

Keys to improvement: St. Teresa's Primary School



Overview

St Teresa's Catholic Primary School was rated 'satisfactory' by OFSTED inspectors in 2003. Led by its head and governors, the school wanted to find ways of addressing issues raised in the report while consolidating and building on the school's strengths.

"After being the head of a school for twelve years, there is the danger that you can go off the boil and lose the drive and determination to seek continuous improvement. So the aim for the school is not to coast along in a comfort zone, but for us to find ways to build in challenge and excitement for the children – and for the staff too."

– Nikki Stevens, Headteacher

"You sometimes feel a minister has an idea in the shower in the morning, and it's a green paper by the afternoon", jokes Nikki Stevens, Headteacher of St. Teresa's Catholic Primary School in Rochford, Essex. "So part of the attraction of working with EdisonLearning was that it was a way of rationalising the demands that are made on us. It appealed to us as a way of managing continual improvement in a framework that helped deliver continuity."

"There are lots of things this school has going for it, but that brings its own problems in a way: because we

Key points in this case study

This case study looks at how a school partnership with EdisonLearning in the context of a faith school, and covers these points:

- how a faith school can improve its ethos with EdisonLearning
- developing the base of leadership skills
- assessment for learning strategies
- effective professional development
- improving dialogue with children and parents with termly learning conferences

have been a successful school, we'd never had any support from our education authority. We'd never had any literacy or numeracy consultants in the school – we'd done it all ourselves, and that's fine for a time, but eventually you need some fresh air. After being a head of a school for twelve years, there is the danger that you can go off the boil and lose the drive and determination to seek continuous improvement. So the aim for the school is not to coast along in a comfort zone, but for us to find ways to build in challenge and excitement for the children – and for the staff too."

Ethos and Leadership

“We had a number of strengths in some of the five main areas EdisonLearning works on, and some areas that we needed to develop. But what we wanted to ensure was that we had firmly embedded the strengths before we were in a position to develop in the areas we wanted to improve.”

As might be expected with a church school, ethos was considered a strong area. “Our children were pretty well behaved, and we had an effective code of conduct. But with Edison we have simplified and fine-tuned it even further, and I have to say it is now better than the system we had before.”

“We already had a very clear value system in place that was explicit, and people understood that Christian values underpinned the place. But with EdisonLearning we’ve reviewed the way we promote those values, simplified the terminology, made everything far more explicit to raise the profile of our values far higher than ever we did before. We’ve strengthened what was already a strength in the school, clarified our ethos down to our core values and communicated it more intentionally.”

In leadership too, the early training sessions with EdisonLearning paid dividends. “I used to think I was quite a generous leader but even that has now developed, and we have a much more distributed leadership team across the school. What it means is that we have an

increased capacity for people to undertake significant changes as leaders in their own right, making an impact in key areas of the design across the whole school. It might have been difficult to let go and devolve the leadership, but the buzz you get from seeing others grow and develop makes it worthwhile, and I know that the school’s capacity to function at a higher level is the result of that increased leadership capacity.

When I see the kind of improvements that are happening I have to say I could not have done this on my own.”

Assessment for Learning

Yet another area where the partnership with EdisonLearning yielded fruit was the use of data to feed into the teaching. “We had really good collection of data about the children; it was very well organised, with all sorts of test results we could lay our hands on, from individuals to different groupings, and so on. But the connection between that data and what happened in classroom teaching was pretty tenuous, and that was a huge missing link: what’s the point of having all the data if you don’t use it to the benefit of the children?”

So the school worked with EdisonLearning on assessment for learning, and introducing the online diagnostic assessment system. “The children now sit down to a diagnostic test six times a year, and we require staff to demonstrate that they are taking

note of, and using, the information that the testing provides for them. The children sit assessments in reading and maths units before we teach those elements in the curriculum, so the teachers have a really good idea of who knows what, before they launch into the next section of the literacy or numeracy strategy. It means they know where to plug the gaps, and they can feed that knowledge into their classroom teaching. Our experience with the system has been so positive that we are now looking at our assessment procedures in others areas beside maths and reading. It’s a very exciting development.”

A new curriculum

“One of our most critical needs was met by EdisonLearning’s Core Skills Curriculum. We worked on the basis that while our children were capable, they hadn’t been achieving as well as they should because they weren’t engaged by the curriculum. The QCA curriculum we were using was very tame and lacking in sparkle; the staff weren’t fired up by the materials, so the lessons weren’t all that vibrant. The national curriculum is over twenty years old now and really some of the materials are past their sell-by date. The world is quite different for children now than it was twenty years ago; children are interested in different things, and they expect different things in school.”

But Nikki’s concerns in this area encompassed not just the style of the curriculum, but its purpose too.

“We think it’s important to anticipate what children will need in twenty years’ time. How can we be so presumptuous as to think we know the shape of the world they will live in? We need a curriculum that teaches skills they will be able to use and apply whatever the world looks like.”

“So, where the QCA is content-focused, Edison’s core skills curriculum has similar content but focuses on developing the skills they need for life beyond the classroom. Although we have always taught children to do their research, it didn’t form such a planned and intentional strand of the curriculum as it does now. For every single lesson, they are told what they are learning, and they also told why they are learning it; how it fits into the bigger picture, the usefulness of the lesson for their learning in the future. So a lesson might be about the Romans, but the skill they could be learning about at the same time is how to work as part of a team, to produce an end product.”

“We may not be able to predict what our children will need to know in thirty years, but we can say that they will need to be independent learners, and have collaborative skills that will enable them to work as members of a team. They will have to be able to research and use new technologies – a whole raft of skills that will enable them to survive in their world. So we now have this dual approach to both knowledge and skills, with those

skills brought on and monitored in a systematic way. The new curriculum is just fantastic because it’s really exciting for the children – the content really grabs their attention. For example, one unit is about chocolate: now, how much more arresting is that for a child than, say, climate? Yet we work in all the climate material when we look at how regions where the beans are produced. When they are learning about minibests, we theme it around A Bug’s Life, and they learn about how animation is put together, and in the literacy strand they look at character analysis; the PSHE element looks at bullying (there’s a character in the film who bullies the others), there’s the information about all the insects which brings in the science curriculum. It’s rich and engages the children with no problem at all.”

Nikki refutes the idea that structuring the curriculum this way risks trivialising it: “Not at all! I know from bitter experience that if children aren’t engaged and having fun in their learning, they don’t respond and absorb the knowledge. You have to find keys – ways in – to engage them. Once you’ve found the key, all the serious stuff is there – we haven’t taken anything away from the national curriculum that they have to cover.”

As examples of the kind of ‘key’ she is talking about, Nikki mentions a group of visual aids

the school uses to help children understand the underlying principles of the curriculum. “The classrooms have a little dog symbol on the wall called WALT. That stands for We Are Learning To, and he’s a reminder to the children to keep in mind what they are learning to do. There is another character WILF – What I am Looking For, which helps them focus on what they are looking for in terms of team working or independent learning. There’s another little character, a cat called TIB – This Is Because, that the teacher uses to explain how today’s lesson fits into the overall scheme. At the end of the lesson when they have their plenary the teacher will refer back to these characters and what they represent and review how well they’ve done against their intentions. It’s really sharpened things up for us.”

Professional training

“Another of the key reasons for us going with Edison was the professional development training. Our education authority does have a pretty good professional development programme, but it’s costly and we always have to provide supply cover to allow teachers to attend the sessions. Then the expectation is that staff return and disseminate what they’ve learned to the rest of the school, and I must say that has never really worked in reality. For the individuals attending there were gains, but you’d be hard pushed to

find any genuine impact in the classroom.”

“The way that EdisonLearning approaches CPD is completely different. They come into the school and work with the whole staff, so that we all hear the same messages. Then we have a chance to go away and evaluate new approaches, before coming back to build on that knowledge together as a team, with the same Edison adviser who has been linked with the school right from the start. We have the benefit of that adviser to lead those sessions and oversee the whole process, guiding and supporting us along the way. We’re also able to include all our support staff, which is important because they have their part in delivering the core values and ethos so it’s essential that everyone understands the vocabulary and ‘signs up’ to the concepts.”

“One of the refreshing things about our work with Edison is that we are not into quick fix solutions. If you do anything as fundamental as this is, it takes a long time for the results to be measured accurately. We didn’t even start the core skills curriculum during year one, we were doing essential work to lay the foundations. But certainly during the autumn term our attendance, which has always been good, was markedly improved, and I ask myself was that going to happen anyway, or was it that the new curriculum had so inspired the children that they didn’t want to be

away from school?’ (It was the chocolate term for year 3 &4!)”

Termly Learning Conferences

“Staff have the feeling that children don’t want to miss lessons now because they are really engaged with their work. Certainly we’ve engaged with parents in a much better way, with exhibitions at the end of each learning unit so that they can come into the school and share the processes that went into their children’s work. All these are very positive developments, and to hear the children talking about themselves as learners is new: I had a conversation with one little girl – not the most articulate – and I asked what new skill she had learned that had helped her move on in her learning. She said “I’ve had to learn to compromise”, and it’s little snippets like that which make you realise what kind of changes are happening.”

St Teresa’s new way with parents’ meetings has ensured that they are aware of changes too: “We now take the triangular approach, starting with a teacher-child meeting, looking at targets from the previous meeting and how they have worked towards them. We talk about what’s been an obstacle to their learning, and then they highlight what they’d like to focus on for the next period. At the parents’ meeting it’s a three-way discussion and the parent is asked to commit to supporting the learning targets for the next period. Out of the meeting we get a Termly

Learning Agreement – it’s like a soft contract.”

“Some recent visitors to the school asked the children to explain what impact this new type of meeting was having. They said they felt they were now fully involved, whereas before they didn’t like the meetings that were just between teacher and parent because they didn’t know what was being said about them. They felt the meetings clarified what the key areas were, and gave better prioritisation for them to organise their efforts for the next period. In fact they were very articulate about feeling that things were more clearly defined: they also said that the school’s more regular and structured contact with their parents now meant they couldn’t get away with anything!”



Edison Learning Ltd
Digby House, Riverside
Business Centre,
Causton Road, Colchester,
Essex CO1 1RJ
+44 (0)1206 767980
www.edisonlearning.net