

Collaborative frameworks for collective school improvement



Overview

In 2004 EdisonLearning reached an agreement with Thurrock Local Authority to begin work with Thurrock primary schools in a collaborative framework that would facilitate the exchange of good practice. This framework meets the DfES agenda for Primary Strategy Learning Networks.

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– Cath Power, Headteacher

The DfES white paper (published 2004) set out the benefits for schools of working together in clusters to address common issues.

Around the same time, EdisonLearning began to work with a network of primary schools in Thurrock, supported by the local authority, with the aim of improving standards in the participant schools.

The network eventually included ten schools, all close enough together to allow regular contact between them, but encompassing a variety of circumstances and improvement aims.

Key points in this case study

This case study looks at how EdisonLearning worked with a group of schools in Thurrock to facilitate a lasting network between them, and how the network enriched individual schools in their efforts to bring about improvement. Key points:

- networking as a way of thinking
- networking benefits between and within schools
- how the EdisonLearning programme compares with ‘traditional’ approaches
- structures and forms of the networking framework

Seven schools in the initial partnership with EdisonLearning – Stifford Primary, Thameside Junior, Aveley Primary, Arthur Bugler Junior, Stanford le Hope Junior, Corringham Primary, and East Tilbury Infant School – were later joined by Tilbury Manor Junior, Horndon-on-the-Hill Primary, and Bulphan Primary. Thurrock Local Authority supported and subsidised the project as part of its strategic plan for education in the borough.

In addition to working with individual schools and in smaller clusters, the EdisonLearning team of advisers guided the collaboration

between the schools and the sharing of good practice, in the process developing a new working model for the project which has now been incorporated into EdisonLearning's standard programme for primary schools.

The learning network created by the project showcases some of the benefits extolled by the white paper, and the advantages of a well-defined framework as a vehicle for sharing practice between a group of schools working towards a common set of goals.

Cath Power, Headteacher of Corringham Primary, one of the participating schools, emphasises that although a network may reflect the diverse requirements and priorities of the member schools, there is a striking degree of commonality:

“Although we are in the same area, all the schools are different demographically and have a different school population, so we have a lot of expertise to share amongst ourselves. However, there's not really much divergence between the schools in terms of the priorities – we are all working toward a similar agenda, and the government has an agenda for us, so we all have similar needs for development.”

“Our school has had four heads in three years, so there's been a real lack of consistency, and the school narrowly avoided being put in a

category in the first term after I arrived. It needed a huge amount of input, and we felt we could get it from EdisonLearning. Our aims at this school were to raise attainment and achievement; both were above average but our CVA was low. We decided to concentrate on assessment for learning as a first priority.”

“There are differences between the various schools in terms of attainment, but we are all focused on raising it and raising achievement, and what we are doing here is using EdisonLearning as a means of bringing that about. We haven't had the opportunity to work collaboratively with other schools this way before and EdisonLearning has facilitated the process in a very effective way.”

“What the EdisonLearning Design for School Improvement actually does, because it takes such a holistic approach to the school, is give every school an opportunity to work on the areas that it needs to develop; any school at any level can click into it to get what they need.”

Networking benefits

“The collective method of working together, sharing ideas, collegiality, team support – these are the extra things the group structure has brought to the process. It's given us more strength of purpose and reinforced morale. We're all very like-minded as a result of working with EdisonLearning because we are all familiar with the concepts and methods of the Design for

School Improvement. That means we have all tended to go for similar goals, and that in itself creates a lot more energy within the group of schools, with each wanting to compare progress, and share experiences with the others.”

“Working this way removes the sense of isolation that can come about in a school, and the collegiality filters through and benefits the operation at all levels. We discuss the activities of the leadership teams with the entire staff, and we also have our staff training sessions where all the staff work together with EdisonLearning. In some of these sessions we do get together with three or four other schools, so our teachers are all meeting and sharing ideas and experiences too. Much of the work we do in our workshops is hands on, so that in itself is extending practice, and meeting in each other's schools to conduct these sessions means that my teachers are inspired by what's going on in other places, and vice versa I hope!”

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Beyond a failed approach

It's a common observation among staff at schools working in partnership with EdisonLearning that the effect of sharing with other experienced professionals is an invigorating one. Working together on a well-defined

programme for the whole school is effective where in many cases other approaches have failed.

“We were ready to move our leadership team forward,” says Shelagh Cosgrow, Headteacher at East Tilbury Infant School. “We had been sending our staff on a range of courses to try to bring some fresh ideas into the school, but we found that this approach resulted in rather disparate input which was not easy to disseminate throughout the school.”

“In a sense, it became a little divisive in that some staff who had received extra training wanted to push changes through, while others did not get the whole picture, and were reluctant.”

“By contrast the professional dialogue our staff have with our team of EdisonLearning advisers gives us a close and consistent point of reference; there is always someone to bounce ideas off when we encounter a problem, and our staff feel empowered.”

“By embracing the model we have a common understanding of where we want to go, through the entire school, and that helps us challenge new staff when they come to us. It also helps us cover gaps when they arise; it’s like a wound healing more quickly, now that our system’s had a booster.”

Structuring the sessions

“We train on two days every half term: one of these days will be

about the learning environment, and one about SAFS (Student and Family Support). We also have the curriculum academy on integrated learning and core learning skills, then we have assessment for learning on the other day. We have another day on leadership and management. We have members of staff on the leadership team who are also responsible for one part of the EdisonLearning design in our school, and they attend the lead academies with colleagues who are responsible for the same area in their own schools.”

“Staff come back and discuss their work in the lead academy – these people are part of my extended leadership team – and then we prioritise what we want to concentrate on next for our school improvement plan, and this also feeds into our cycle of staff development for the following term. We put the whole picture together in the extended leadership team, with information feeding in from each of the lead academies. Then the leader of each of the teams has priorities they want to work on within their team during non-contact time once a week, to drive forward their area across the whole school, through monitoring and evaluation.”

Foundations for achievement

Like the other six schools that began in 2004, Corringham Primary is now nearing the end of the initial project, and moving to the next phase.

“This is not a quick fix in terms of attainment,” says Cath Power, “it’s more like a thoroughgoing revision across the whole school. It takes time to bring something like that about, and it takes time for the benefits to be seen in terms of results. Attainment has not yet risen but we didn’t expect that given the position we started from – it takes longer for changes to work through and be seen in exam results; we’ll see that in the next couple of years when the year groups who have had time to benefit from the changes come to be assessed.”

“What has already improved is the quality of our teaching, which has risen dramatically. This is due to the new integrated curriculum we’ve adopted – especially the focus on core learning skills – and all the opportunities for professional development that come from working with Edison. The staff training they provide is really very highly thought of here.”

“The benefits to us are in increased effectiveness, efficiency and provision: the quality of everything we are doing is so much better. And you can see it in the classrooms: the achievement quality is much higher, and attitudes to learning are hugely improved.”

Part of this improvement in the attitudes to learning has come about as a result of the school’s energetic engagement with the Student and Family Support (SAFS)

programme. “We were already on a pretty good level in this area, but working on the EdisonLearning SAFS module has really made it take off for us.”

“We are now running parents’ classes and our intervention procedures with the children ensure a really quick response when a child has a problem; that’s all down to our work with EdisonLearning. The benefits are there for all the children – not just the vulnerable ones – because problems can affect all the children in some way or at some time. We had a recent example of a little girl who had a death in the family, and our procedure ensured that all the staff in the school knew about it immediately – even down to the daily assistants; the whole staff was on the lookout to help that child. That’s part of the holistic approach, part of being child-centred. It filters into things like the way teachers greet the children – do they do it with a smile? Things like that are easy to forget, but it makes a difference.”

“We have also reorganised the structure of the school to give us a more consistent and rounded view of each child that we can use to guide their progress. We now have three Achievement Teams: the upper, for years 5 and 6, the middle for years 3 and 4, and the lower for year 1 and foundation. Each team has fortnightly meetings doing solutions-focused work on areas like gifted and talented children,

progress and barriers to it, underachievement, and developing support for teachers.”

“We also do pupil audits to find out how they feel about school, and we are working on the personalisation agenda, with school forums training children to talk about their learning and how it works for them. The results from these forums go back to the leadership team and filter through their work. I think the effectiveness of this aspect of our work is reflected in our attendance figures, which are the highest in the borough.”

Lead and Leadership Academies

Lead Academies and Leadership Academies are a feature of the EdisonLearning design developed during the work in Thurrock, and have now been adopted as a standard working model for our partnerships with networks of primary schools.

The Lead Academies focused on four areas of the EdisonLearning Design for School Improvement: Core Learning Skills; Assessment for Learning; the Learning Environment; and Student and Family Support. Each school assigned key lead teachers with responsibility for each area of the design, and released them for a session each half term.

At each session the key lead teachers for all the schools and the EdisonLearning team of advisers meet at a school (hosted in

rotation). Meetings on each area of the Design follow a similar format, reviewing actions and progress against termly objectives and term 9 outcomes; discussing solution planning and comparing challenges throughout the group; previewing forthcoming training; sharing good practice; and planning next actions.

Leadership Academies gave an opportunity for overview and innovation. These whole-day sessions take place near the start of each term, for Heads and Deputies of all the participating schools. As with the Lead Academies, these sessions are for sharing and reviewing progress and practice, and previewing what is to come. EdisonLearning uses these sessions to introduce new tools and methods and float new ideas. There are contributions also from guest speakers who deliver presentations on subjects related to the priorities of the leadership team.

An adapted form of Academies model developed for the Thurrock project has now become a regular feature of all EdisonLearning’s partnerships, so that the benefits can be shared across other groups of schools.



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