

Impact of New build upon the School – September 2009.

Talbot's move to the Newfield site in January 2009, brought with it many challenges. This has to be the understatement of the year! This is not least because it meant moving 132 young people, aged 11 – 19 years of age, with Severe and Complex Learning Difficulties, to a site approximately a mile away, in the middle of winter, to a site not yet finished, to be co-located with approximately 1000 new students. However, in spite of this (or because of it??) the school community was convinced that it was the right thing to do. The vision was strong, clarity of purpose was everything and staff commitment to both of these was fundamental.

Teaching and Learning

The transformation agenda has been a feature of whole school improvement for a number of years, and we are delighted that plans previously discussed, have finally begun to be implemented. A key feature of the new build for Talbot, was that of specialist rooms (Art, Food Technology, IT, DT/Science, Music/drama, Sports hall and Post 16 provision) and a number of specialist teachers have been appointed to begin work in school from September 2009. This has had a knock-on effect on timetabling, and encouraged us to move towards whole school timetabling, to an extent never before considered. The deputy head has undertaken to establish a whole school timetable, including co-ordinated breaks and lunchtimes, supporting community cohesion, facilitating extended school activities and ensuring curriculum consistency.

Students now enjoy curriculum breadth and balance, not previously easy to establish, simply because the specialist rooms provide facilities which extend and enhance curriculum planning. Students have the opportunity to enjoy specific Scientific Enquiry for example, in a Science base equipped and ready for such delivery. The specialist rooms support students understanding of definite subject differentiation and 'clue' them into this. For example, the drama studio has a very different atmosphere and environment to that of a regular classroom or sports hall – you know that something special will happen here, cutting and sticking won't be on the agenda!

Technology was always to be a key feature of the provision in the new school, and its effect upon the curriculum has been truly transformational. Students now access their learning through a broad range of tools and resources which were previously limited to them through under-provision in IT resources. All rooms have an interactive Smartboard, 2 PC's for student use and access to the MLE and the curriculum content store. Many students have extended their learning to include e-mailing, google searches and internet surfing, something we could only imagine just a few months ago. They have responded to the opportunities with confidence, imagination and flare, winning their category at the Sheffield Globe Awards for their animated film of Dr Who (supported by the South CLC), holding a celebration event for other documentaries and films created in school to which Sonia Sharp attended, and creating a plethora of slide shows, powerpoint presentations and musical pieces using sound beams.

Leadership of Learning

Facing a new school, and all that is demanded of the staff team, is a daunting task and not one to be undertaken lightly. Looking back over the past 12 months, no-one could have prepared us for the challenges we would encounter. Some might have predicted (things taking longer because they're new, increased stress due to unfamiliar activities etc) however, coming to terms with learning to work and exist in, a new building wasn't one of them. Looking back, of course it's like getting a new home, when you have to read the user guide for the washing machine, TV, dishwasher, boiler and air conditioning. However, this was on a grander scale, as there were about 90 new users, all wanting to make the most of the opportunity, feeling their own levels of stress about the encounter. In addition, they were also under pressure of time to consolidate this (eg "Just how do you open the windows?") before our students demanded attention, support, their lunch, escorting to the roof terrace ("where's that?") and introducing to friends in Newfield, to name but a few.

Demands on the staff to attend training on behalf of others, placed pressure on some and raised the game for others. It was no mean feat, making attendance possible on a site a mile away, whilst still sustaining the learning for 130 young people who were preparing for Christmas parties, whilst helping to keep 90 other staff afloat!

Our greatest ongoing challenge has been the ever increasing need to use the technology which now surrounds us, not least because we know it can do wonderful things, but haven't yet figured out how! Staff development in the use of the MLE has continued at a pace, influencing both its design and development (the first in a special school in the country). Civica have delivered training sessions on a regular basis, development meetings have continued to enhance the intranet for both staff and students, and specialist providers have given specific groups of staff support with key pieces of kit. We were always encouraged to dream about where technology might take us, and the difficulty for both Civica and ourselves has been in agreeing on realistic and achievable outcomes, and on sharing expectations.

In recent Performance Management reviews, targets set for teachers in ICT had plummeted from being an area of concern for 100% last year to only 1 member of staff this year. This suggests that targeting the IT training for this group of staff to specific teaching and learning opportunities, and the schools realisation of its aspiration to provide a Smartboard in every classroom, has had an extremely positive effect. In contrast, IT featured high on the list of priorities for support staff, indicating that it has risen in its importance for this group of staff, and that increasingly all members of the community wish to participate in the opportunities now on offer. So much of what the school now undertakes, has changed simply because of this provision. Everything from weekly briefings to staff notices, professional development opportunities to lesson planning, and communication to resource management have now been refreshed by the effective and efficient management using our new system.

Based on figures from last year, staff absence levels have significantly improved, suggesting that the school environment has had a major positive effect on staff morale and well-being. The average total working days lost in 2007/8 was 8.4% but only 5.7% for 2008/9 – a significant drop. Comparison of the spring term indicates an even bigger decrease (6.8% compared with 3.46%) and this is in spite of the under-lying pressures brought about by Pay and Grading which basically engulfed staff in January 2009, just as we moved into this beautiful new building and were looking forward to a new and positive chapter in Talbot's future.

Within 18 months of moving to the new school, we found recruitment challenging. It appeared that what we felt was a positive and exciting opportunity, was perceived by those beyond the school community, to be a period of uncertainty, hard work and un-necessary challenge. The school was in a good position, we'd had an Ofsted inspection that recognised the school as one which was "Good with many Outstanding features", a strong leadership team and a supportive and effective Governing Body, yet we couldn't attract candidates. In April 2008 we advertised for a Deputy Head, and attracted 2 candidates. In October 2008, we secured 8. In February 2009, we advertised for 2 Assistant Head posts and attracted 42 inquiries!

During the build up to the move, the leadership team emphasised the need for change, and encouraged the whole community to evaluate their own roles and in light of the transformation agenda. Some staff saw the move to the new school as a 'water shed' a point at which they would leave their posts, mainly to retire, but in some cases to pursue other careers. This, we feel worked to the schools strengths, ensuring that as far as possible the staff team facing the challenge of a new school were motivated, positive and enthusiastic about the move. Whilst in many cases this was correct for some staff who, have remained at the school for many years, the challenge of doing things differently has continued to prove difficult, for others.

The leadership team were clear in their need to restructure the teaching team, and the transformation agenda gave clarity and definition to this. A new staffing structure was consulted upon, and teaching vacancies were introduced and appointed ready for September. The school had functioned with a higher than normal number of vacancies for the previous 12 months, but this was unavoidable due to the response to advertisements as previously mentioned, and the time needed to formulate a new structure. The summer of 2009 saw fewer than average changes in staff, those joining the team were in excess of those leaving which in turn was significantly below what we'd expect at this time. This suggests that on the whole, staff are secure and confident about their current posts and aren't looking to move on – particularly where support staff are concerned.

Access, Inclusion and Enrichment

Over a number of years, Talbot has addressed the behavioural needs of its young people, through a consistent and holistic approach to positive behaviour strategies. As a Team Teach school, we have ensured the safe and effective support for our young people who display complex behaviour. This has been through delivery of high quality staff training, closely monitored behaviour support plans and carefully applied physical interventions where necessary. Of the 132 students on roll in 2009, only 17 had the need for a behaviour

programme (a reduction of 2 on the previous year). From January to July 2009, the number of incidences recorded was down from 67 for the same period in the previous year to 56 this year. Overall the number of incidences, accidents and occasions of positive handling recorded for January – July 2009 were down 15% on the same period for the previous year. Talbot achieved its long-term aspiration of achieving the Team Teach Gold Standard award in July 2009, for outstanding practice in the area of holistic approaches to positive behaviour management.

Talbot has provided work experience opportunities for many students over the proceeding years, however a new location, encouraged us to formalise our approach in this. The challenge for the school, was the appropriateness of providing work placements to young people not much older than those attending the school (we range from 11 – 19 years) whilst remaining loyal to our commitment to promoting positive approaches to disability. In our new location both the Newfield with Talbot community recognises and supports diversity and personalisation of learning. It was therefore no-longer felt to be appropriate for Newfield students to come through to Talbot for work placements, where the emphasis is on helping and caring for young people, whilst on the other hand we are trying to build relationships based on equality . This decision was pivotal in guiding our thoughts through the maze of possibilities about how to support Newfield's Work Related Learning curriculum, yet underpinning it with the right philosophical understanding.

Of all the opportunities that were ever going to be on offer to the school community, those which resulted from our co-location were always going to be the most exciting. Little work had been undertaken with Newfield prior to the move, simply because of the priorities facing the leadership teams of both schools, but of Newfield in particular. From the 1st day of our co-location in January, it was very clear to all that this was the most important and far reaching decision taken within the whole of the BSF programme, and the one which would have the greatest impact on the Every Child Matters agenda for all of the children in the two communities. Lunchtimes offer the opportunity to share a common theme of meeting both social and practical needs. Students from Newfield are at least aware that students who attend Talbot are here in the world and have an opportunity to observe the challenges that they face. From day 1, the leadership team of Talbot have been very clear that there are no "No go areas" either physically or philosophically, and that we can be asked anything and an answer will be provided. No-one should be constrained by worries over language and the choice of words needed to understand the behaviour and actions of some of our young people. If we don't like the chosen word, we will offer a better alternative and show others a "better way". We've always been very clear, that if we don't educate young people, this can result in ignorant adults, and such people say and do unreasonable things. Our young people, from the two communities are a celebration of our differences but also our common agenda – to develop young people able to face a complex and demanding society in a confident and secure way.

When developing the dining facility, we went through all kinds of phases, including a separate Talbot room through to what we have today – a shared dining experience. Even when we opened in January, we were still be being offered flower troughs to provide a low-level separation for the two queues! (These were late arriving, were not required and subsequently are somewhere decorating Newfield!) Newfield students have seen our young

people being fed either orally or through gastro-tubes, and not one has made a comment – in fact once you’ve seen it once, there’s nothing to talk about.

Both student communities are inquisitive of each other and through our gentle approach to co-location and inclusion, we are equipping all of our young people with the skills to communicate and understand each other’s needs. All students, have been eager to find new areas of the two school’s in which to spend time, Talbot students tend to run for “escape” onto the top floor of Newfield or onto their recreational grounds, whilst Newfield students simply want to find the Roof Terrace or want to see our Hydrotherapy Pool. Our approach to this has been collectively respectful of both the needs of students and the wishes of the leadership teams. Newfield staff and students have become additional eyes and ears in our need to provide a safe and secure environment for vulnerable students moving unexpectedly beyond our school door, whilst Talbot has provided a “bolt hole” into which young people have been invited into, to share their thoughts, when engaging in “the wrong thing at the wrong time” .

Who would have thought that by the end of the academic year, Talbot would be sharing it’s 1st ever Prom with Newfield? The ripples from this were felt far and wide across the whole community, and the positive impact it had on everyone from the students themselves, to staff both present and absent, to parent/carers and Governors, was an unexpected delight. Our young people shared a formal occasion on which to celebrate their completion of full-time education together with their Newfield peers, and it sent signals across the whole community about the shared context in which we are all working. The learning needs of our community are all individual – the personalised learning agenda is high in all our considerations, the challenge is simply the approaches we use to achieve these. Staff from Talbot have presented and lead discussions on the needs of our school and openly worked with groups within Newfield on Disability Awareness courses. A joint Student Council has been held and preliminary ways of collaborating have been agreed. For example, students are unanimous in their desire to share a common uniform colour. Staff, parents and carers might be anxious about this – how will we spot one of our “runners”, but we can’t ignore this powerful agreement. We have been committed and confident about the co-location agenda for the two schools, and students have risen well to the challenge. It would be wrong of the school to simply ignore opinions, when they provide equal challenge to us.

Makaton signing sessions have been introduced within Newfield and Talbot for the Newfield community and the positive approaches used have consolidated attitudes to those with a disability. For example, signing sessions have been delivered by students from Talbot, not staff and this presents the positive side to disability and challenges preformed ideas on the skills and abilities of our community. Other community groups have contributed to the overall ethos of empowerment and person centred planning, which has now taken hold across the school. This places young people and their families at the heart of the learning process and encourages partnership working on a totally different level to that previously explored. Talbot is breaking new ground in this area, on a national level, and the agenda for change continues to gain momentum.

Partnerships and Performance

Clearly our most remarkable forming relationship has been the one with Newfield and we are delighted that the two staff teams have so easily slipped into collaborative and productive practice. We feel our curriculum developments will be enriched by the opportunities opening up for all the young people on our site, and relish the opportunity to further expand the innovative and creative solutions being considered. For example, the two schools had a shared concern about the direction that ICT was taking, and the way in which we were working with our managed service provider Civica. Both Headteachers were involved excessively in the day to day operational aspects and clearly this couldn't be sustained. Together we developed a job description for an ICT Strategy Manager, and appointed our first co-located member of staff from July. Whilst this role is in its infancy and has yet to be fully developed, we feel that this type of appointment is yet another indicator of how co-location can bring a whole range of benefits to a school community through collaborative ventures which have financial repercussions. We doubt that as a Special School, we would have been able to appoint a senior ICT professional for the salary that the school could afford, but that by pooling our resources this became possible. Providing the two school's continue to establish common grounds for collaboration, we feel that further joint appointments are clearly of benefit for all.

As a Specialist Special School, we are enthusiastic about establishing effective partnerships with our partner schools which include a number of mainstream primary and secondary schools. Already we have agreed initial priorities for these to be developed, and we are proud to be a showcase as a centre of excellence for young people with Cognition and Learning Difficulties. Colleagues in other special and mainstream schools share our delight at the quality of provision now in place for these students and together we are establishing new standards in the quality of teaching and learning for such young people. We are passionate about the learning needs of the young people we teach, and celebrate their achievements through a wide variety of media. The resources now in place in Talbot, have been instrumental in making learning more accessible for the whole of our population, and support us in giving recognition to the enormous strides in their academic and personal development, that all of our young people make.

Conclusion

There is no doubting in the minds of the staff, Governors and parent/carers that the move to our new building has been an enormous success. For us, the measure of this is in the confidence and personal effectiveness of our young people. The impact that those working most intimately with our young people, have on their ability to interact with the learning opportunities and environment, and the successes that we all recognise, but to which we all contribute.

One parent is convinced that the only reason her son is now talking regularly is because of his move to this school. Young people can engage with learning when they feel secure and ready to do so. They have room to sit back from the group, and don't have to engage because there is no-where for them to retreat to. Staff, have room to work alternatively with students, in spaces other than the classroom, for example in the groups rooms, chat rooms or break out spaces. This impacts on everyone's ability to relax and consider how

best to approach the fundamental task of teaching and learning. The young person above, needed time to feel comfortable about his surroundings. Time away from the group, to walk down the corridor without getting close to people, to work with staff who felt relaxed and confident about the building. Once this was secure in the young man's eyes, he joined in with the class, engaged with the learning and began giving of his best. This success isn't always reflected in performance tables or achievement criteria, but it is the start of a wonderful journey, for all of us involved with him.

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