

Inclusion – the secret to success at Thames View

Thames View Infants Academy is in the top three per cent of schools for attainment but is located in the most deprived ward of the sixth most deprived authority in the country. **Suzanne O’Connell** finds out how inclusion is at the heart of what they do and the secrets to their success

Paul Jordan has grown the vision since he was appointed as headteacher in 2007. Along with his deputy, Claire Smith, he has established a team that welcomes parents and their children to the nursery provision at Thames View Infants and works tirelessly with them for the next four years.

The last two Ofsted inspections judged Thames View to be outstanding. Mr Jordan is a National Leader of Education and now also CEO of the Thames View Learning Multi-Academy Trust. With 438 children in the school, a four-form entry, he still prides himself on being a hands-on head and accessible to the school community.

Looking at the demographics of the area, you would not perhaps expect the children to leave the school with such high attainment. Thames View is located in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and pupils are admitted to the school an average of 18 months behind where they should be developmentally.

“Some of our children are still in nappies when they start school,” Mr Jordan explained.

There are approximately 41 different languages spoken and pupils come from a rich and varied mix of cultures, including first generation migrants. Thames View continues to respond to a constantly changing catchment which now also includes some wealthier Londoners settling in new developments.

The pupils might have entered Thames View Infants below what is expected but by the time they leave at the end of key stage 1 they are significantly above the national average. So, how does Thames View help them to achieve this?

It’s all about inclusion

Ms Smith is both the deputy and inclusion leader. It is clear that inclusion is very high on the agenda and that Mr Jordan and Ms Smith believe it to be a key factor in the school’s success. Many of their pupils have SEN but there is a reluctance to talk about them as part of a category. They might have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or receive SEN support, but these are the mechanics rather than the essence of SEN provision at the school.

Instead, the provision at Thames View involves a high level of fluidity in the way in which pupils’ needs are met. An example of this is the abandoning of support groups that require withdrawal of children from their classes.

“Withdrawing children meant they were missing out on their class time,” Mr Jordan continued. “It wasn’t good for their self-esteem and led them to experience a disjointed day. They needed their connection with their class teacher.”

However, looking down the list of staff members at the school, it is evident that a high priority is given to the employment of teaching assistants.

“Both teacher and teaching assistant work together as a team in the classroom,” explained Mr Jordan. “They’re another set of eyes and ears. They might focus on a group or individual but they are there for all the children.”

At one point Mr Jordan describes the school’s approach and organisation as being “messy”. Not a term we’d usually find in relation to a top performing school. However, this system of allowing staff and support to follow the child as needed is working incredibly well.

“Our inclusion team is central to this,” said Ms Smith. “We have an inclusion leader, a SENCO, a child and family practitioner, a parent support advisor and an attendance leader. We work closely together and plan but can also respond where individual children are brought to our attention.”

Formal meetings are minimal, instead people are brought together around a particular child as and when they are needed. “We don’t have



Images: Thames View Infants Academy

Removing barriers: Pupils at Thames View (both images). Head Paul Jordan credits the school’s success as being down to an inclusive approach for children, families and education

surgeries or meetings once a week. It’s much more fluid than that. Where a concern is raised then it comes to the inclusion team who meet and look for solutions together.”

The five professionals listed by Ms Smith form the core of the group but there are other specialists that they can draw upon depending on the needs of the child. For example, they have a teaching assistant who has been trained in speech and language support and they buy in one day a week from a speech and language therapist.

We spoil our parents

“We don’t believe there are hard-to-reach parents,” Mr Jordan said. “But we know there are hard-to-reach schools.”

Mr Jordan has made every effort for himself and his staff to be accessible. The school doors are open when parents arrive and most members of staff are available when parents need to see them.

“Our front of house is more like a hotel reception than a school,” he added. “Many of our families have unpleasant memories of the education system and we do as much as we can to remove this as a barrier.”

In line with this belief, in partnership with parents they hold a range

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of school events that engage the community: “We cook together, practise phonics together, walk and talk together,” Mr Jordan added. Thames View wants to give parents the right tools to help them support their children. For example, they have more than 300 videos on YouTube that parents can engage with. Mr Jordan uses this as a method of reaching out to the whole school community twice a year. Teachers upload videos regularly and there are more focused, instructional videos such as how to help your child with phonics, or even how to get them to hold a knife and fork correctly.

“It’s a journey with our parents,” Ms Smith said. “They come to us scared to put their children in the nursery. We know it’s going to be a tough four years and we have to build trust into the relationship. Our parents are our greatest ambassadors.”

We prioritise our staff

Teaching strategies are modelled in the school and the best teaching is expected from everyone and for all the children: “The teaching is of a very high quality,” Mr Jordan said. “Seventy per cent of the lessons are outstanding.”

This approach follows the belief that if teaching is of the highest calibre then additional support is less likely to be needed: “We spend 87 per cent of our budget on staff,” Mr Jordan added.

At a time when recruitment across the country is a problem, you might expect that Thames View would struggle to find the staff of the quality needed. However, for the last two appointments the school has had 60 applicants. Teachers want to come and teach there and are happy to be taken through Mr Jordan’s three-stage interview process: “At the first interview we expect the candidate to sell themselves and show us how they are right for our school,” he said.

We want to help other schools too

Mr Jordan is a National Leader of Education and Thames View actively works with other schools to deliver bespoke training and support.

In 2012 the governors voted to convert the school to an academy and Mr Jordan has welcomed the sense of ownership that this has given them.

Since then Thames View has become a MAT and has actively opened its doors to other infant schools who would like to join. Interest in this



has taken a little time to build but they do now have a partnership with a free school that had been flagged up by the Department for Education for support. Mr Jordan is hopeful that these MAT collaborations will continue to grow. With the success that the school has already experienced in a challenging context, it would seem that sharing it as widely as possible would be a logical next step. **hu**

• *Suzanne O’Connell is a freelance education writer and a former primary school headteacher.*

Further information

■ Thames View Infants Academy: <http://thamesviewinfants.org/>