

Specialist leader of education case study

Dean Jones, Wickersley School and Sports College, Rotherham

Dean Jones is assistant headteacher and director of teacher training at Wickersley School and Sports College, an outstanding 2,000 pupil 11-18 community school in the South Yorkshire town of Rotherham. Before taking on the teacher training leadership role he was head of geography at Wickersley, which he has taught at since qualifying as a teacher 12 years ago. As a specialist leader of education (SLE), Dean specialises in teaching and learning.

The development and support of others is part of Dean's professional DNA. As well as heading up teacher training at Wickersley he also leads interventions for under-achieving pupils and school-to-school support on teaching and learning. As Wickersley is a teaching school and part of the Learners First alliance of schools, Dean leads the professional development element in a qualified teacher programme for schools in Rotherham and the wider area.

Dean joined the SLE programme in late 2011 as part of the first intake. "When the SLE programme emerged they were looking for people who could be part of support programmes across more than one school," he says. "I saw it as a route to do more of the work I had already been doing."

At the time Wickersley was supporting a school in Barnsley as a national support school. Dean was part of the leadership team directing learning as assistant head at the school. The partnership saw the school make dramatic strides. It quickly came out of special measures with inadequate lessons dropping from 48 per cent to just 3 per cent in six months. The school also achieved its best ever GCSE results and improved its value-added score.

Dean's work at the Barnsley school, which included the evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning, prepared him well for his SLE work. Soon after he became an SLE, another school on the outskirts of Sheffield, asked him to develop and lead the implementation of a whole-school approach to feedback.

Dean proposed a feedback model at the Sheffield school that he had used in Barnsley. This had earned the praise of Ofsted inspectors, who said the approach had helped to improve learning by providing students with better guidance about how they could improve.

Over the next six months, Dean spent a day a week at the school, working with senior leaders to develop a range of strategies on priority evaluation areas of differentiation, formative assessment and questioning. "We introduced a new school-wide lesson planning format and a programme of individualised support for specific departments and teachers," he explains. "We also put in place a school-wide system of monitoring and evaluation so that we could review the impact of the approach, as well as a model for quality assurance led by each department's middle leaders."

The impact of Dean and his colleagues' involvement at the Sheffield school was rapid. There was an almost immediate improvement in the school's own judgements of student's progress in lessons - from 53 per cent good or better lessons in December 2011 to 75 per cent in May 2012. Inadequate teaching judgements plummeted - with none in the May 2012 whole school review. The school now has a house style for lesson planning - a development described as "outstanding" in a review conducted by national leader of education Tim Moralee. "Written feedback to students improved significantly and through feedback from students we realised that this was a major factor in their overall ability to improve their attainment," says Dean. "Crucially, other leaders have been left better placed to evaluate and improve teaching and learning."

The legacy of increased leadership capacity and capability at the school is a key aim of any SLE intervention, says Dean. "The first thing to look at is building capacity," he explains. "You need a clear picture at first through observing and scrutinising lessons, and analysing the data on pupil progress. Once you've learned about the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning you can support middle leaders and teachers through development and learning programmes. This might involve peer coaching so that the best staff develop other staff in the school."

SLE work is challenging but exciting, says Dean. He says he is motivated by the desire to make a real difference to the achievements of pupils. He usually finds teachers and leaders who share this desire to make a difference, as well as pupils who are capable and want to achieve. SLE support is about supporting fellow professionals to apply tried and tested approaches that will help them fulfil those aims more effectively. Part of this work is about challenging and raising expectations of what everyone can achieve, he says.

“The vast majority of teachers are fully committed to turning the school around but there might be some who are responsible for getting the school into the position it is in,” he says. “You have to make sure expectations are clear. If a school has been placed in special measures then this is a very good tool for doing that. On an individual teacher level it might be about setting targets and providing the support to meet those.

In almost all of the schools I have worked with the students have been very capable – much like the students in Wickersley. What is different, though, is the expectations that the school and the community have for the students. These are often not high enough. This is often as simple as teachers not challenging students when they have their ties undone or they are using their mobile phones in lessons. But once you have introduced high expectations students quickly rise to meet that.”

Dean says it is important to quickly establish your credibility as a teacher once you start working with a new school as an SLE. “Relationship building is vital,” he says. “I always aim to support staff through team teaching or look to lead intervention classes for cohorts of students, for example to support study skills. It’s important that they see you as a teacher. This gives you credibility with the staff.”

Quick wins are another key consideration in the early days of a deployment, Dean adds. “You can run some CPD events and offer some tips to bring classrooms to life. This might be about having a clear, positive ethos and introducing the consistent management of behaviour that might have been lacking”.

“We are showing them day-to-day practical strategies that worked in other classes in other schools. It’s not about you standing there lecturing. It’s about working with them so that when you do step away they will be able to carry on.”

What advice would Dean give prospective SLEs? “You have to have the will to make a difference to the school and beyond,” he says. “It’s a good idea to talk to other SLEs to get an insight into what is involved. You can get a good idea of what it entails by working with one in your own school or doing your own school-to-school work.”

While the benefits of SLE support are clear for the schools being supported, it is also apparent that the role enhances leadership in the SLE’s own school, says Dean.

“The better the teachers and leaders in our own school, the better the deal for students in our school,” he says. There’s also a boost to the SLE’s own professional development.

“We get real leadership gains by building professional development networks,” says Dean. “The SLE programme empowers a normal classroom leader to lead. It improves their confidence and leadership skills. At Wickersley this is really important because as a teaching school alliance leadership at all levels should be at the centre of everything that we do.”