

PARTICIPANT CASE STUDY

KEEP THE FAITH

Future Leaders cohorts often find they have a lot in common, and they speak openly about the importance of working with like-minded colleagues. Often they are people who have always had a desire to teach, and who make the move to headship after their experiences in urban schools leads them to recognise the need for exemplary leadership in some of the most deprived schools. However, Lee Faith came to education for rather different reasons. “I suppose I’m a bit unique in that my initial drive wasn’t that I wanted to teach or be in education specifically; it certainly wasn’t a vocation – I just knew that I wanted to improve the life chances of young people in inner cities,” he explains. Where he is similar to his Future Leaders colleagues, however, is in his desire to improve standards and ensure that every child has access to an excellent education.

“I am very motivated by the social justice agenda. I grew up and was educated in Camden, North London and saw that there was a need for children from challenging urban areas to be given every chance to succeed, and to have the same choices and opportunities that other children their age had. I wanted to make a real difference, and when the option of doing a Citizenship PGCE became available, I felt that this was the way I could make that difference.”



Lee Faith, Future Leaders Cohort '07, Assistant Principal at Harris Academy Falconwood

Lee was among the first cohort of teachers to undertake the citizenship qualification, which centres around providing students with a political, social, economic and values-driven education, equipping them with the tools, knowledge and drive to have an active and educated impact on the world in which they live. “It’s about giving these young people a sense of purpose and a voice to engage with the world, so they can be a real part of society. So for me, the PGCE was part and parcel of empowering them.”

An Immediate Impact

The decision to take a Citizenship PGCE turned out to be a vital move – influencing his career and leadership style in numerous ways – and at his first school, Lee became an advocate for the citizenship curriculum. Employed at a challenging school in South East London with over 2000 students, in an area of high social deprivation, Lee was made Head of his department in just the second term of his Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year. “It was exciting because it was a brand new subject for the school, so I had the freedom to develop their citizenship curriculum throughout the school. I was chomping at the bit, because I really believe that this subject is so crucial for all young people.”

Lee’s commitment and enthusiasm saw him become the lead practitioner of Citizenship in the borough at the end of his first year of teaching, working with the local authority and local primary and secondary schools, helping them to develop their provision. It was this experience that began to develop the leader that Lee has become today; someone committed to change and improving standards, often in the face of challenging resistance or uncertainty. “Citizenship was a new subject and people were wary of it. They didn’t believe it was necessary, and yet I knew it had the real capacity to make a difference. Working in that climate means being a relentlessly optimistic voice among sceptics. And having to maintain a focused drive and commitment while being challenged by those that are resisting change really teaches you about holding your nerve. That confidence is something I have been able to call on countless times over the years. It’s vital for any leader of an urban school!”

A National Leader

From this successful position, Lee moved to Deptford Green School as Head of Citizenship. Under Sir Keith Ajegbo’s leadership (as previous Head of Deptford), the school gained specialist status for Citizenship. While there, Lee was involved in numerous outreach projects with other local schools, and worked at a national level with the Qualification in Curriculum Authority (QCA) to develop the Citizenship agenda. During this time he was also lucky to take a group of students to Uganda, with Sir Keith, as part of the Global Schools Partnership, where he did some life-changing work on citizenship. In his previous school, he led a group of students to Rwanda.

“It was incredibly moving, and inspiring, to see young people who have witnessed such atrocity, yet who are committed to being a valued member of their society and to changing things for the better. When you compare that to some of the reasons we use here to explain underachievement and disaffected youth, it really puts it into context. Sadly we have an endemic culture of making excuses in this country, and yet these excuses must be left behind at the school gate if we are to change outcomes for our children.”



Lee Faith, Future Leaders Cohort '07, Assistant Principal at Harris Academy, Falconwood with Principal Terrie Askew

A Future of Leadership

Having completed four years working as a head of department, Lee knew that the next step for him was to move towards leadership, and it was at this time that he discovered Future Leaders, a programme that really spoke to his own values. “I felt very aligned with their mission statement, and reading about it felt like coming full circle, back to why I’d got into education in the first place.”

“The key point for me was that in pursuing leadership I felt I could make the biggest possible impact on the largest number of students. And that has always been my drive.”

Lee undertook the renowned summer training with Future Leaders, an experience he says was profound and humbling, especially in working with a number of likeminded individuals. He then moved to his residency year in a North London school, which allowed him to experience another urban context with a range of complex issues, and where students still talk of the substantial impact he made on their lives.

With this experience under his belt, Lee then moved to Harris Academy Falconwood, Bexley as an Assistant Principal in July 2008. The Academy took over a seriously failing Academy – only 17 per cent of students attained 5 A*-Cs including English and Maths – in a tough working class area with a deep-rooted culture of low aspirations and social deprivation. It was one of the fastest takeovers in the UK, which saw Lee appointed in the July just as the term was ending, and the school reopen in September as an Academy.

For Lee the timing proved to be hugely beneficial, allowing the new leadership team to work together over the summer, developing an action plan to put into practice the minute the Academy opened for the 2008/2009 academic year; which meant they could start making an impact immediately – which was crucial.

“When we were looking to appoint Assistant Principals, our main focus wasn’t so much longevity, but on hiring energetic, ambitious leaders who would make an impact really quickly,” explains the Principal, Terrie Askew.

“Lee was the perfect candidate because his qualities and his views about education tied in with exactly what we needed to do at the Academy.”

“We wanted to appoint someone with a desire to make a difference to the lives of the students, and he was very committed to that. We also wanted someone who had experience working with a number of different ethnic minority groups in a variety of circumstances and his experience was fairly broad, which meant he brought a lot to our Academy.”

A Remarkable Turnaround

The Academy operates a system of faculties, which effectively splits the Academy into four smaller schools, each with a specific subject focus, run by an Assistant Principal. Lee is responsible for Science and Maths, which meant he was at the centre of the drive to improve English and Maths results in the Academy, though it also meant he was line managing subjects that weren't his own. “It was a challenge for Lee,” says Terrie. “But it was a challenge that he rose to, and he is very committed to improving learning and teaching.”

Lee is also responsible for a number of other initiatives including Assessment for Learning – developing learning routines and structures; the National Curriculum Framework; the Staying Safe aspect of Every Child Matters and working on projects to develop community cohesion and stakeholder voice, a vastly important role for an Academy that had effectively lost the support of its students and parents. Most importantly though, and part of showing the community and students that things had really changed, was to set about dramatically improving results; which is exactly what Lee and the Vice Principal, Mr Steve Jenner with Maths colleagues did, moving A*-Cs in Maths from 28% to 40% in just three months and reaching 51% by August 2009. “That was an incredible result and something that as a team we're very proud of.”

Not only are these impressive figures, but when you consider the legacy the Academy took on, and the hard work they had to do with a disaffected cohort of students and staff, it is even more incredible.

“Understandably staff and students were demotivated and under-prepared; and we had to work hard to gain their trust and support, to ensure that results improved, in turn improving the outcomes for the young people we had a responsibility for.”

“Getting these results was only a part of the good work Lee did with the community,” adds Terrie. “He was excellent at the PR and promotion side of things; working with local businesses, the community police service and parents to raise the profile of the Academy and get the community to see how much we were changing. He really understood how important it was to raise the aspirations of our students, but at the same time raise the expectations of the parents.”

A Systematic Approach

For Lee, the first few months of managing the Science and Maths faculty involved assessing the attainment levels of all students, and then working to improve them, through a series of small group and one-on-one interventions with specific students. Lee and his team targeted specific micro populations (for example students on free school meals, of a particular gender, and SEND students - those with Special educational needs and disabilities). “I made sure I knew every single student, and what they were specifically struggling with; we managed every aspect of their attainment on a micro-level, drilling down to everything, while at the same time working to convince them that we were really investing in their future; though it was hard work. The students initially felt an element of betrayal in terms of the fact that the school had turned into an Academy, and they didn't want to trust us.”

A key turning point came after the results from early Maths GCSE entry; where nearly half of the students gained A*-Cs. The early entry decision was made to be able to give as many students as possible a second chance, to see what they could achieve, and then improve it; but also to demonstrate to the students that the Academy system was really going to deliver for them.

“The students could suddenly really see the investments we were making in their futures, and the possibility that suddenly lay before them. It was a few months of blood, sweat and tears but I knew that we’d get there, and that it was worth it.”

It was during this time that Lee called on the resilience he’d developed in his early years driving forward a citizenship agenda; keeping a clear focus and a vision of what he wanted to achieve. “You do need an abundance of resilience and conviction when you work in urban education; always keeping that end point in sight and striving for it, even when it’s really tough.”

The Most Improved

Lee coupled this work on results with a dedication to really improving learning and teaching in the Academy; raising standards for learning and teaching by delivering solid professional development interventions and opportunities. “We want all our lessons to be graded good or outstanding. In conjunction with this we’ve also developed a rigorous cycle of observations, which means we can support teachers in continually improving the way they work in the classroom.”

Lee did some work with the teaching staff on Assessment for Learning, using it to really measure

Harris Academy Falconwood: Grades for 2008/2009

5 A*-Cs, not including Maths and English

Previous school AUG 2008: 47%

Harris Academy Falconwood AUG 2009: 92%

5 A*-Cs including Maths and English

Previous school AUG 2008: 17%

Harris Academy Falconwood AUG 2009: 42%

A*-Cs in Maths

Previous school AUG 2008: 28%

Harris Academy Falconwood AUG 2009: 51%

(60% predicted Aug 2010; Nov 2009 entry results delivered 65% A*-C)

students’ progress, and identify where more work or support was needed for students; as well as exploring how students learn, developing what he calls learning routines and rituals which teachers can use to help structure and plan lessons. “Lee was excellent at the work he did on teaching and learning, raising standards and working with teachers to help them improve,” says Terrie. “Where he was particularly impressive was being open to readjusting his expectations as things evolved, without lowering his standards. He worked on numerous levels with different staff, and did a lot of work on improving the quality and delivery of lessons, and working through more complex theories of learning with some staff.”

It’s of course been a challenging few months, but the differences can be felt at the Academy already, and Lee knows that the momentum for change and improvement is now there, meaning bright and brilliant things for the future. “I feel so positive about what the Academy can achieve now; and our incredible results really speak for themselves.”

“To improve overall grades by 45 per cent in 12 months, and the grades for 5 A*-Cs including English and Maths by 25 per cent is just incredible, and there is still so much that we can do.”

Lee is not wrong; Harris Academy was the most improved newly opened Academy in the UK in 2008/2009.

A Leader for the Future

Lee’s success at the Academy in the time he has been there, has been incredible, and he looks set to continue this great work in his future; committed to getting at least 60 per cent A*-Cs in Maths this year; and setting in place a system that will ensure this improves year on year, even after he has moved on from the Academy.

Terrie particularly notes the impact Lee has made on other leaders, and the students he’s worked with, demonstrating an admirable work ethic. “Lee has been a great asset to the Academy, and his commitment to rolling his sleeves up and getting the job done has been impressive. He doesn’t shy away from hard work, and he’s very visible around the Academy, walking through the corridors, welcoming students at the Academy gate etc. He is very driven and has a really solid philosophy about education, yet he doesn’t just talk the talk; he walks the walk too.”

The lessons learnt in the past few years have been invaluable, and Lee feels certain that he can

demonstrate the qualities needed to be a great leader of urban education. “Perhaps the most important thing I’ve learnt in the last few years is how accountable you, and crucially your staff, need to be. It’s about following everything through, down to the smallest detail, and always questioning; being rigorous about what you expect and not accepting less, in any circumstance. You need a lot of stamina to do this, and need to be prepared for the journey and the time it might take. I always talk about taking small bites at a time; and working to milestones, over short periods of time. I suppose in the end it’s about picking your battles, focusing on what is most important now, and that’s always what will make the most impact on students. That’s what you should always be thinking about.”

Lee also notes that while it’s vital to keep your focus and drive, and only settle for the best, you need at the same time to remain open-minded, commenting that education is rarely black and white.

“There are so many grey areas, and often difficult decisions to make, and circumstances which serve to really change how you thought about something. The trick is to be open to learning all the time, but keep your conviction and really hold your nerve while doing this. You just can’t settle for ‘ok’; it has to be the best. All the time.”