

# Specialist leader of education case study

## Pete Sides, Notre Dame High School, Sheffield

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Pete Sides is a maths teacher at Notre Dame High School in Sheffield. He had been head of the school's maths department for 16 years when he decided that he wanted fresh challenges.

The school's lead role in the Hallam teaching school alliance – which is a large alliance reaching out to over 100 secondary and primary schools across Sheffield, South Yorkshire and the wider region – gave him that opportunity. In February 2012 he became standards consultant for the alliance and an SLE specialising in maths teaching – one of the alliance's team of 28 SLEs.

Pete's school-to-school support work has deep roots which predate the SLE programme. "In a way I was doing this role already," he says. "I'd been doing some support work already through the Leading Edge programme and our status as a National Support School. The rest of the country was catching up with the way we worked. This has opened up a lot more opportunities for me because now there is a structure to work in. I'd been head of department for a long time and this came along at the right time for me. I was ready for something new."

He divides his time evenly between the classroom and his standards, school evaluation, CPD and teaching alliance work. Retaining a 50 per cent timetable ensures that he has classroom credibility with teachers when he goes into schools, he says.

Pete's SLE work takes a variety of forms. This will include the mentoring of department heads and mini-Ofsted style department evaluations but the bulk of his work is taken up with the delivery of a programme he has developed called RAMP (Raising Achievement in Maths). This is delivered in six twilight sessions over a term or half-term. It focuses on classroom strategy and practice and is aimed at leaders and teachers of maths who want to reinvigorate their teaching.

"There will be issues that are addressed that will be generic to teachers of all subject areas but there will also be times when the very unique elements of maths will be focused upon," says Pete.

**"It's more of a case that maths teachers think they are different but they aren't really. They often come across kids who are demotivated about maths. A common response from many teachers is to work around that barrier and give them an easier route. But the best way is to challenge them and to try and develop the kids' thinking."**

Once the course is completed Pete is mindful that improvements and changes need to be sustained beyond the programme. He takes a collaborative approach when delivering RAMP to ensure this, working closely with teachers and heads of department and incorporating their ideas and practice into its delivery.

What is Pete aiming for when he goes into schools as an SLE? "It's about raising attainment for children and raising standards of teaching," he says. "Every school is different and every headteacher and head of department has their own needs. When I have my first meeting with a school I will try to judge the background and where people are. Quite often they're unsure of exactly what support they need. Generally the majority of schools that I have been into are interested in developing the quality of staff and turn the quality of teaching and results. I come in with suggestions but it's not about doing a blanket approach for everyone."

The majority of Pete's current SLE work has been with secondary schools in the neighbouring Barnsley local authority. His deployment is part of a wider package of support being offered by the Hallam teaching school alliance. "The schools are mostly in disadvantaged areas with high unemployment," he says. "Many of the kids have low self esteem and low aspirations and maths is bottom of the pile."

Pete works with a wide variety of teaching professionals in these schools, including new and established heads of department as well as new teachers and those who have been in teaching a long time but may have lost their way and want to improve their practice with fresh ideas.

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“The impact of what I do is hard to measure and I can only claim anecdotal success so far. For example with one of the Barnsley schools the maths department has made big improvements. It came out well in a recent inspection and anecdotally is now one of the leading departments in the school. The head of department has to take a lot of credit for that but I would like to think that I made a contribution. I’ve been writing to the schools I’ve been working with for feedback to include in my application for the NCETM (National Centre of Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics) CPD standard and nearly all the departments that I’ve worked with have been very complementary and talk about how I have helped to move them on.”

The SLE role does create challenges on a personal and school level, says Pete. With growing interest in the services of SLEs Pete has to make sure that his other responsibilities aren’t compromised. This might be resolved by referring inquiries to SLEs in other teaching school alliances. In the early days of his SLE role Pete found himself putting in a lot of extra hours on deployments but with the role beginning to pay for itself he can now contemplate getting time off in lieu.

The vast majority of deployments are successful but Pete can point to one that did not work out quite as well.

“We don’t always get it right. We did a programme with one school which felt that they did not need the focus that I was trying to develop with them. The best advice I can give here is to keep an open mind and keep talking to the head of school or department and where necessary re-negotiate the support you are offering.”

Pete thinks that understanding of the SLE role is growing all the time. “There are a number of alliances across this area now, so schools are beginning to understand what it is SLEs can do as well. It perhaps hasn’t helped that different schools and alliances have different approaches and there has been this fuzziness with how the role differs to ASTs, for example. But once you go into a school it becomes clear to them.”

Maths teachers are lucky to have the support of an active national organisation in the shape of the NCETM to support their development, says Pete. This is a useful support network for SLEs with a maths specialism and he points to the SLE toolkit on the organisation’s website as an invaluable support tool for anyone considering the SLE role, whether they are maths specialists or not.

“We are lucky that we have a body like this,” he says. “There isn’t necessarily a similar kind of body for English or teaching and learning. There are lots of SLEs around the country doing great work but they aren’t necessarily sharing this on a national basis. That’s something I think which we need to consider for SLEs across the board.”

Pete believes that the SLE role has had a big impact on his own professional development. “I am constantly improving as a teacher because I am always checking and testing the teaching and learning element of my own job,” he says. “I was so busy once just doing my job but now I am an SLE I’m focusing much more on my craft.

“I’m 51 now and I’ll be retiring in nine years’ time. I could have sat back on my results as a head of department but instead I’ve been given these opportunities to contribute outside the school. I’m not going to solve the problems in maths now but the more that people work together on these challenges the better.”

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