



School's Voice

Woodlands Meed on school staff apprenticeships



Woodlands Meed, located in the heart of Burgess Hill, welcomes students between two and nineteen years old, all with special educational needs and disabilities. As a setting, they are strong advocates of school staff apprenticeships and have engaged in a wide variety of programmes. Adam Rowland, headteacher, explains how they have utilised these numerous apprenticeships to support staff development.

Can you tell us about the history of staff apprenticeships at Woodlands Meed?

When West Sussex County Council first offered initial training on the benefits of apprenticeships, I thought it was a no brainer as the apprenticeship levy offers free funding for a range of roles that are often hard to find training for. Since then, we have accessed close to £90,000 of free funding from the levy to finance a wide range of apprenticeship programmes.

What sort of apprenticeships have your staff accessed?

We have placed staff on six different apprenticeship programmes so far. The first programme is the Level 3 Teaching Assistant (TA) qualification, which four of our staff members have completed. All four were new to the role of TA and the apprenticeship offered broad training which they could complete flexibly.

The second type of programme on offer is the Level 5 and 6 Teacher apprenticeship. These are available to professionals with a degree who want to get a teaching qualification on the job at no cost to them. All four of our staff who have completed this qualification thus far have been TAs or Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs). This option counters the argument that there is no progression available for HLTAs (so long as they have a degree).

We have also engaged individual staff members in several unique apprenticeship opportunities. One member of premises staff has completed a Level 3 Horticultural and Landscape Construction Operative apprenticeship. This has given him the qualification to allow him to weed spray the site, which otherwise would have required a training course funded at cost to the school. His confidence has significantly grown as a result of the formal qualification, and he is now a more motivated, driven member of staff. He is able to think strategically about planting across the school site and brings his ideas to me directly.

Other apprenticeships we have offered to individuals include Level 5 Children, Young People and Families Manager, Level 3 Business Administration and Level 4 School Business Professional.

When our Level 4 School Business Professional apprentice was recruited to the role of school business support, she did not have a formal qualification in this area. However, we recognised her as having the cognitive ability, people skills, organisational capacity,

and financial knowledge necessary for the role. By engaging the apprenticeship, this individual has progressed through the pay grades and is now an exceptional business manager, currently supporting other business managers in the area to best allocate SEND funding.

How have apprenticeships changed your recruitment process?

Having apprenticeship routes which facilitate on the job learning means that we are able to appoint people to roles based on personal skills, rather than formal qualifications, and I have greater confidence in external recruitment. For example, our Level 3 Business Administration apprentice had the perfect demeanor and people skills for a receptionist role, but lacked formal administrative qualifications, having come from the catering sector. The apprenticeship route enabled her to develop the skillset to support her customer service competencies.

How do you manage release time for study given the busy school environment?

For apprentices in administrative roles, we allow them to make their own time for study during the week. For our teacher apprentices, we build in release time for planning into their timetables. Teacher apprentices also go to evening college sessions. This is the compromise for accessing free training in a full-time paid role.

Do you run a mentor scheme as part of your offer?

Our staff members who have already been through the Level 5 Teaching apprenticeship, act as mentors to those who are currently undertaking or just about to start the apprenticeship themselves. For those staff undertaking unique programmes, they have the opportunity to network with colleagues completing the same qualification through their apprenticeship providers.

What are the keys to effectively supporting staff undertaking apprenticeships?

Simple things! If staff need time to do their training, give them the time. I understand that this time is given at a cost to the school, but I think that it is more beneficial to our organisation to invest in long term learning. Especially for the Level 5 Teacher apprentices! Allowing staff to develop through on the job learning supports my succession planning - if I ever need a teacher and don't get anyone applying, I know that I have people training internally who can bridge the gap in the future.

Apprentices also need coaching and support from their line management to fulfil their criteria and make time for study. It can be all too easy to get sucked into the day job! Keep in mind that learning processes take time and apprentices need to immerse themselves in learning. Apprenticeships are more than tick box exercises.