



This profile is part of the EU Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe. It presents one of the 24 schools in the study, giving an overview of the changes and experiences in that school. Find the rest of the materials from the study at:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

Curriculum innovation for a conducive and supportive learning environment at the President Kennedy School in Coventry



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Coventry, West Midlands
- ◆ **Established:** 1965
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides secondary education for pupils of 11 to 18 years old
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 1,460 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.pks.coventry.sch.uk/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Peter Thomas



Why did we innovate?

The school has a high share of pupils with a migrant and/or minority background, of students with special educational needs, as well as of students who join or leave the school other than at the start of Year 7 (the start of the secondary school, when children turn 11 years old) and the end of Year 11 (the final year of secondary school) than in most schools.

A 2008 Ofsted Report (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) had rated President Kennedy School as 'Satisfactory' only. The school did not enjoy high popularity as a school of first choice in the area. There was a clear need to: improve students' performance; improve the quality of teaching and learning; put a much greater emphasis on the learning process, rather than on 'firefighting' problems in student behaviour and disaffection from the learning process; give high priority to meeting the professional development needs of teaching staff, particularly in relation to them seeing learning as a holistic process and to have as their primary focus the learning of each individual student.

The school has earned a strong reputation as a school which has transformed students' performance and attitudes to learning. It serves a relatively disadvantaged community, yet it clearly places no limits

on the aspirations of its students, and indeed it positively encourages them to achieve at the highest level in all aspects of educational and personal development.

According to the School Development Plan for 2016-2018, the main goals of the school are to raise standards in areas of social and economic deprivation and/or educational underachievement and to build brighter futures of students. The action plan to achieve these goals aims to improve school's rating, academic achievement, confidence and the well-being of students, as well as teaching quality and teacher motivation. Innovative approaches are crucial to support the implementation of the action plan.



What were our innovations?

The school's philosophy in relation to teaching and learning is focused on students' active understanding of and participation in the learning process. The school's curriculum is based on the principles of progression and coherence.

'The Bridge' is one of the key innovative practices implemented at the Kennedy school. It consists of a curriculum innovation established to provide a conducive and supportive learning environment for students entering secondary education at age 11. Learning is project-based and delivered by teams of teachers from different areas of the curriculum, which enables students to engage with a small number of teachers, and to work on clearly defined and cohesive learning objectives. Learning mainly takes place in a dedicated area, which has flexible open spaces for project work.

The Bridge was established in 2012 as a 'school within the school,' with an assistant school leader in charge of the overall process. The teaching team was able to focus on curriculum development and learning. Students are issued with a dictionary, which they are required to bring with them to all lessons, along with basic equipment – and a reading book. They are supported in developing appropriate skills in reading and interrogation of text through the DARTS programme (Directed Activities Related to Text). The school has introduced public speaking for seventh grade – working with a local Rotary Club. Students are mentored by eighth grade students who were part of the process in the previous year. The Bridge enables a holistic learning process to take place while students in seventh and eighth grades have no more than six or seven teachers.

The fundamental principle is that the whole development focuses on learning. The emphasis is on providing a human scale for the students, in order to enhance their learning and social experiences. It gives them a sense of belonging – and 'wrap-around support systems.' Behavioural issues are dealt with by a member of the support staff, leaving teaching staff, led by the Assistant Headteacher in charge, to focus on the whole learning experience of the students. The experience of the staff is that the Year7s lose any sense of being in large and unfamiliar environment 'within days'.

The five principles underpinning the Bridge are: Achievement; Belonging; Celebration; Discipline; Enrichment. These principles apply to all teaching and learning throughout the school. The students are empowered as independent learners – throughout their time at the school – and beyond. A rewards system enables students to earn points towards prizes at the end of the year. This has proved to be a powerful motivator for students.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

As a result of the use of the Bridge, reasons for learning and the process of learning are open and clear to the students. Their active understanding of and participation in the learning process is fundamental.

The Bridge also provides a conducive and supportive learning environment for students entering secondary education at age 11. The innovation has contributed to markedly improved examination results.

Teachers

According to school staff, teachers who have taught in cross-curricular teams in The Bridge have a concept and vision of learning as a holistic process, which continues to inform their practice at all levels.

Parents

The school ensures that new parents understand the new assessment system – and the appropriate routes to high performance at the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), at age 16. It is worth noting that, in the catchment area, many parents have had very negative experiences in their own schooling. This creates barriers which have to be overcome.

School as a whole

The school's annual intake has risen from 150 to 300 since the introduction of the innovative approach to learning. This dramatic increase in numbers has of course brought much increased funding to the school, so that new development can be properly supported.



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

There is a strong belief in encouraging all students to aim for the highest standards in their academic work, their extra-curricular activities and their ambitions for the future.

The school has researched best practices elsewhere, including independent school sector, to achieve an ethos of confidence, resilience and self-belief. Clubs and societies within the school feature as an important part of the school's enrichment programme with a crucial role in learning development.

It is a vital principle that expectations of the students are at the highest level, with no reference to the relative deprivation of the catchment area in socio-economic terms. Clubs and societies within the school feature as an important part of the school's enrichment programme with a crucial role in learning development.

A distributive leadership structure enables each year group to operate as a 'college' within the school. Each college director has full responsibility for learning and for personal and social development for the students in their year group.

The appointment of a new school leader in 2010 was a crucial factor in bringing about positive changes in the management of the school and in the teaching and learning practice at the school. Previously a deputy school leader, he had therefore developed a deep understanding of the needs of the students and of the community – as well as an excellent rapport with the staff.

The school is committed to fostering further innovation through Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Their approach is based on the expectation that future government reforms may not be predictable, or allow sufficient time or resources for adequate preparation. The school actively encourages the teachers to engage in research related to their own teaching, through the 'Developing outstanding practice' programme and develop their pedagogical skills. Finally, each teacher is paired with a member of the Senior Management Team, in relation to the CDP programme and assessment of performance. 90% of CPD however is informal, with teachers carrying out peer observation and working together on developing schemes of work.

Finally, the appointment of an experienced teacher with a primary education background as Leader of Literacy & Numeracy in Year 7 was crucial in helping staff to focus on learning, rather than just on disparate subject knowledge.

National level

The English system allows for freedom to develop new initiatives – and these are necessary to make the learning meaningful to the students. However, interviewees from the school staff note that “you have to do it yourselves” – and, crucially, get the results.



The process of change: what limited us?

Municipal level

According to school representatives, little or no support is available from local authorities, which have seen their funding drastically reduced. In general, there is pressure on school budgets, which have reduced somewhat in recent years.

National level

In the English context, schools now increasingly operate as independent units, expected to compete with others and to consistently produce 'high standards'. Authority rests with the Governing Body, formed for the most part from representatives of the community (and sponsoring organisations in the case of 'academies' state schools which are free of local authority control).

Academies, such as President Kennedy School, are now responsible to the Regional Commissioner for Education (in this case for the West Midlands) but the Commissioner has a purely administrative function - and will receive complaints against a school.

Within the English system, funding is within the control of the school, and there is a culture of self-help. Advice on curriculum and professional development has to be bought in from private contractors.



Sustainability of change

Innovations in the President Kennedy School have a sustainable nature that was confirmed by parents, students as well as national inspectors in 2013.

Financial management is strong and the governing body has checked carefully to ensure that pupil premium funding has been effectively used and that teachers' pay is closely matched to their performance.

Regular meetings of teaching teams focus clearly on teaching and learning issues. Senior leaders oversee key developments, such as 'The Bridge', subject to continuous monitoring, evaluation and review. The role of 'student voice' is also key in relation to evaluation of curricular developments.

The main vehicle for sharing the good practice of the school is the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), in which President Kennedy is the lead school. A MAT can act as an effective vehicle for disseminating best practice, though the experience of schools as members of MATs will inevitably vary.

There is no mechanism for mainstreaming good practice across the educational system in England. The other means by which good practice from PKS is shared is via the work of staff from the school working in co-operation with partner primary schools.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

'The Bridge' is a curriculum innovation which provides a conducive and supportive learning environment for students, focusing on project-based learning and delivered by teams of teachers from different areas of the curriculum. This approach enables students to engage with a small number of teachers, and to work on clearly defined and cohesive learning objectives. Learning mainly takes place in a dedicated area, which has flexible open spaces for project work.

The school has deliberately put a major effort into sports and the arts – and has established strong links with community groups in these areas.

The commitment to the transition process from primary to secondary education has been a crucial element in the school's success – allied to the student-centred approach to learning, developed within The Bridge.

The school places a very strong emphasis on monitoring student performance, both in terms of examination and test results – and in terms of perceived success in meeting broader learning objectives.

Further reading

- **A full report** 'Supporting School Innovation across Europe' explores the conditions in the school education system that can enable or constrain positive change in schools.
- **12 case studies** explore the national approaches and individual school innovations. They include the perspectives of key national education experts and stakeholders who were interviewed and took part in workshops.
- **24 individual profiles** give a quick view of the changes and experiences in each school.

Available here:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

- The school profiles also feature as part of the [European Toolkit for Schools](#), alongside a range of materials and many other inspiring examples of practice from European countries.

© European Union, 2018

All rights reserved.

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

