



School's Voice

Alexis Conway (Kingslea Primary School) on Strategic Improvement

Following a recent Ofsted Inspection Kingslea Primary School were judged "Good" overall and "Outstanding" in the areas of 'Behaviour and attitudes', 'Personal development' and 'Leadership and management.' We caught up with headteacher, Alexis Conway to talk about his approach to strategy, leadership and school improvement.



So Alexis, can you please describe your school context?

'Kingslea Primary is a two-form entry in Horsham with 420 children from the surrounding local area, mostly central Horsham. I have been at the school as headteacher for eight years and the staff body contains a mix of long-serving and new staff. Historically, we have always been clear on having a curriculum that is not just comprised of Maths and English. For example, we maintain a permanent display, known as our charter, encouraging teachers and children to go out and engage in wider learning activities - build a snowman, playing conkers, going to the cinema etc.'

Can you tell me more about how this approach to the curriculum is embedded through the staff body at Kingslea?

'We have a curriculum team, to whom the various subject leads report into. The curriculum team, informed by feedback from the various leads, then decide the areas of strategic focus for the school for the term and year. This model also allows for interaction between the various subject strands – no lead is ever working in isolation'.

Speaking more broadly, how does strategy and development work at Kingslea?

'Strategy works at three levels here at Kingslea: rational planning, wavy planning, and opportunistic planning. Rational, or traditional school planning, was essential at the early stages of my headship to achieve consistency and has helped to secure the fundamentals.

However, we find that using this form of planning alone can be limiting. We now engage heavily in creative or 'wavy' planning; this is when we know where we are and where we want to be, but not necessarily how to get there. We provide rough parameters and encourage our teachers to have a go at getting to the end goal in the way they think is best. The leadership team then set success measures as we progress using evidence from staff on their individual approaches e.g. notes, proformas etc.

Creative or 'wavy' planning is therefore heavily led by those on the ground. I am very aware of the illusion of control and that as a headteacher, the systems I put in place are interpreted very differently by different individuals; wavy planning helps capitalise on these different perspectives and approaches.



Because we work in this way, most of our developments come from the teachers; my job is to balance their proposals and decide what to do in what orders. We are always clear that those who find the problem can also be trusted to find a solution!

The third level of strategic planning employed here at Kingslea is opportunistic planning – my personal favourite! Often people forget to look for ad hoc opportunities that crop up as and when, when they are heavily engaged in forward planning and structured improvement. It is important however to look out for these wherever possible. For example, we teach Mandarin to one of our year groups as a result of a conversation I had in a local Chinese takeaway with a woman who also taught Mandarin at a private school.'

Given your staff led approach to strategic development, what challenges do you face as a school in implementing change?

'Time is obviously always a challenge, even though teachers are given time specifically for their subjects. The paradox between stability and change is also challenging – too much change in a short space of time causes initiation fatigue. We offer coaching to help teachers manage change and encourage 'tweaking', rather than big major changes.'

Can you tell us about some key areas that you have been successful in implementing change at Kingslea?

'We have implemented positive change in the quality of teaching and learning through instructional video coaching. Every teacher in our school has a coach, and every coach also has a coach. Coaches will video elements of their mentee's lesson and both individuals will then watch back the footage together for reflection. Seeing yourself in action is far more powerful than any verbal or written feedback you could receive. This does take investment in terms and time and money to do but is worth it and the teachers know that we are invested in their development.'

We also engage in peer-to-peer review. I cover a teacher and teaching assistant's lesson so that they can do a whole school walk around from Reception to Year 6 to observe good practice. They may then choose to implement strategies which they observed in their own classroom. For example, all of our teachers now use visualisers to model learning, be it in maths, English or art, after observing this practice during a walk around.'

What have been the most valuable lessons you have learnt from all of this?

'Getting the culture right in the school is key; if you can achieve a culture of trust and accountability, then you don't have to be as direct and instructional, and you can allow teachers to use their professionalism and creativity in strategy development. Culture takes time to develop, and consistency helps cultivate trust. Competency is important but so is authenticity – it is easy to trust those who have the children and their education at the heart of everything they do. My job as headteacher is to know something about everything, but my subject leads have the real in-depth knowledge which enable them to lead effective change.'

Any advice for other schools on a strategic development journey?



'Be confident, be brave and keep the children at the heart of what you are doing; if you do this, you will be right no matter the DfE policy or Ofsted focus. Take risks where appropriate and avoid jumping on the bandwagons of best practice! 18 years of headship and having been through difficult times does make it easier to look back and have this attitude, and we are lucky enough to be in a stable enough position to engage in creative and opportunistic planning. However, I want to empower and encourage others to take the route that works for them – their staff know the context of their school and what is likely to work within it better than anyone else.'