

Cross-Sector Partnership: A Model That Works for All

Partnerships between state and independent schools have become a more prominent part of the educational landscape in recent years and, for better or worse, a topic of some political debate. Ruth Edwards MP quoted recently in the Commons that ‘two-thirds of Independent School Council members are engaged in mutually beneficial cross-sector partnerships’ ranging from renting a swimming pool (at a very basic level) to educational opportunities where pupils of the same age from different settings can work together in collaborative events. Sir Kier Starmer recently alluded to the approach of some as ‘trickle down education’, a view which is understandable if it is always one school giving and another taking.

Can there not be a meaningful alternative and a model which can be impactful, mutually beneficial and one that works for all?

Recently we came across [this article](#) in Schools Week, written by Heidi Heinemann, Education Lead at the Roots Programme, an organisation which provides opportunities for young people to broaden their social understanding and aspiration by connecting those from different backgrounds. Many of the ideas shared were pertinent to the work that we do; modelling what we aspire to see in the next generation, consent-based involvement and a relational approach with authentic social connections. Over the last five years we have worked together as the ‘Oundle, Peterborough and East Northants (OPEN) Learning Partnership’, seeking to offer additional opportunity to young people in our region through collaborative programmes. We now connect with over 10,000 children, and in many cases their families too, every year.

Iain Holmes, Vice Principal at *Kettering Buccleuch Academy (KBA)*, a founding member of the OPEN LP reflects that: ‘The first thing you have to get around is that this is not the private sponsor school leading and directing things for the state schools to follow. Cross-Sector Partnership is a shared vision with leadership, expertise and drive coming equally from all areas. All schools have staff who are experts in their respective fields and can offer inspiring educational opportunities. Being in partnership allows these superb teachers to have an impact on more students. Staff from across the partnership schools have delivered content to all ages and in many settings, and while Oundle School often provides the perfect backdrop to facilitate this, it is the enthusiasm of these colleagues that makes the event one that the children will remember for ever.’

In one early collaboration Thomas Deacon Academy and Oundle School initiated a series of Maths Conferences, occurring tri-annually since 2017, where keen pupils work with those from other schools in seminars delivered by teachers from the OPEN LP schools. Schools from outside the OPEN group are invited to attend and teacher training is offered to accompanying teachers, often led by experienced staff from the OPEN LP. A teacher from *Prince William School* notes that ‘Liaising with other maths teachers and discussing curriculum, lesson plans and other maths issues was productive and it was enjoyable to have the opportunity to present. The provision of Continuing Professional Development was invaluable to visiting staff’. KBA notes that students ‘love going to the OMEC events where they get to participate in mixed teams with students from other schools. They get to make new friends and learn in a completely different setting. These kinds of opportunities broaden their horizons and grow their aspirations for the future.’ Kim Homard-Roy, Deputy Head at *Prince William School* says ‘The students enjoy meeting other like-minded students; it gives them the chance to be competitive and learn maths outside the classroom in a less formal or restrictive manner. It also enables students to build relationships outside the classroom with their own maths teachers.’

STEM Potential is another regular programme delivered by the partnership, seeking to support capable pupils from backgrounds statistically under-represented in high tariff universities. Each visit also features a formal lunch where pupils speak with adults and develop soft skills in addition to their scientific learning. 'These events have helped to open doors for some of our students. It is not that they lack the ability but being immersed in a subject in an environment away from their normal classroom gives them a glimpse of what the future could hold for them' reflects Iain at *KBA*. A pupil from *Prince William School* says that 'I really enjoy STEM. The sessions are engaging and fun as well as educational, and it's great to get into contact with and learn from professionals. As a PWS student, I like visiting Oundle School in order to use the equipment so that we can do interesting experiments eg dissections. It's also good that we have a connection to university through these events and I'm hoping to continue with STEM during Sixth Form too.'

Through teachers working together to plan, host and deliver these opportunities in a spirit of mutual respect with the warmth of being friends and colleagues rather than as representatives from 'a state school and a public school', we hope to model the values and attitudes which we want our pupils to develop. Some events include both primary and secondary whilst others focus on a particular phase.

Oundle CE Primary School hosted a Forest School Day for from partnership schools where children learned together in the outdoors in one recent primary focused event. *Tessa Humphrey from Laxton Junior School* shares the reflections of two Year 5 pupils who attended the a singing event alongside five other nearby schools: 'It was a really fun day and we loved singing with so many other children. It was fun to see friends we have made in out of school clubs as well as making some new friends in the breaktimes. We enjoyed listening to the other schools perform. This was an experience that is impossible to recreate with one school alone, whether it be a state school or an independent school. Mass music making is a unique experience and all children were given the opportunity to work with different teachers from different schools. The delivery was a combined effort with Oundle CE Primary and it was an uplifting and special occasion for all.'

Gordon Montgomery, Deputy Head Partnerships and Outreach at Oundle School has seen the benefits of partnership, both academic and social, over several years. 'For pupils and staff alike, stepping outside of our usual routines and meeting people in different contexts broadens our life experience and teaches us in ways that we cannot replicate in our own classroom. Whether it is playing music in shared masterclasses with the Royal College of Music, seeing the expertise of partner school teachers in the STEM Festival or Sixth Formers working together with their peers to judge the Creative Writing event, the partnership opens doors and delivers connection in a new and powerful way.' This maturing partnership has developed activities that reach beyond the local area including online curriculum support through ExpertEdLive (www.expertedlive.org) and connecting with parents and children at home. As you would expect, guests and presenters for this programme are drawn from both sectors and the 8 regions of the country currently involved in this partnership.

Partnerships can be an ill-defined term, used in different ways even within our space of cross-sector working and, as Heidi's article notes, there are pitfalls where relationships are not balanced and activity is not collaborative. Working together raises quality, reduces cost and increases opportunity. Partnership means valuing each partner and what they bring, having a genuine respect for each other, relying on each partner to bring their talents to the table and to share them generously. If we model this for our pupils, and bring them together so that they can practise it themselves, then we can break down social barriers, provide academic opportunities and support all of our young people to fulfil their potential.

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