

PARTICIPANT CASE STUDY

THE BEST OF THREE

Having one Future Leader in your school can have a vital impact; improving standards, raising attainment and providing a new focus and viewpoint – but what can having three do?

The impact of having a Future Leader in your school is without doubt considerable. Since 2007 Future Leaders have been instrumental in raising standards and attainment in numerous schools across the UK. For instance, in one school a Future Leader got 95 per cent of coasting pupils to progress at least one level at Key Stage 3; another successfully bid for a £30,000 grant. Other Future Leaders have been responsible for ensuring a 90 per cent Grade B result in literacy and numeracy for a group of underachieving boys; moving attendance figures in one school to well above the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) standard of 91 per cent; launching and leading the introduction of a new curriculum for year seven; dramatically reducing behaviour and exclusion figures for year eight; improving punctuality by over 50 per cent; and raising teaching standards by 80 per cent. **A Future Leader can bring an energy and commitment to the leadership team that is so far unparalleled. So what's the effect of having, not one, but three Future Leaders in your school?**

Headteacher at Brentside High School, Arwel Jones, explains the impact that three people with a unique perspective and a united commitment to change can bring to the school: “The crucial thing is that having three of them here creates a team of people with a



Peter Knight, Future Leaders Cohort '08,
Deputy Headteacher

common vision. Of course they're not the same and they do things in different ways, but they subscribe to the Future Leaders mission – they're as committed to our No Exceptions, No Excuses agenda as I am, so it really drives that, which links with my vision for the school in the long term.

“ We only have one chance with these pupils; if we get it wrong we severely limit the chances our pupils have in life, so we have to get it right. Having three people here who equally subscribe to that vision and are working together to promote it creates a strong momentum that helps us to raise standards and improve.”

Aiming high

In fact, having Future Leaders at Brentside High School, working with the leadership team and teaching staff has been so successful that the school has seen the number of students achieving 5 or more GCSE A*–C grades including English and Maths improve consistently for the last six years, with a jump of 23 per cent alone last year - 60 per cent of pupils achieved this standard in 2009. It's impressive, and encouraging, but perhaps what is most inspiring is that all three Future Leaders are actually not content with these improved figures, and have much, much bigger goals to aim for.

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“It's got to be 100 per cent getting the A*–C grades. We simply can't settle at 50 or 60 per cent, let alone the national current minimum target of 30 per cent. We want every single child to achieve the five A*–Cs including English and Maths; with no exceptions,” explains Sabrina Cumberbatch, Assistant Headteacher at Brentside, and a Future Leader at the school since 2007.

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Peter Knight, a Future Leader and Deputy Head, who arrived at Brentside in 2008 agrees: “The bottom line is, that when you get past all the initiatives, the SATS, the



Sabrina Cumberbatch, Future Leaders Cohort '07, Assistant Headteacher

government targets, the thing that really matters, the thing that all schools are judged by, is the number of A*–C grades at GCSE. And that's where we can make the most impact.”

Solid improvement

Whatever the goals are for the future, the progress the school has already made is impressive. This year, Brentside, a school as little as five years ago seen by some as a 'last resort' school within the local community, with falling roles and a struggling reputation, was recognised as one of the most improved schools in London. “Six years of year on year improvement is something we are very proud of as a school and Sabrina, Peter and Jodie – our three Future Leaders – have worked hard and been a crucial part of that in the last three years,” says Arwel. In addition to significant improvement in grades, the school has also seen an improved relationship with the community. “Parents are spending more time at parents' evening; we are seeing a stronger commitment from parents to their child's education. There's a real feeling that this is a good school that gets results, and it's now

oversubscribed,” explains Jodie King, this year’s newest Future Leader recruit, currently undertaking her residency year there.

So how have they achieved this incredible turnaround? A key focus – both for headteacher Arwel and all three Future Leaders – has been going back to basics, perhaps the most enduring aspect of the Future Leaders’ mission and a key part of the training. “The focus of Future Leaders is narrow, because it has to be,” explains Sabrina. “There’s one goal, and we’re all working towards it; and to achieve that you need alignment across the whole school, where every member of staff is committed to the same thing.”

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Learning to learn

In fact, Sabrina was the first to approach the basics in 2007, working on developing the school’s approach to learning. “Learning is strangely the one thing that seems to fall off the radar in schools – and yet it’s actually the one thing we’re about. Learning is our business basically, and nothing should get in the way of our core business.”

“ I’m very clear that any Future Leader who comes here is given leadership responsibilities.”

Approaching something so integral to everything the school does is obviously a serious undertaking, and Sabrina approached the issue in a number of ways, staggering various stages of the project over three years.

Her first year was primarily concerned with introducing the idea of being a learning focused school, encouraging a commitment to producing profound learners, changing learning habits and embedding this mindset as standard across the school. “Obviously it was a major culture shift, and that first year we spent a lot of time raising awareness, running courses, training, working with the staff rethinking the way we approach learning, which led to bringing together a champions group, so we had a committed team who were dedicated to improving our learning standards. That was a really important year because it’s vital that everyone is aiming for the same thing, and they can see the importance of raising our learning standards.”

The hard work in that first year has paid off, and the atmosphere in the school has shifted noticeably, meaning the real changes can start to happen. “Now people are talking about learning more,” explains Sabrina. “And it’s becoming something that happens every single day.” The next stages are introducing what Sabrina calls a ‘level of accountability’ to how the school delivers excellent learning, and putting into practice the theory she worked on in the previous years. “Learning is always something I’ve worked on in my career, so it



Jodie King, Future Leaders Cohort '09,
Associate Deputy Headteacher



The Best of Three - Peter Knight, Sabrina Cumberbatch, Jodie King

was a natural fit, and the good thing about this project is that it's allowed me work across the whole school, on a large scale." Based on the success of her work and following the external promotion of an Assistant Headteacher, Sabrina applied for, and was appointed as a substantive Assistant Headteacher at the school.

Developing a policy

Of course, nothing happens in a vacuum, and a year into this work on learning, Sabrina was joined by Peter, who came into the school as an Associate Deputy Head. He took on the Learning and Teaching policy, another initiative he had adopted from Future Leaders. "The school didn't have a specific Learning and Teaching policy, when I joined. There were lots of concepts and ideas that could feed into the policy but nothing centralised that everyone was committed to. This fitted in with what Sabrina was working on, which meant we were working together for one clear goal."

Peter and Sabrina worked with the leadership team on developing a Learning and Teaching

policy that the school could really engage with. The policy, entitled: "Keep It Simple, Awesome Teaching", inspired by the Summer Foundations training, is the product of months of work, throughout the whole school, and is something rooted in the values of Future Leaders. "We made the Learning and Teaching policy as succinct as possible, something straight forward and easy to integrate into the school," says Peter. "That said we really wanted to make sure everyone was behind it, so we had a Learning and Teaching weekend conference to launch the policy – in fact I think that was Jodie's first experience at the school. We led an INSET day dedicated to learning and teaching and used numerous ideas from our Future Leaders training – bingo balls, Q&A sessions, reading groups etc – to bring the leadership team, and whole school body, together. We led the whole Senior Leadership Team (SLT) through revisiting the school's vision, things such as no exceptions, no excuses, and it was something that everyone bought into. That weekend of team building saw a real step change in mindset and vision for the school."

Part of the Future Leaders training involves encouraging recruits to work as a team, not merely as a group of individuals, and it was this knowledge that Sabrina and Peter used to establish not only their working relationship, but to establish stronger links and team focus within the leadership team.

“You spend time looking at the core values for your team and how you'll get work done; and you explore ways to make sure you are working with people, not working separately and only coming together to report or make decisions. It was about creating teams that are making a difference all the time, not just in meetings,” adds Sabrina.

Working in a team

This approach even helped Peter and Sabrina navigate a situation that could have been quite challenging, due to the unique circumstances where Peter had entered the school and Future Leaders programme later, but had ended up managing Sabrina.

“Future Leaders presented a way for me to gain the valuable experience that I needed.”

“I'd been a headteacher in New Zealand for two years before returning to the UK to take up a post here,” explains Peter. “The issue was that over here my experience in New Zealand wasn't considered enough, and it wasn't allowing me to progress to headship level - Future Leaders presented a way for me to gain the valuable experience that I needed; though I had to work hard to convince them to let me do the programme as technically I had too much experience!”

Luckily both Sabrina and Peter had been through the Future Leaders intensive annual residential summer training course, which had taught them a lot about working in a team, and they were able to take this knowledge and use it to their advantage. “What this enabled

us to do was talk professionally about what we wanted from each other and what we wanted for the school; we were able to leave personal issues aside and concentrate on developing a team that would get results,” adds Peter.

A powerful influence

What perhaps is most interesting is that not only were Peter and Sabrina working with the SLT in a “Future Leaders” way, but that they were using Future Leaders' techniques and philosophy to implement change throughout the school. “The Future Leaders training refines your thinking, and we wanted to lead sessions that weren't about talking and catching up, but were about seeing the bigger picture and really moving things forward,” says Sabrina. “Even if these sessions were merely our weekly leadership meetings.”

“The best measure of a leader is how the school works after you've left, and what you have put in place is sustainable and realistic. That's what we're aiming for.”

One of the benefits of using these techniques to get results is the impact it has on the way the staff see Future Leaders. “The staff has really bought into what we're doing and what Future Leaders is about, they understand that the impact we've had on thinking, and the level of sustainability we bring. That's been crucial, seeing that the work we're doing is not about being here for a year and then moving on, that it's about developing a system that improves things, and works,” says Peter. “The best measure of a leader is how the school works after you've left, and what you have put in place is sustainable and realistic. That's what we're aiming for.”

“Commitment to one hundred per cent of pupils gaining A*-Cs at English and Maths”

This is clearly where Jodie's focus also lies, and she mentions how this kind of working is integral to the success of any school. "I'd like to see even more of this team work in the school and it's something we will be working towards this year," says Jodie. "We need something that involves the whole school. And that's been my focus – really drilling down to the basics. I'm responsible for vulnerable groups, to look at ways we can teach them and bring them on; but even this is something that needs the attention of the whole school, not just a select group of people."

On reflection

As the three discuss their work it's clear how closely the Future Leaders process is part of everything they do – and it can be seen in the motivational signage around the school, the positive affirmations in each classroom, the innovative training they deliver to the staff, the way they see the pupils and their ambitious goals for them – in fact, hardly a minute goes by before one of the Future Leaders recalls something from their training, or an aspect of its mission statement and core values that has had an effect on them.

For instance, No Excuses is seen in the schools ethos – No Exceptions, No Excuses – which they helped to develop; No Islands is clearly demonstrated in their work on developing leadership teams; their commitment to one hundred per cent of pupils gaining A*–Cs at English and Maths is in keeping with the Every Child and High Expectations agendas, and Lead Learning can be seen in their persistence and ambition for the school, despite only being there for one or two years. This ethos has been invaluable for all three Future Leaders, and for Sabrina the programme's training was one of the main reasons she was attracted to Future Leaders in the first place. **"Future Leaders offered a level of training that you don't see anywhere**

else. I didn't want to learn as I went along, I wanted a solid foundation, I wanted, as Future Leaders says, to get the basics right, so I could really make an impact. Where the strength of the programme lies is in the recruitment process; it has multiple stages, and it forces you to keep thinking and questioning education. You get onto the programme because you are the type of practitioner who reflects and questions and challenges things all the time."

Peter agrees: **"I don't think the programme teaches you to be reflective, as such, it attracts people who naturally look at what they can change and how they can change things,"** he explains. "We want to know why, and we go away and think about it – I'd rather spend the time looking at how to change something, and why something isn't working, than continue doing something that is ineffective. I value people for what they achieve, not how long it takes them. Working ten hour days is only useful if you have an outcome that you achieve. At the end of the day, it's about everything you're doing that has an impact on learning."

"The conversations the three of us have about the school are always developmental and focused on moving forward."

Jodie also joined the programme because she absolutely believed in its mission statement, and was inspired by the opportunity to work with people with the same level of commitment to change as her. "The key thing is that we have the time to look at what we're doing, and then improve it, rather than just reacting to things," says Jodie. "We're bombarded with data, but we don't really feel the impact of it because we have time to understand what it means. The time to be reflective is vital, which is one of the great

things about Future Leaders training in the summer. That said, by its very nature it attracts people who are asking questions and wanting to change things. The conversations the three of us have about the school are always developmental and focused on moving forward.”

Presenting a challenge

It is clear that having three Future Leaders in the school, makes for an intense and focused environment; and this year sees no respite in the relentless drive to challenge the status quo and improve attainment still further. Peter explains that the next step is to really develop the idea of team working, and drive change still further. “I think the three of us have challenged the status quo, which is why Arwel has wanted us here. He has seen that Future Leaders can really bring something to the school and that’s why there are three of us here. It’s about having that critical mass and working with people who have a similar mindset and way of working.”

“ Each Future Leader is different, but they do challenge the status quo – it’s a very important aspect of what they do.”

Headteacher Arwel Jones definitely agrees: “Each Future Leader is different, but they do challenge the status quo – it’s a very important aspect of what they do. And they can be quite driven and blatant about it; they only care about driving change – which is exactly what I wanted from them. I don’t want my leadership team to stand still, and the questioning, the different way of working, the fresh viewpoint helps the team to evolve. In education we need to keep changing and developing what we do – that’s the reason here, for instance, we’ve had six years of year on year improvement.”

Of course, bringing in new people from outside can be a challenging and complex process, but, explains Sabrina, taking these risks and trusting in what you believe in, is part of driving change. “The problem is that so many schools are happy to sit comfortably when achieving the basic targets, and never moving forward from that. If you want to see a change you need to hold your nerve and take risks when you have to.”

“That is exactly the issue,” says Jodie. “Teachers often spend too long physically doing the job without actually improving anything. Change needs to come initially from higher up; heads and leaders need to set an appropriate challenge, and everyone needs to be going in the same direction to achieve that.”

For the Future Leaders, the feeling is that schools need to be the ones to set the challenges, and drive change. “Schools need to be visionaries. We want to come into work and enjoy the challenge and get the buzz. Future Leaders is about working towards that one vision, and nothing else,” says Peter.

A lasting impact

Putting schools at the centre of change is close to Headteacher Arwel’s vision as well, and one of the main reasons he is involved in the programme. “Future Leaders is about addressing the serious gap in appropriate leadership in urban high schools over the next decade. We need to get the appropriate succession sorted out. We simply cannot stagnate and we must be moving forward. I am very committed to the scheme, it’s very important, the networks they’ve set up, the training and the comradeship they create are excellent.”

Having the three Future Leaders working together at Brentside really did produce results: the school became a high performing specialist school, and applied for a second specialism in Applied Learning. Jodie, Peter and Sabrina have all been involved in intervention programmes, targeting vulnerable groups of youngsters, identifying pockets of underachievement, and driving the whole raising attainment and raising standards agenda. **“Without these three people we would have moved forward, but we might not have moved forward so quickly or effectively. They’ve been a big part of our year on year improvement; they’ve also been integral at looking at things in different ways and asking us to question things, which is so important.”**

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Leaders of the future

“I suppose at the centre of everything what we’ve brought to the school is a cohesive vision, this is what Future Leaders provides. I’ve been looking to work with people like this throughout my career, who really believe you have to get the basics right, and everything else will follow,” says Jodie.

For Peter, Sabrina and Jodie the experience of Future Leaders, and their time at Brentside has afforded them a real chance to make an impact, and see the change they can make – and crucially start to become the kind of leaders we need to see in our schools.

“You need a solid clarity of vision, and the alignment of that vision within the school. You need to be a leader of learning, and very focused on learning. It’s about holding your nerve, even when it’s challenging and difficult, and taking risks. You’ve got to really build, not just put together, winning teams; put time into your people, and they’ll deliver for you. And, in the end, keep it simple!” they all agree.