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'Getting learners back into class': Improving whole school SEND provision and staff-student relationships in a secondary school

Peer Mentoring and Whole School SEND Resources

School: Secondary

Introduction

This case study highlights the role of Whole School SEND (WSS) peer mentoring and online training and the impact that this had had in improving inclusion at a secondary academy.

At the end of 2021, the SEND team at this academy underwent a complete overhaul, with only one staff member remaining. New leadership, including a Principal, Vice Principal, and SENCo, did however bring rapid positive change together with support from WSS. Plans were made to foster a culture of effective and prudent SEND provision, empowering learners in school and beyond through focusing on staff expertise and leadership. An OFSTED inspection in the same academic year recognised that effective, inclusive SEND provision should be a key focus for development.

The academy's vision centred on reintegrating learners with SEND into classrooms and building a culture of inclusivity and high expectations. This school improvement project was delivered using WSS's peer mentoring program where a Regional SEND Lead (RSL) worked with the school directly to improve SEND provision and inclusion, and through use of WSS online webinars and training.

Implementation

Initially a Whole School SEND review supported by the WSS RSL was carried out. The key initiatives and strategies then implemented at the academy included:

- Enhancing inclusive learning,
- Streamlining support plans,
- Providing targeted professional development and,
- Fostering focused learner support.

Inclusive Learning

The school began its SEND improvement journey with a whole-school review, providing targeted feedback and sharing best practices to foster truly inclusive classrooms. The focus was particularly on delivering an ambitious and accessible curriculum, ensuring “ambition for all.” Staff development centred on scaffolding, improving reading instruction, reducing cognitive load, fostering positive relationships and creating inclusive classroom environments.

Support Plans

Simplified and streamlined learner support plans were designed and became a key tool in SEND provision. These plans outlined simple, tailored “dos” and “don’ts” for supporting each learner and were informed by parental input and staff collaborative “book looks” at KS3 and KS4. The assess, plan, do, review cycle ensured these plans were consistently implemented and reviewed by all staff. With a skilled and confident SEND team, the plans have been effective in improving provision.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The academy has engaged in extensive CPD across all staff levels to enhance SEND provision and inclusive practices. The SENCo is pursuing the National SEND Award, while the SEND Leader has been actively involved in the local authority’s Graduated Approach Working Group and EHCP Quality Assurance team. Whole-school and bespoke CPD sessions have focused on embedding high quality inclusive teaching practices, as identified through the WSS review. These sessions have improved staff expertise in areas such as reading instruction, vocabulary development, and scaffolding techniques like “I, we, you,” ensuring all learners, including the weakest readers, can access the curriculum.

Senior leaders have used resources such as Whole School SEND webinars to introduce fresh ideas and strategies.

The academy has emphasised sharing best practices, using “book looks” to align teaching with support plans and showcase effective strategies. These efforts have reinforced a culture of collaboration and inclusivity, ensuring all learners can thrive academically and socially.

Focused Learner Support

The academy launched a ‘Focus 5’ initiative, where all teachers have 5 learners to focus on in each class; learners who aren’t flourishing in the way others are. Simple approaches such as increasing ‘checking in’ on these pupils, circulating the classroom and live marking are becoming embedded in practice across the school. Each teacher has been given a presentation pen, so that they can circulate and continue to present their lessons on the screen.

Outcomes and Impact

Innovative strategies have been introduced to improve the quality of teaching through CPD using resources such as WSS and nasen webinars. The academy has prioritised sharing best practices through regular “book looks,” aligning teaching with support plans and identifying effective strategies. These efforts have fostered a collaborative, inclusive culture, enabling all learners to thrive academically and socially.



More inclusive high-quality teaching



More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting



Improved mental health and wellbeing of learners with SEND



Increased engagement of learners with SEND

Outcomes and Impact (continued)

Practice is regularly reviewed through link meetings, learning walks, SEND reviews, book scrutiny, and data meetings with the Principal and Assistant Principal. The SEND Leader actively participates in SLT meetings and uses these insights to inform support plan updates, which are simplified into clear “dos” and “don’ts.” These have been positively received by all staff and are used more effectively and positively than ever, as discussed in the Whole School SEND RSL’s report. This has had a significant impact on learners, with one learner telling us that suddenly lessons are clearer and easier to follow.

The Academy Way is now in its second iteration, incorporating staff and learner feedback. The updated version, “The Academy Way 2.0,” reduces cognitive load, enhances teacher scaffolding, and includes resources like bookmarks for learners that visualise key routines to support positive learning. Additionally, a vocabulary and reading toolkit focusing on scaffolds like Reciprocal Reading and pre-teaching vocabulary has improved engagement and understanding.

Staff-learner relationships, particularly between key support staff and learners, have significantly improved, leading to better attendance and a reduction in exclusions. Learners report feeling safer, respected, and supported, benefiting from high quality, inclusive teaching. This progress was highlighted in the WSS RSL’s implementation report and is reflected in the improvement of learners’ work, with many making noticeable progress day-to-day.

The academy has also introduced the ‘Focus 5’ initiative, where teachers focus on five learners who may need additional support in terms of attainment and well-being. Teachers provide extra attention, ‘checking in’ and offering tailored support as needed. This approach feeds into the integrated assessment system, which tracks learners’ progress across all subjects. The SENCo continues to collaborate with curriculum leaders to identify learners struggling with their learning, using this data to inform targeted interventions. Additionally, the SENCo is developing a whole-school document that will track learners’ progress against key learning milestones, ensuring that those who are not making sufficient progress receive the necessary support to thrive.

Key Learning

Staff Development and Collaboration: Continue to focus on staff development, induction, and fostering collaborative working to enhance the overall effectiveness of the team.

CPD Alignment to Learner Needs: Strengthen CPD by explicitly linking professional development on SEND and adaptive teaching practices to specific learners and their support plans. This will help teachers connect theoretical insights into practical teaching and learning.

Consistency of Key Developments: Ensure the consolidation and consistency of key improvements throughout the school by addressing even minor inconsistencies, thereby ensuring that best practices are consistently implemented in every classroom interaction.

Development of Systems: Further refine paperwork to include:

- Clearly defined SEND support outcomes.
- Short-term objectives articulated as SMART targets.
- Comprehensive evaluations of strategies and provisions.

Reflection on Teaching Practices: Encourage teachers to reflect on their use of thinking time and pauses, allowing learners time to process questions and information. Emphasise the importance of modelling followed by learner practice to reinforce learning.



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