



PARTICIPANT CASE STUDY AN INSPIRATIONAL LEADER

Exemplary leadership is a crucial part of the Future Leaders training, which sees all recruits spending a residency year being coached and mentored by an outstanding headteacher. It's chance to learn from the best and to develop themselves as leaders. Where the programme will see its impact growing even further is as Future Leaders themselves in turn become these exemplary leaders, passing on their knowledge, drive and ethos to future recruits. And at Oasis Academy Coulsdon, Principal and Future Leader, David Millar, who will undoubtedly become one of those leaders, is already ensuring a solid Future Leaders ethos runs throughout his school.

A Force for Change

Oasis Academy is the former Coulsdon High School, a school whose reputation in the community had hit rock-bottom, whose results were close to failing and whose pupils were severely disaffected. Two years ago, while working at another challenging school in Croydon, David applied to become Senior Deputy Head as the failing high school became an Academy; but it wasn't an easy decision.

“I come from a family where we've always wanted to make a difference, which is why I went into teaching. I've always felt it was my vocation, I love working with students in challenging schools”

“I could see that by moving to Coulsdon I'd really be able to impact change and deliver a good deal for the kids there. But it meant leaving a school that was also in trouble. It involved a lot of soul searching but in the end I sensed that Oasis was where I'd have the scope to make the most impact, and really change the school for the better.”



David Millar, Principal, Oasis Academy Coulsdon

David spent the summer of 2007 before moving to Oasis working in his previous school during the day, and spending the evening working with Deputy Head Mark Pelling and Principal John Murphy, to plan how they would implement change at the school, and what crucially they needed to focus on first. The priority was to put in place the systems and structures which would form the basis for turning the school around. Because David was going to be starting at the school as it became an Academy, it was like having a blank canvas on which to work. “It was very exciting, but also challenging. It was the first time I'd really been in the driving seat like that, and the challenge for us was not planning how we'd fit into an established role at a school with set structures and protocols, but actually inventing those structures and protocols first. And while we were given carte blanche to be innovative, and had space to set up what we were doing, it was a huge task.”

A Future Leaders School

The benefit of this collective process, especially working closely with Mark and John, was that when John became Executive Principal and left to set up another new Academy in Croydon, the transition for David was seamless.

“Right from the beginning I felt a real sense of being able to steer and drive something, and because I’d worked so closely with John beforehand there was no crossover period, I was able to pick up the reins and keep going. It was very exciting. The reason I chose to work for Oasis in the first place was that I felt their values really spoke to me about the kind of education I wanted to deliver, and it’s a very ‘Future Leaders’ school, as it were. Our ethos centres around ‘Every Person Matters’, ‘High Expectations’, ‘No Islands’, ‘Lead Learning’ and ‘No Excuses’, essentially the core beliefs on which Future Leaders is built!”

Making Changes

The first year of David’s leadership as Deputy Head, saw some dramatic changes, while the following year of his headship has allowed him to take a more measured, whole school approach, working with middle management and aligning his goals. It’s been quite a journey already, and there was a lot to do from the outset. David and his team knew they needed to work on leadership and management; improving teaching standards, and raising attainment. But before all that David wanted to regain the support of the local community, something the school had lost in recent times.

“We had to hit everything almost straight away; put in a master plan and work on several things; but we started crucially with expectations – both for the school and the community. We approached it first by dealing with the hearts and minds of teachers and students, giving them pride back in themselves. There was a point when Coulsdon was the least popular first choice school in England, which meant a number of our students literally didn’t want to be here at all. It had really lost the confidence of local community, with the number of pupils falling from around 830 to less than 600 at one point. The school is also in an area of Croydon that has the highest concentration of elderly residents, which creates a tension with the young people; 20% of our students are on Free School Meals, which exceeds the DCSF average; and the monitoring visit the school received when in Special Measures said the school’s ethos and attitudes to learning were blockers to progress, with over 20 per cent of lessons inadequate.”

Raising Expectations

One of the first things David did was turn expected targets on their heads, abolishing the idea of ‘minimum target grades’, and setting deliberately high targets for pupil achievement. David and his team worked with teachers to turn data back into real pupils, so teachers could start to see, not just grades and numbers, but the children they were working with and the difference they could make to their lives. He divided all the pupils into different groups, depending on their grades, ranging them from Green, to Amber, to Red, with special groups for those who needed extra intervention to ensure they got their five grades A*-C including English and Maths. He then met with all the teachers to convey his vision for the school and the impact they could have on these children. “We shared with them how crucial their role was to providing a real future of possibility for these kids. And then we asked each of them to shake hands as a pledge that they were committed to converting those children to getting 5 A*-Cs.”



David Millar, Principal and Future Leaders Cohort '06 with pupils

At the same time David ran 'Intervention Nights', dedicated to raising the expectations of parents, and showing the pupils where they needed to be; encouraging them to start believing in their capabilities.

And it didn't stop just within the school; David and other staff took teams of current students to local primary schools to give presentations about how the school was changing and what they had planned for the future, showcasing the school as a Centre of Excellence.

“We also invited the primary schools to visit us for football matches and dance lessons; this entire endeavour was about raising our profile, increasing admissions and gathering support for us locally.”

The new Oasis Leadership team spent the summer bringing together a Student Council group of Year

Tens, and established a Business and Enterprise model for supporting them, paying them for performing roles within the school, such as site improvements, cleaning and DIY. “All these pupils came in over the summer and were heavily involved in our work to improve the way the school looked – they painted, varnished and cleaned, making the school look and feel different from the outset. So when the pupils came back in September, not only was the school different in structure and leadership, but it simply looked different too, they could physically see the change and that had an instant impact.” The impact has lasted too; site managers at the school report that the daily practice of replacing broken windows and cleaning graffiti is gone, when they repair things now, it's only ever accidental damage.

The final approach was to reconnect with the local community members, and David now ensures the school is constantly present in the local area, with staff doing litter picks in the surrounding roads, monitoring buses, shops and local takeaways; when it snowed earlier in the year Oasis' students cleared

the elderly residents driveways, a team of staff and pupils helped an ecology project restore a local pond, the school runs stalls at the local fete, and any complaints about behaviour in the local area are dealt with swiftly by the school. The impact of all of this can be seen in the rise in applications for Oasis: there were 143 applicants in Year Seven last year, there are now 296 applications for next year – an incredible 100 per cent increase.

Family Values

“In the end it’s about creating an environment where our kids want to be”

“Children don’t want to be somewhere that’s unsafe, or the lessons are boring, or they don’t feel loved and appreciated, or that they’re hungry and cold – all these things we addressed, and we say quite openly that we’re a family here, and we say that your children should feel loved, valued, included and part of a family. And some of the kids with difficult backgrounds find it hard to deal with that – and we still have exclusions and behaviour issues – but we operate an ethos of tough love; our expectations for these kids are sky high and if they don’t have the right uniform, the right books and pencil case when they get to the school gate they have to go home and get them. If they’re not ready to learn, they’re not going to access what we give them. I suppose it’s quite old school values, we don’t confront the kids, but we challenge their expectations all the time, we want the kids to be proud of themselves.”

Time to Teach

Teaching was the next key focus, and six weekly assessments were introduced to start ensuring all teaching was meeting Oasis’ high standards. Every six weeks David and the leadership team observed teachers, through paired observations, eventually working out a structure, an observation matrix and learning and seating plans – many of which are used

in Future Leaders training. “The point was about raising the standard of teaching; and if a lesson was inadequate we had a follow-up observation the next week and if it was still inadequate you were monitored and we intervened. It was tough, but it concerns me that in so many schools teachers are inadequate and nothing is done; it goes unchallenged.”

In the early days there was naturally some loss of staff, but David is clear that it was not unexpected. “I’m not apologising for that, if it’s not good enough for my child; it’s not good enough for anyone else’s. And actually the effect on the teaching body that remained was to find confidence in our standards and expectations; they had a clear model of what we needed so they in turn raised their game.” Of course support and training went hand in hand with these new standards, and David even rolled out his expectations to recruitment, appointing only good or outstanding teachers, and also recruiting staff based on their values, rather than just their ability.

“We’re actually finding some teachers are leaving their schools and coming here, even taking paycuts, because they want to work in this environment.”

The tough stance has worked, and he has eradicated inadequate teaching in the school in just under a year.

The effect of this visionary and cohesive leadership can be felt all around the school, where the staff is constantly visible and senior leadership offices are dotted across the school campus. “The point was to have offices that we’re not in very much. I spend most of the day around the school, in lessons, talking to the kids; I know all the students and they know me, and the whole leadership team does that – emails and meetings can happen after school.”

Perhaps the most impressive measure of the impact David’s had is in the grades, which have risen steadily since he and his team took over, with a nine per cent increase in A*-Cs (including English

and Maths) last year, and a 12 per cent increase in overall A*-Cs. “We had 44 per cent get A*-Cs (including English and Maths) last year, and this year the expected grades – even though it’s a more challenging year group – are 51%. Because we’ve had the time to put into these kids, they’ll actually do better than the outgoing Year 11. “

Whole School Leadership

Perhaps one of David’s proudest moments has been in the last year, developing his distributive leadership model. “We set up Development and Innovation Teams, made up of 6-8 teaching and non teaching staff that all had particular skills and we gave them projects, such as developing vertical pastoral systems, dealing with inclusion, specialisms, and healthy schools. And within six weeks, they’ve brought about some of the best changes here.”

The school has already implemented a vertical tutoring and family system – they’re deliberately called families, explains David – and is now looking at moving to a model of teaching that focuses on the stage a child is at, not their age. They’ve also developed their inclusion policy, with a drive to educate the whole child.

“We’re not an exams factory; we provide academic, enrichment, professional and service aspects to the children’s education. We talk to the students about the idea of being a host, not a guest in your life, and in the world; service is really important, you’re here to influence the world to serve each other and the community. We talk about not graduating from the Academy if you haven’t met these other criteria, it’s a competitive world out there and they need to offer more than just their exam results.”



David with Sally Williams, Head of English at Oasis Academy Coulsdon

In doing work like this, Coulsdon has reduced exclusions by 80 per cent – in one year, despite having previously been one of the highest excluding secondary schools in Croydon.

The key point about all this innovation is the way it has come from middle leadership. “That’s the only way we’ll be outstanding, I can’t sustain the drive alone, it needs to be everyone pushing for the same thing. You need the students doing it, and staff driving it, and we as the senior leadership team can be the coaches in this process; we’re even doing leadership secondments and coaching programs to ensure succession planning.”

A Different School

It’s clear that changes have been fast and furious, and for Deputy Head Mark it’s been an incredible shift.

“I’ve been at the school for five years, and having David become Principal has been fantastic. He firstly has such a solid strategy for the school, and a real vision; but he crucially underpins everything he does with the school’s values. The cultural change here, getting people to ask fundamental questions about what and why you’re doing things, has made such an impact.

“He’s also a leader with real integrity and emotional intelligence. You know where you stand with David, the expectations are high and the accountability is high but the support is there as well. And his commitment to distributive leadership has been absolute. It’s a phrase bandied around a bit, but it’s something we really do have here. And everything he’s worked on has been done in a way that’s developed people. The difference now in the school is that the place has got a smile on its face; you walk in and you can literally feel the difference.”

For Mark and David, the impact of Future Leaders is also clear. “I’ve undertaken my own leadership training,” says Mark. “But when I see what David gets from Future Leaders it’s just a whole different league; he’s really benefitted from it so much.”

David agrees, explaining that Future Leaders training allows teachers to become adept at articulating and defining their values; helping them to create a cultural blueprint for how their values will be demonstrated in their leadership. “I really appreciated the time and space to hone and shape the way I do things within a group of like minded mission-driven people. Many schools say they have a vision and that they’re inclusive but they don’t actually deal with it as explicitly as we do, we’re not ashamed to make our decisions based on those values.”

This was seen very clearly with one student who became pregnant during Year 11. Rather than sending her to a local pupil referral unit specialising in pregnant and schoolgirl mothers, the school fought to keep her in the school. “We said no; we have a nursery on site, and have been working with her all year – there’s no reason why she shouldn’t finish her education. Our values say we won’t give up on her, so we won’t.” The school put everything in place to support the student, who went on to end up with 11 A*-Cs, including English and Maths, and had a healthy baby boy. “We have stories like that throughout the school, and we use every incident to learn from, and to encourage our pupils to learn as well. And actually it’s in part Future Leaders that gives you the confidence to be sure you’re doing the right thing.”

John Fuller, chair of the Academy Council (comparable to a governing body) and one of the people in charge of appointing David is absolutely sure he is doing the right thing, and is in no doubt as to the value David has brought to the school already.

“We wanted David at the Academy because he has the calibre and the vision to deliver the speed of transformation and improvement that we needed.”

“And we wanted someone who upheld our own aspirations and ethos. Because David has and continues to benefit from Future Leaders training for instance, he has a network and a resilience he can call on when necessary. David was clear from the outset of the sheer challenge this was going to be, and he didn’t shy away from that. Since he’d been here the relationship with the community is better, the pride and student ownership is visible; he places a huge emphasis on not giving up on students, and on developing the supportive infrastructure we have now.”



David with Oasis Academy Coulsdon's pupils

Leading Change

It is high praise indeed from David's colleagues, and yet he is clear that the success so far has been down to so many at the school.

“Everyone has worked so hard, and you need that unity if you're going to be successful. I'm very proud of what we've achieved already, there's a real ethos for learning here, and all the senior leaders are working together with a common moral purpose.”

One of the best measures of the success they've had can be seen in external comments from inspectors,

who were paid to come in to the school every six weeks for the first year, and will continue to do so termly this year.

“They said we'd made very good progress in a year, won the hearts and minds of the students, who were keen to learn and engage in the running of the Academy”

In closing David asserted “We're on a journey, we're only satisfactory at the moment, but we're going to be outstanding, and I know we have the capacity to improve immeasurably.”