

PARTICIPANT CASE STUDY MAKING AN IMPACT



In September 2009 Oasis Academy Shirley Park opened its doors to just under 1,500 students, the majority of whom had been attending three separate schools only two months before. The Academy, an all-through school for learners aged 3 – 19, had taken its new shape through the merger of an Infant, Junior and Secondary school.

Over half the Academy population is of minority ethnic background, almost a quarter of whom (12.5%) do not speak English as a first language. Around a third of pupils are eligible for free school meals and a high proportion have additional educational needs.

Part of the original Academy scheme, the Academy was born out of a drive to improve failing or struggling schools in challenging communities. Glen Denham (Future Leader cohort '07) is currently Principal at the Academy – one of the Oasis Community Learning Academies. Alongside Executive Principal John Murphy (a Leadership Development Adviser for Future Leaders), Glen was handed the task of merging the three schools and a children's centre. The schools are within five minutes walk of one another and all three had their own unique challenges.

Within one year both results and school culture have been significantly affected, with Oasis Academy Shirley Park designated as the seventh fastest improving Academy in the country.

The predecessor schools were in various states of poor health; the Infant School was placed in special measures in September 2008 due to falling standards, while the Junior School had been under notice to improve since April 2008, also due to a



Glen Denham, Principal and Darren Campbell, MBE, guest of honour at the Grand Opening of Oasis Academy Shirley Park in September 2009

deterioration in standards. The Secondary school was underachieving in that only 24% of students achieving 5 A*-Cs with English and Maths in their 2009 GCSE results.

In response to the situation, Croydon Council appointed Oasis Community Learning as sponsor of the new all-through Academy and they in turn appointed Glen as Principal in April '09.

Since the first student crossed the Academy threshold in September, the transformation has been rapid. Within one year both results and school culture have been significantly affected, with Oasis Academy Shirley Park designated as the seventh fastest improving Academy in the country and picking up the PiXL award for most improved school in the PiXL (a collaboration of school leaders) group.



Glen Denham,
Principal, with
students

As soon as he was appointed, Glen, along with Executive Principal John Murphy, focussed on putting into place the structures and systems necessary to take on such a challenge. The four months leading up to the September opening were some of the busiest and most important in terms of laying good foundations, but for the growing leadership team, and Glen in particular, they were also months of inspiration.

By the end of the 2009/10 academic year, 46% of Oasis Academy Shirley Park Year 11 students achieved 5A* - C grades, including English and Maths, an astonishing increase from the 24% achieved in the predecessor school.

“It was a massive task but also hugely exciting and there was no other place I’d rather have been. Although I’d thoroughly enjoyed my time at my last

school, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to get on board with what Oasis were trying to achieve. Their ethos of holistic transformation, supporting, building, enhancing and engaging communities struck a note within me personally and it is their commitment to making a real difference with the most vulnerable in a community that was key in my decision to apply. Working with such an ethos was strengthening and gave me the energy over the summer months to help construct our School Improvement Plan in step with Oasis’ vision.” And the work certainly paid off.

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The percentage of students achieving 5A* - C excluding English and Maths also saw a similar exponential increase from 48% to 96%, while the Academy’s Contextual Value Added (CVA) rose to 1045 from the predecessor’s 976.8.



Glen is happy to acknowledge the swift improvement his staff has achieved, though firmly believes greater things are yet to come: “Come and see us again in five or 10 years – we’re only just starting out. We will continually refine, plan and implement our systems and structures to ensure the Academy not only justifies its rapid improvements, but that we provide and maintain world class education for all of our students, as well as for our local community.”

However, the passage to such a quick improvement was not a straightforward one, requiring a range of changes to be implemented. Deputy Principal Dan Morrow is clear on what needed to change.

“The immediate challenge the Academy faced was on two fronts; the first lay in motivating the staff who had been through a tough transitional period and the second with the students whose belief and ambitions had not been adequately encouraged.”

Through the introduction of a focused leadership team, staff were given clear targets and were encouraged by raised expectations that came with widespread leadership and the responsibility, the credit for which Dan attributes to both Glen and John. With a growing belief in the Academy’s students and the passionately repeated message of inclusion and their ability to raise attainment, the team has begun turning the school around as one body. Dan was confident that once the Academy staff began to see what was possible, standards would inevitably rise.

“Success breeds success, and once a school’s staff take on board that situations can improve, then you find it easier to maintain that upward spiral. Belief grows and spreads and it’s incredibly inspiring to hear and see that change happen in individual and collective staff members.”

The second priority was to encourage the self-belief and ambition of the students. The range of measures introduced in the Academy included interviews with all Year 10 students over summer 2009 to set agreed goals and standards of behaviour; after-school

intervention classes (for which a large number of staff gave up - and continue to give up - their free time); and learning incentives linked to student events. A number of trial single-sex classes have also been incredibly successful in increasing progress, as has the assignment of staff according to the quality of their relationship to the students. The focus on the wider life learning and well-being of each student has played an equally central role in bringing about change and now forms part of the Academy’s core provision. Similarly, success has been achieved in the Primary phase of the Academy through a tighter and stricter adherence to hitting targets, in addition to the adoption of the International Primary Curriculum (IPC) and a greater effort to identify pupils who need additional support.

“We remain totally and utterly focused on achieving the aims of raising our standards, quality of teaching, adapted and individualised curriculum and our shared responsibility for leadership.”

Alongside the concentration on staff and students, Glen is quick to highlight the importance of engaging with parents and carers and the role and impact this has had. “Part of our strategy was always going to involve our parents and carers and we’ve worked hard to include them in their child’s schooling and wider education. We’ve involved them in setting targets for their child, in evening literacy classes and through greater engagement with the leadership team.”

Following John Murphy’s departure in 2010 to become a Director of Education for Oasis Community Learning, Glen and his leadership team have set about ensuring that the success seen so far is used as a spring board for further improvements. Data is rigorously monitored to inform planning and strategy and engagement programmes actively pursue the raising of student aspirations.



Twinned to the leadership team's use of innovative programmes, remains Glen's belief in the importance of people and visible accessibility is ingrained throughout his staff team.

"First and foremost, successful school leaders must be involved in meaningful conversations about teaching and learning, whether on a formal or informal basis with staff and students as well as parents and carers; high quality interactions and high quality relationships are key. As a leadership team and in my role as Principal, we must be fully involved in school life and visible in every facet of the Academy."

Much of what Glen and John brought to the Academy can be traced back to their training through the Future Leaders programme which Glen enrolled on in 2007: "I was drawn to the Future Leaders five core values and the ethos. It was the perfect match for what I believe in. I found the networking incredibly valuable. Listening to Sir Iain Hall, Sir Keith Ajegbo and Sir Alasdair Macdonald amongst a myriad of other world-class speakers was hugely inspirational."

The values that Glen felt drawn to are synonymous with the ethos that has driven Oasis Academy Shirley Park through its recent improvement; an emphasis on the potential of *every child*; a *no excuses* policy in ensuring children reach their goal; *high expectations* on the Academy to provide high-quality educational opportunities; an inspirational leader who draws the best out of all in the Academy community; and an expectation for widespread leadership within the school.

"At the moment, we're ahead of our curve, but remain totally and utterly focused on achieving the aims of raising our standards, quality of teaching, adapted and individualised curriculum and our shared responsibility for leadership."

"As part of the Maori community in New Zealand, I am unrepentant in my belief in the saying: 'He tangata, he tangata, he tangata', which means, 'It is people, it is people, it is people'. We have to remember that in a world of targets and standards it is the people we work with, and for, that will get us there."

Oasis Community Learning Academies - the facts:

- ★ Oasis Community Learning was set up in 2004 with the express purpose of transforming learning, lives and communities through the development of the Oasis Academies
- ★ Oasis currently runs 12 Academies around the UK
- ★ They are the second largest sponsor of Academies
- ★ Oasis Academies are among the fastest improving in the country
- ★ Oasis Academies are typified by their central ethos of inclusion, interdependence and opportunity.