mystery event; we hope our alien invasion pupils can have a camp out on school grounds, and do star gazing; and I’m planning a ‘CCA lockdown’ for the middle learners, where Clacton is taken over by zombies and we have to survive the night at school. That’s going to be properly scary!”

Scary? Perhaps. Good fun; probably. Certainly it will involve hard work – for children and staff alike. Progress will be carefully monitored, plans altered appropriately if necessary, and ambitious aspirations will be incentivised with instant and meaningful rewards. Standard CCA procedure, in fact...

About AR

CCA has been using Renaissance Learning’s Accelerated Reader (AR) programme for several years now. AR has been designed to raise literacy standards among children of all abilities in Years 1 to 13 by providing immediate data – taken from interactive quizzes that are completed by children once they have finished a book from their school library – which enables early diagnosis of reading problems so that teachers can inform instruction and offer intervention when required, as well as tracking progress. The programme also uses personalised reading practice to motivate students to read more challenging books, based on their individual reading level, calculated using the ATOS readability formula.

AR has been adopted by thousands of schools worldwide, with many reporting an average of two years’ reading age growth in just one academic year. Find out more at renlearn.co.uk/reading.