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Strengthening provision across a MAT through Communities of Practice

Whole School SEND Review Guides

Introduction

This case study examines the pivotal role of Whole School SEND (WSS) supporting a multi academy trust through the path of a Professional Development (PD) group, the effective implementation of CPD led by a WSS Regional Lead, and the WSS Review Guides to drive significant improvements in inclusion across four secondary schools within a multi-academy trust (MAT).

The Trust oversees the operation of four secondary schools located across Birmingham, collectively serving a student body of 3,220 learners. Among these learners, 18 have an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP), while 16% are identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Additionally, 46% of learners within the Trust qualify for Free School Meals (FSM), and 51% are designated as Pupil Premium, highlighting the significant proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Historically, the recruitment, retention, and professional development of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) within the Trust have posed considerable challenges. In response to this, the executive team were looking for an initiative to foster collaboration, professional development and capacity building among SENCOs and aspiring SENCOs in their staff. Through discussion with a WSS RSL, the WSS PD group approach gave the perfect solution.

Implementation

To personalise the PD group approach and because the trust wished to continue with the model after the year of WSS support, the trust named these meetings – Communities of Practice (CoP). The CoP convened five times throughout the academic year, amounting to a total of 15 hours dedicated to joint professional development and knowledge exchange. Developed in partnership with the Trust, the WSS RSL led the meetings ensuring high-quality and impactful support. Each CoP session commenced with a structured knowledge input aligned with key elements of both the SEND and Preparation for Adulthood (PfA) audits, using the WSS Review Guides. The RSL facilitated expert-led Continuous Professional Development (CPD), ensuring that SENCOs developed a robust and comprehensive understanding of best practices in each audited area. This structured knowledge dissemination aimed to equip SENCOs with the necessary expertise to drive improvement and enhance the provision for learners with SEND across the Trust. targeted SEND development strategies for the upcoming academic year.

Implementation (continued)

Following each CoP session, SENCOs were tasked with applying their newly acquired knowledge by conducting SEND and PfA audits within their respective schools. This process required close collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including senior leadership teams (SLT) and Trust-wide leaders, to ensure the audits were rigorously quality assured and accurately reflected the strengths and areas for development within each school's SEND provision. The iterative nature of the CoP sessions enabled a continuous cycle of reflection and improvement, as each subsequent meeting began with a structured opportunity for SENCOs to discuss their findings, share experiences, and address challenges encountered during the audit process.

As a part of this initiative, each SENCO has successfully completed a comprehensive SEND and PfA audit. These audits will now serve as foundational documents to inform whole-school improvement plans and targeted SEND development strategies for the upcoming academic year.

Outcomes and Impact

The implementation of the CoP model and the structured professional development provided by Whole School SEND have yielded measurable improvements in SEND-related attainment and progress across the Trust's four secondary schools. Comparative analysis of performance data from 2023 to 2024 indicates a positive trajectory in key data:

- Attainment 8 increased by +5.85 points
- Progress 8 increased by +0.49

A key strength of the CoP approach was its function as a critical support mechanism for SENCOs. By fostering an environment of shared learning and collective problem-solving, the initiative allowed participants to engage in professional dialogue, co-construct solutions, and develop strategies to address common challenges across different school contexts. This collaborative framework not only enhanced individual professional development but also contributed to strengthening the overall SEND provision within the Trust.

School Ofsted Comments about SEND following input (Nov 24):

Since the previous inspection, the school has significantly improved. It has high expectations of achievement for learners, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Learners with SEND access the same curriculum. Teachers are given high-quality information about the individual needs of these learners. They plan adaptations effectively to support individual's learning.

Learners' outcomes are now beginning to improve, particularly for disadvantaged learners and those with SEND.

The school prioritises reading. It systematically identifies learners who have fallen behind. Staff provide specialist and targeted support so that these learners catch up. The school also promotes a love of reading. All learners have frequent opportunities to read in lessons as well as in dedicated time in form groups.

Most parents and carers recognise that the school has improved. They are very positive about how the school now supports their learners.

Key Learning

Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants, the Trust has committed to continuing the CoP initiative in subsequent years, with future sessions designed to focus on key development areas identified through the audit process.

Building upon the successes of the past academic year and recognising the areas that require further development, the Trust has outlined a series of strategic actions aimed at sustaining and expanding its SEND provision:

- **Appoint a Trust-wide SEND Strategic Leader** to provide overarching leadership and direction, ensuring consistency and excellence in SEND provision across all schools.
- **Introduce Deputy SENCo roles** within each school to enhance capacity and provide additional leadership support for SEND initiatives.
- **Standardise and quality assure the graduated response and SEND offer**, ensuring consistency in the identification, assessment, and support of learners with SEND across all schools.
- **Develop a comprehensive CPD pathway for Teaching Assistants (TAs)**, incorporating apprenticeship opportunities to enhance their professional skills and effectiveness in supporting SEND learners.

By embedding these next steps into the Trust's broader school improvement strategy, the organisation aims to further enhance its ability to provide high-quality, inclusive education for all learners, particularly those with SEND. The sustained focus on professional development, structured collaboration, and data-informed decision-making will be instrumental in driving continuous improvement and ensuring that all learners receive the support they need to thrive academically and personally.