

NATIONAL COLLEGE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY

OLD FORD TEACHING SCHOOL ALLIANCE

Context and background

Old Ford is a large, urban primary school in Bow in Tower Hamlets, East London. Bow and Bethnal Green wards are two of the most deprived wards in the country, and over half of pupils at the school are eligible for free school meals. Most pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds, three quarters speak English as an additional language, and Old Ford has some of the largest groups of Somalian children in Tower Hamlets.

The school is a National Support School and has gained national recognition, most recently for its approach to literacy which was celebrated in the Ofsted publication “Reading by 6: how the best schools do it” (Ofsted 2010). Ofsted noted in an earlier subject survey visit to the school:

You and your staff are clearly determined to enable all pupils to reach or exceed national standards of attainment in literacy. In particular, to narrow the attainment gap for those pupils who are most at risk of falling behind (Ofsted subject survey 2009)

The Headteacher, Amanda Phillips, was appointed in 2003 when the school was in an Ofsted category. She is a National Leader of Education. In 2006, Old Ford joined in a federation with nearby Culloden Primary School, with Amanda as executive Headteacher. Culloden is a similar size to Old Ford and the pupils come from a similar background: highly mobile, over half eligible for free school meals, and most with English as an additional language.

Teaching School application

“it is an organic journey... and a lot of the teaching school role is what we were doing already”

Old Ford Teaching School Alliance was designated in the first cohort in September 2011. A number of elements of their work prior to 2011 had enabled them to be well placed for the Teaching School role:

- Old Ford senior leadership team had considered what might be the next strategic step for the federation to take. There were a number of potential options (including moving to trust or academy status); becoming a teaching school was the most obvious route, as it fitted with the school’s values and its beliefs about school improvement
- both schools in the Old Ford / Culloden federation were designated as National Support Schools and Amanda therefore had experience of working across two schools with the capacity to provide support to other schools

- Old Ford were clear that it would be important for the national teaching school programme to be able to demonstrate that it included schools in challenging urban setting such as Old Ford and Culloden
- both the governing body and senior leadership team accepted that schools supporting other schools and teaching schools were the future direction for school improvement and wanted to be part of shaping the direction of this journey: “we wanted to be in the vanguard of how it will be...” (Amanda Phillips)

Governance and leadership of the teaching school alliance

The Old Ford Teaching School Alliance has determined that the right way for them to begin their work is to start small and focussed. Amanda is very clear she will not take her eye off own school: “I constantly feel accountable for the performance of pupils in the school, so must avoid becoming diverted”. She recognises that one of the risks of taking on the teaching school role is that the alliance feels it needs to say ‘yes’ to all requests for support and training.

The Alliance is made up of a small number of key strategic partners:

- Bethnal Green Technology College – achieved 79% 5+GCSEs A*-C including English and maths, up from 29% in 2008
- Ian Mikardo Special School – Tower Hamlets special school, judged outstanding by Ofsted in 2009
- Touchstone Training – an organisation providing HR support, advice and training
- Several HEI partners including the University of East London and Institute of Education
- Tower Hamlets and Southwark Children’s Services
- The Park Federation

Example of key strategic partner: The Park Federation

The Park Federation is a two-school primary federation in Hillingdon, West London. The two schools - Cranford Park and Woodend Park – are led by executive head and NLE Martin Young. Both schools have about one third of pupils eligible for free school meals and a majority of pupils with English as an additional language. There are currently 7 forms of entry across the two schools (1,600 pupils), in future moving to 9FE across two schools. The Park Federation have been supporting other schools since 2008, helping two schools move out of notice to improve and one out of special measures. Martin had worked with Amanda before the Alliance was established, first of all on a DfE organised leadership project. Since that time, the two federations had worked together to share practice and opportunities, for example on NPQH candidates.

In addition, the Alliance will be joined by two new schools which are being supported by Old Ford as they become established:

- a) Southwark Free School. Old Ford is supporting the setting up of a primary free school in Southwark, which will open in September 2012. Amanda is a member of the trust board. The new school, which will be a mixed, two-form entry school, will replicate the systems and processes which have worked successfully at Old Ford. There will therefore be training and support provided by Amanda and the senior team from Old Ford
- b) Reach Academy. This new 4-18 Academy in Feltham, West London, is being established by a group of former Future Leaders and Teach First teachers. Old Ford are supporting the approach to literacy and reading, and providing CPD on reading and writing

Both schools will be part of the Alliance and able to seek support from the Alliance partners, with some at reduced or nil cost. Amanda described it "...as another way of approaching school improvement": allowing them to take their successful model of school improvement and teaching and learning to a wider group of pupils.

a) Governance

The governing body at Old Ford is accountable for the progress of the teaching school alliance and is fully supportive of the move to become a teaching school. The Chair of Governors, Christopher Crozier, sees the teaching school role as one part of the overall accountability discussion with Amanda, not a separate stream. He and the governors see a number of important benefits for Old Ford: it is a natural extension of their existing work; it provides an opportunity to learn and improve their own practice - "...a really good cross-check on what we are doing here by engaging other schools"; and an opportunity for Old Ford to spread what it is doing and for Amanda to have the maximum impact on the system "...to leverage the skills which Amanda has". So the governors were keen to push ahead when the proposal came for Old Ford to apply to be a teaching school.

Christopher and the governors receive regular reports on the progress of the Alliance from Amanda as part of her headteacher's report, and also from Grant Jenkins as the school business manager and operational manager for the Alliance. The finance committee receives regular information about the teaching school finances, so that governors can link the impact of the work with the costs and income.

b) Strategic and operational leadership

This section to be expanded and updated. The Teaching School Alliance is revising its approach to governance and accountability, following the support which is being provided by Denis Mongon during March 2012.

Section also to include following points on current approach to strategic leadership:

- All strategic partners were invited to Old Ford after designation as a teaching school to discuss and set out the vision for the Alliance and consider initial ways of working. The Alliance wanted to keep things as simple as possible
- Old Ford would accept that they have got on with their work as a teaching school, rather than set up additional systems of governance and accountability. They recognise now is the time to step back and look at what might be needed
- They are developing their systems with support from Denis Mongon
- At the moment, there are weekly report from Grant to the Old Ford SLT about the work of the Alliance

Activity in the main strands

Old Ford have been aware of the potential risks of providing support and development on the scale expected of a teaching school: “you can break a school by saying yes to everything” (Amanda Phillips). So for all the strands of activity they have taken a realistic and robust view of the capacity and skills of the staff to offer support and training, and derived from this the offers so they do not become overwhelmed.

a) Initial Teacher Training (ITT)

Old Ford is looking to develop its existing relationships with its higher education institute (HEIs) partners to move the relationship onto a different footing. They have had very productive dialogues with some HEIs; others have not engaged as productively, or have assumed that the situation will remain as it was before the school became designated. Where it is working well, an ongoing dialogue and effective communications between partners has made it straightforward to develop shared priority areas.

The Alliances specific objectives are to increase the range of ITT providers working across the partnership and to increase the number of students within partnership schools. At Old Ford and Culloden there have been 19 student placements so far this academic year, with one GTP student. They expect GTP and PGCE placements to grow, alongside an increase in demand for voluntary and other work experience.

With the University of East London (UEL), they are establishing a programme of student focussed days (for example on EAL and early years specialisms) across Old Ford, Culloden, Ian Mikardo and the Park Federation. Teachers from Old Ford and Culloden have worked with UEL to deliver presentations to students about their practice.

Darran Wallace is an Assistant Head at Old Ford and leads on ITT for the Alliance (a post for which he volunteered himself). He is enthusiastic about the opportunities for growth for the Alliance, and sees the teaching school alliances “...training the potential school leaders of the future”.

Other partners across the Alliance are working with their HEIs: the Park Federation undertaking ITT placements with Brunel University; and Bethnal Green Technology College with University of East London for secondary placements.

b) School-to-school support

Old Ford and Culloden have been providing support to a primary school in Norfolk which was in special measures. Support has been provided by a range of staff, including the assistant Headteacher at Culloden, Janet Baker, who was recently designated as an SLE. Janet's support was on guided reading and involved her planning activities, delivering some of the teaching, demonstrating practice, and reviewing with the teachers involved. The support has also included leadership and management development, HR advice, school business management advice, and specialist maths support. Amanda said that the support was often about changing the mindset: "...that there are no excuses, and then the question becomes how can we delivery the national curriculum in this context?" The supported school has now come out of special measures.

For other strategic partners, there has also been work to support other schools. Bethnal Green Teaching School has been supporting a secondary school in Kent. The Park Federation has been supporting a school in special measures in Slough: Martin Young has been acting as the interim executive Headteacher; the Park Federation has been leading the support to the school, and providing a range of staff to support.

Old Ford has received £40,000 through the LLE deployment fund which it will use to support a range of school support activity.

The Old Ford Teaching School Alliance was offered seven places to designate as SLEs, interviewed six people and designated four. For new SLE Janet Baker, the role is an opportunity to put into practice some of the skills and methods which had been developed while Culloden was being supported by Old Ford.

c) CPD and leadership development

The Park federation have developed a training and development programme for Slough local authority which is being delivered to 17 staff. The programme is focussed on moving teaching and learning from satisfactory to good, and the programme is based at Cranford Park. The Park Federation is also supporting a number of NQTs on their development programme.

At Old Ford and Culloden, 46 NQTs have been involved in assessing the learning environment through a support programme from the local authority. Planning is underway for a training programme for all teaching and non-teaching staff at the Southwark Free School. Old Ford is also continuing its existing programme of CPD on early years and KS1.

Old Ford are considering how any spare space on their site might be utilised for a training and research space. For example, it might be possible to construct a classroom with partitions so that trainees can watch lessons being taught with a specific focus on phonics.

d) Succession planning and talent management

Old Ford are aware that there are very good opportunities for movement across the two schools in the federation, and in the future with the other schools across the Alliance. The 10 Assistant Head places had "...broken the model of the expectation that for advancement you need to move schools" (Amanda Phillips). That is enhanced by the opportunities for management experience when Amanda is away from the school.

Martin Young has been working with the National College in the redesign of the new modular NPQH and is member of the writing team to support this project.

The governing body at Old Ford recognises that as the pupil population changes, so the teaching staff need to respond and the requirements for leaders in the future will be different. To that extent, remaining flexible and nimble in terms of the offer and opportunities will be important.

Financial and business planning

Old Ford has not set up a separate trading account but all incoming and outgoing expenditure associated with teaching school activity is accounted for separately within the school's accounts. They will investigate in the future whether a separate account, and possibly a separate company, might be required to manage the Alliance finances.

The main sources of income are from grants from the National College, and income from courses and contracts to support other schools.

Grant Jenkins, the school business manager and teaching school lead, provides financial reports to the governors at Old Ford and the SLT to account for income and expenditure. Governors see the teaching school revenue as a stream within the overall funding for the teaching school. At this stage, there are no requirements for any single stream of activity to cross-subsidise another.

There has so far not been an issues in charging for services. The culture at Old Ford has been that they are willing to try and identify where the best support might be found, knowing that that would need to pay for it while at the same time secure value for money for anything they were purchasing: "we're not used to having mediocrity delivered for free" (Amanda Phillips).

What have been some of the key issues in helping the alliance establish itself effectively?

Old Ford has seen the different strands of teaching school activity as interlocking pieces of the same role. It has been a good fit with their own notion of school improvement support, and providing a continuum of professional development from initial teacher training right through to leadership development.

The opportunity for Old Ford to work directly in supporting two new schools has been part of their journey to become a teaching school. While locally it has not been possible to grow the Old Ford and Culloden federation, the support to the Southwark Free School and the Reach Academy feels to Amanda Phillips as though they are expanding their brand and model.

They have deliberately started small and focussed: several primary schools, one secondary, one special school, several HEIs and an HR company. Over the next 12 months they will look to grow, but for the time being they have started small. Martin Young said “we wanted to keep it tight, disciplined and with a strong centre.”

The Alliance has got moving, rather than spending significant amounts of time getting structures in place. This has been a conscious approach: the schools did not want to reduce their pre-existing commitments to support other schools during this phase of getting the Alliance established. This is a different strategy to those Alliances which have spent time developing their governance, accountability and communication arrangements. The Alliance recognises this is now an important priority for Year 2: to step back and look at governance arrangements across the alliance; to review the communication and marketing of their offers; and set the strategic direction for Year 2.

The two primary federations provide a significant amount of capacity: in the future, 15 forms of entry across the four schools. In terms of staff capacity, teaching expertise, and the size of senior leadership teams this is obviously equivalent to a much larger alliance of primary schools. While having the two primary federations on different sides of London has its challenges, there are advantages in being able to be close to different, and a greater range of, local authorities and schools to be able to offer support.

There are strong pre-existing relationships across the Alliance on which to build, and good personal and professional relationships between the heads involved. One of the strategic partners talked about having “...great faith in Amanda and her approach”. There is an overarching sense of the vision for this teaching school Alliance in supporting schools, closing gaps, and ensuring a high quality focus on the teaching of reading. The governors and the senior leaders and partners share a strong sense of the moral purpose in the Alliance and the desire to support other schools in their improvements. For Old Ford, it has seen the journey from a school in serious weaknesses, and the Chair of Governors was adamant “we are never going back there again”. They strongly believe that the quality of the education which is available to pupils at Old Ford, Culloden and the other schools in the Alliance should also be available to pupils in other schools.