



Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership

A Whole Authority Approach to Student Involvement in School Improvement

Bedfordshire, a County North of London, currently operates on a three-tier system of 222 Lower, Middle, Upper and Special schools, although this is currently under review. It has four key strands of activity:

1. Leadership
2. Curriculum Development
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Student Voice

A number of strategies have been employed to address each of these strands. Since September 2004, Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership (BSIP), which is part of the Bedfordshire LEA, has employed Gap Year Students as Student Voice Consultants. Their primary remit is Student Voice activities, however the strands overlap, so the consultants engage with all four on a regular basis. The employment of these young people coincided with the division of Bedfordshire into seven Learning Communities, and four consultants are currently employed.

These Communities consist of up to four Upper Schools, and all their feeder Middle and Lower Schools, the idea being to facilitate networking and sharing of resources amongst schools in each Learning Community. Ideally, these Learning Communities will become entirely self-governing and self-funded over time, with all schools buying into the Learning Community. The Student Voice Consultants are linked to particular Learning Communities to facilitate, support and sustain Student Involvement initiatives, both in individual schools and in whole LC projects.

As non-school staff, the Student Voice Consultants are not timetabled; as a result the capacity they can provide is enormous, and the benefits considerable. They provide training on a number of Student Involvement initiatives, including School Council, Playground Buddies, Students as Researchers, Students as Learning Partners and Student Leadership and Facilitation, and new packages are constantly under development. Training is usually delivered to groups of Lower, Middle or Upper Schools according to demand, and it is delivered free of charge, with Learning Communities and/or individual schools providing funding for room hire, refreshments and transport. Student Voice Consultants provide ongoing support with implementing what the students/pupils have learned into their school, and follow up progress at regular intervals with all schools who have received training.

One of the key aims in Bedfordshire is to ensure a multi-agency approach wherever possible. The Student Voice Consultants are frequently approached

by different agencies to facilitate consultation with young people. Recent projects have included working with young people to consider options for a solution to radioactive waste for the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM), carrying out focus groups on inclusion with young people to gather their opinions on school, and on Mental Health to inform a CAMHS consultation, and working with students on the County Council's budget allocation for the coming financial year. As young people, the consultants are of a similar age to the students they work with, meaning the students tend to be more open and honest in their dialogue than they would perhaps be with adults. The fact that consultants are addressed by their first names may contribute to this.

The consultants work closely with a number of other people in School Improvement. There are School Improvement Advisors who have a specific responsibility for Student Involvement as part of their role, and they are also linked to Learning Communities. Each Learning Community now employs a Learning Community Leader, whose role also includes a remit of Student Voice. This person may be a Headteacher within the community and take on the responsibilities of the job in addition to their usual role; they may be a retired Headteacher from the area or may even be from out of County with no previous knowledge of the Authority. The Leader can be useful in terms of the contact they have in schools, and can provide essential support for Student Involvement.

A Lower School Headteacher has been seconded for one day a week to work both with the consultants and with schools around the County on improving engagement with Student Involvement, particularly in relation to Teaching and Learning. This has resulted in the provision of Professional Study Groups (PSGs) for staff to plan and implement action research in their schools. Staff will attend a PSG, bringing with them a small number of pupils from a class they teach. The session, which is approximately two hours long, gives pupils and teachers the opportunity to discuss their lessons together, discussing what works and what does not, and then plan a lesson collaboratively. Examining Teaching and Learning in this way enables both parties to speak openly, having a dialogue surrounding what works and what doesn't, thereby increasing the impact of Teaching and Learning by giving teachers an increased appreciation of pupils' learning styles

At the creation of Learning Communities, each was allocated £2000, ring fenced specifically to support Student Voice activity. Several Learning Communities created Student Steering Groups, which consist of pupils and students from all three phases, facilitated by Student Voice Consultants and School Improvement Advisors. Several of these groups have planned and run Learning Community Student Voice Conferences, one of which was the Student Extravaganza. This was planned by the members of the group, with the linked Student Voice Consultant providing organisational support. Twenty schools attended this event, which included workshops on different Student Voice strands, teamwork activities, a session for staff on Student Involvement

in School Improvement and allocated time for action planning. Several schools who had previously not engaged in any Student Voice activity implemented School Councils following this event, and others embarked upon new projects, showing the value of bringing a Learning Community together. Primary Learning Networks (PLNs) also exist within Learning Communities and are supported by Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) and Lead Teachers.

BSIP has recently written and published a Student Voice Handbook, outlining many strands of Student Voice and giving advice on effective implementation. All schools in Bedfordshire have received a handbook, and will continue to receive regular updates to include in the handbook as new packages and products are created. The handbook also included an Ofsted-type questionnaire, which schools were invited to complete and return, in order that BSIP could gain an accurate overview of how advanced each school and Learning Community was, and so direct resources accordingly.

BSIP also works regularly with other agencies, including Looked After Children, the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Bedfordshire's Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) to name but a few. Student Voice Consultants work closely with these agencies to support particular projects, for example by becoming mentors for Young People, running focus groups and conducting interviews. The partnership has also played a key role in a recent Pupil Participation Consultation, helping to map out participation within the authority. Networking in this way helps to ensure Student Voice becomes more central in service provision and can increase capacity by sharing time and resources.

The Children's Conference is another example of networking within the Authority. This conference is an annual event which is run for Middle School Students across Bedfordshire in order to obtain their views on issues affecting them. Five schools that had attended last year's conference were invited back to be workshop facilitators, and seven schools, including two special schools, attended as delegates. This year's conference had the theme of the Every Child Matters agenda, with each of the five facilitating schools delivering workshops on one theme of the agenda over two days. Before the close of the conference each school wrote an Action Plan based on what they had learnt over the course of the conference, the implementation of which Student Voice Consultants will support.

BSIP also has strong links with national and international organisations. Working with the NCSL's Networked Learning Group (NLG) has led to attendance at conferences in networks around the country, where Student Voice Consultants have taken responsibility for running workshops and for evaluating conferences. The partnership has attended and contributed to an ESRC seminar series entitled, 'Engaging Critically with Pupil Voice', meeting practitioners and academics from around the world. Student Voice Consultants have worked with the English Secondary Students' Association (ESSA) to create a toolkit entitled 'Confidence in Communication' to be used

for training students in becoming leaders in their school or network. BSIP also income generates by visiting other networks to speak to students and staff about Student Voice, by running training and delivering workshops around the country. All of these links have given BSIP the opportunity to work with and learn from others, as well as sharing expertise in order to give more students from around the country the opportunity and skills to make their voices heard.

The goal for the future is for every pupil and student in Bedfordshire to have a say in issues that affect them. In order to achieve this, the County aims to have each Learning Community employing their own Student Voice Consultant, meaning they will be able to concentrate their time on a smaller number of schools, thereby achieving greater impact. The consultants would then be based in schools whilst retaining the central support and access to the expertise of the BSIP team. Ideally, all schools will realise the benefits of engaging with Student Voice by using the capacity, knowledge and support of the consultants, and will embark upon Student Voice initiatives because they believe in them and because giving students a voice is central to the ethos of the school, not for accountability purposes.

Working together as an Authority to support all schools in giving their students a voice in this way can be very effective. Potential challenges include getting all schools on board and finding funding, and building a support network around colleagues such as Student Voice Consultants.

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