

National Low-Attainers Pilot (LAP)

Childwall School, Liverpool: Effective preparation for the pilot

The school is a large 11–19 comprehensive with 1260 pupils with a predominantly inner city intake reflecting a range of socio-economic backgrounds. It takes pupils from over 50 primary feeder schools each year.

For change to be successful and sustainable, careful preparation is essential. This was recognised by the senior staff of Childwall when they embarked on devising and implementing an alternative curriculum for their Year 7 low-attaining pupils. As a result, the school spent a full school year putting together what has come to be called Learning in the Fast Track (LIFT).

Initial meetings – autumn term

In keeping with the school's commitment to inclusion, the senior staff members leading the pilot were very keen to involve as many colleagues as possible in the planning process for the initiative. Time was found in the normal meeting schedule to convey to staff the exciting potential of the pilot and the many benefits it offered to the pupils, teachers and school generally and all were invited to participate. This led to a number of lunchtime sessions that were very well attended and where an action plan for the preparation year was agreed.

An important dimension of planning was the collaboration with Creative Partnerships, an organisation that offered the services of practising artists who work in a way best suited to the needs of a school. In Childwall's case, they joined initial meetings to discuss how they might best facilitate more imaginative ways of delivering the curriculum and their involvement was built into the action plan.

Three residentials – spring and summer terms

The school is in no doubt that much of the success of their preparation year was due to the three residentials that ran from after school on Friday to late afternoon on Saturday. These provided colleagues with the opportunity to work together for extended periods of time in comfortable surroundings and enjoy eating and socialising together, with the inevitable benefits such as working with people not normally encountered on a day-to-day basis and team building.

At the first residential an outside speaker was used to reinforce the ambitions of the pilot and to inspire staff to think creatively and not be restricted by the existing curriculum arrangements. People then worked in cross-curricular groups to consider new ways of delivering the Key Stage 3 curriculum that would not only engage and motivate pupils with low levels of attainment but also would mesh with the Key Stage 4 progression routes being developed. The major outcome of this first residential was that a skeleton scheme was agreed to which all staff could work.

The second residential focused on pedagogy. Staff recognised that if the new curriculum was to be successful, it must provide a teaching and learning experience that directly addressed the needs of level 3 learners. After considering what were the likely causes of the disaffection evident in some of their Year 7 pupils, the staff explored learning styles and multiple intelligences and how they might inform what happens in the classroom. Arising from this residential was the recommendation to senior staff that an amended Key Stage 2 delivery model be adopted for the pilot cohort. Pupils would have a designated teaching base and fewer adults to work with as it was felt that this would promote stronger relationships.

The final residential provided staff with the chance further to discuss how they would apply the pedagogic issues raised previously and finalise the curriculum. Work was mainly undertaken in subject teams and a number of novel approaches were adopted for delivering the Year 7 curriculum, for example technology through the design and cultivation of a garden including a pond and a pergola, science through exploring the workings of a funfair, and English through the thematic scheme 'Liverpool: Our City'.

These ideas led to further planning sessions towards the end of the school year when more detailed schemes were drawn up. Making use of funding that had been made available to prime-pump the pilot, supply teachers were employed to free up the permanent staff to continue with the preparation.

The school is particularly proud of the team spirit that has developed as a result of the opportunities for collaboration between staff and the delegation of responsibility for different components of the curriculum, that when brought together created the alternative provision of Learning in the Fast Track.

The experience of Childwall endorses what research tells us about the need for effective preparation if the curricular change is to be successful. In the year prior to the planned introduction, plenty of time has to be found for staff to work together – ideally off-site in conducive, comfortable surroundings. As well as thinking through the balance of subjects that will be offered and the time allocated to each, it is essential that thought also be given to how the subjects will be taught and what will be expected of the learners. Although the planning sessions need to consider the theory that informs the new practice, it is vital that they are engaging and enjoyable and are directly relevant to the task in hand. The careful use of outside speakers and partners will enrich the preparation.