

Developing student leadership at Heathlands

Derek Rodger comments on how leadership training has helped the students at Heathlands improve their skills

Twelve months ago, when drafting our School Development Plan, we asked the question 'How are we preparing Heathlands' students for adulthood?' Our school ethos stated that students should aim 'to develop respect, tolerance and all the skills necessary to make a positive contribution in their communities'. There was much discussion over what needed to happen in practice to make this ambition a reality. Heathlands already had the Student Council in place; this structure provided students with the opportunity to develop their skills. However, in order to create an effective student leadership structure, it was important to question the purpose and the role that the council provided, and to ensure that the School created further opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills. Analysis of student behaviour and staff feedback indicated that there was a clear need to develop a leadership programme, providing opportunities to develop additional skills. This approach would enable young people to take on a more prominent role in all aspects of school life, and most importantly provide them with the tools needed for adulthood.

From the process of self-evaluation our student leadership strategy was born. Careful planning and discussions led to the development of two distinct leadership programmes to enable **senior students** and **peer mentors** to develop a specific set of skills appropriate to their leadership roles.

Five focus groups were set up to engage students in different aspects of school life. These were led by senior students, and each group was accompanied by a teacher providing guidance and support. The following areas were focused on:

- Student Council
- Health and well-being
- Learning culture
- ECO
- Sport.

What leadership training was delivered?

Senior students received at least six one-hour leadership training sessions during the year. Careful negotiations with staff enabled students to be absent from lessons; however, they were required to catch up with their work in their own time. The leadership training was developed from the ASDAN (leadership programme).

Student leaders carried out a self-assessment of their skills. This was then used to develop the leadership training programme utilising some aspects of the ASDAN programme. The students enjoyed the informal training ethos accompanied by hot drinks and biscuits.

Peer mentors received at least six one-hour sessions of peer mentoring training. They learnt how to organise and participated in 'get to know each other' activities. In addition, a buddy system was established during the Autumn term to enable peer mentors to support the new students more effectively.

A weekly drop-in activity was run by the peer mentors for one term, during which they led a range of indoor and outdoor activities. The mentors led a special assembly covering PHSE topics over a period of five weeks, to the new year 7 students. They continued to develop their leadership skills by adapting to various roles; from being a peer mentor to student leader and contributing to focus groups.

The leadership skills were assessed every half term. On a five-point scale, students were rated on how they engaged in each of these skills. This process enabled self-reflection, as well as taking into consideration the written feedback received, along with what actions students need to undertake to improve their skills. This has been a positive experience overall for the students, enabling them to engage in discussions, developing their leadership skills and identifying the next steps.

At the start of the academic year, the student leaders explained in assembly the aims and objectives of their focus groups.

They encouraged other students to 'sign up' demonstrating their commitment to a chosen focus group. Each of the focus groups consisted of approximately eight students. They met up each half term to decide on and organise activities that were relevant to their area. Progress was shared on a regular basis in assembly. In recognition of their leadership role in school, student leaders wear a slightly differently coloured school tie.

Student leaders used the feedback from their focus groups to implement a variety of activities. Here are some examples of the outcomes of activities:

Learning culture:

- Homework – in some subjects, staff explored the idea of introducing more project-based homework.
- A small shop selling school equipment was set up and managed by the student leaders to develop organisational skills.
- Student leaders collected student feedback to determine the issues that impacted on them and what they found useful. This feedback was incorporated into the School Development Plan, illustrating the value of

the student voice in supporting school improvement. Students found this a valuable learning experience as well as developing confidence and leadership skills. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement.

Health and wellbeing:

- Student leaders led an assembly on anti-bullying which raised more awareness of the issues. This enabled them to be more actively engaged, seeing their peers leading this topic. As a result, they were more willing to share their experiences.
- A full programme of activities that coincided with the National Mental Health week (14th – 20th May) was delivered by the student leaders. This helped to increase students' understanding of mental health issues and reduce any associated stigma.

Sport:

- Staff and students organised a weekly 'one mile' challenge to boost their fitness.
- A weekly sport tournament took place where houses competed against each other.
- Joint Physical Education lessons with KS3 and KS4 students were held in order to develop their communication and team work skills.

Student Council

- A senior student, along with a peer mentor, led five student council meetings on a termly basis with a teacher overseeing the process, providing guidance and support. The senior students chaired the meeting and the peer mentor took the minutes. This enabled them to develop planning, communication and literacy skills.
- Regular school activities were organised such as the following: Children in Need, Talent Show, Dance Competition, Easter Treasure Hunt, and a Photography Competition.
- Regular whole school fundraising activities supporting the local Kadect charity (<http://kadect.org/>), based in St Albans. This charity supports deaf schools in Kashmir.

ECO:

- An action plan was created for the school to help us to do activities that promote sustainability.
- We now have the ECO bronze award; the next step is to achieve the ECO Silver Award.

(For further information on this scheme: www.eco-schools.org.uk/howitworks/the-awards)

It is important to reward contributions to the school community. In order to recognise this, we have special end of term treats, such as an afternoon off to have a pizza or a picnic in the park with lots of fun games. These are just a few examples. These activities were suggested by the students with a budget allocated that they managed.

Learning is accredited through the ASDAN programme. Evidence of impact can be seen through improved student confidence, self-awareness and organisational skills. Leading meetings, assemblies and house meetings demonstrates improved leadership and communication

skills. In addition, the training has given students the confidence and skills to become Deaf leaders, enabling them to take the lead in their own communities, being positive role models for others.

This is important; historically, deaf people often experience being marginalised within mainstream communities. Working in partnership with staff had a positive impact on our students and enabled them to acquire a skill set that benefits their personal and future lives. We are looking forward to seeing the leadership programme continue to develop, through student collaboration and participation.

In July 2018 feedback from students showed:

- 100% agreed that they have developed leadership and communication skills.
- 75% agreed that their confidence had improved as a leader.
- 67% agreed that their behaviour had improved.
- 100% agreed that the leadership programme should continue next year.

For some schools the curriculum accountability pressures are so great that they feel they have no option but to narrow students' education, particularly in the end of key stage year groups. We felt it was important for us to take the risk to develop a curriculum that supports the wider achievement of our students and their preparation for adult life. To further develop the leadership programme we are going to do the following:

- We will further develop the leadership programme with a greater focus on leadership behaviour.
- We will further review the school's structure, systems and processes to ensure that the student 'voice' is embedded in our practice and to promote inclusivity.
- We will achieve the ECO Schools Silver Award.
- We will explore achievement of sports leadership qualifications.
- We will organise debates so that students learn to openly discuss ideas and share thoughts.



Derek Rodger is a Teacher of the Deaf at Heathlands School.

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