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Brooke House Sixth Form College (BSix) Adviser support kick starts success at BSix

Summary

In recent years BSix has transformed its practices, results and reputation. In 2005/06 success rates were low compared to national sixth form averages, these have improved year on year. The college is now consistently in the top 5% for value added at advanced level. Recently awarded the TES FE Outstanding Provider of the Year alongside numerous other accolades, the Principal describes a relentless focus on achievement and standards a key aspect in their ongoing strategy for success, and how advisers from the Quality Improvement Agency (now the Improvement and Development Service) supported the early stages of that process.

About Brooke House Sixth Form College

BSix is a sixth form college in the London Borough of Hackney with a current intake of 1540. The student cohort is ethnically diverse and most are aged 16 to 18.

Approximately 70% of the students follow Advanced programmes, 15% Intermediate and 15% Foundation. The Principal, Ken Warman describes the college as 'big enough to offer the full range of A Levels, GCSEs and applied 'vocational' courses at all levels... but small enough for students to receive lots of individual care and attention'.

The college's ethos and practices are non selective and aim to support high aspirations for all. Students' GCSE points on entry are currently the lowest to be found in the sixth form college sector; value added is amongst the highest.

The challenge

In 2007/08 new student enrolments were in serious decline due to a negative reputation based on low success rates; this was exacerbated by competition from local schools with new 6th form provision. At this time, BSix staffs were striving to turn the college around.

The activity

A team of advisers from the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) worked with the college from 2007 to 2009 to support staff to improve success rates. They focused on:

- Addressing pockets of under-performance in ICT, Maths, Humanities, Science, Skills for Life, Business, English and Sport
- Improving the grade profile of teaching and learning observations

Advisers completed several activities during their time at BSix.

Firstly, a quality audit was completed which targeted areas of poor performance. Advisers were assigned to specific departments to examine systems, processes and paperwork. Outcomes were summarised in a report to departmental and senior managers which led to the development of a teaching and learning strategy

“The audit provided us with the accurate evidence we needed to make important decisions about the development of certain areas of the college. At the time, we needed that additional expertise as it was not fully developed within the college.” (Ken Warman, Principal, BSix)

Adviser support continued with input to the ‘Advanced Pedagogy Programme’ which was designed to assist departmental improvements in teaching and learning. Bespoke staff development sessions followed, supported by individual coaching for teachers and managers. Aspects commonly addressed were:

- Student tracking
- Tutorial practice
- Assessment practice
- Target setting and monitoring learner progress
- Strategies to address issues of attendance and punctuality

The college has continued to build on the work completed with the advisers. For example, the creation of ‘Teacher Learning Advocates’. who support staff development and take a lead on assessment for learning by organising Teacher Learning Communities and producing a bulletin.

“Adviser support really helped us at the start by providing the momentum we needed to develop our own expertise and capacity to improve.” (Ken Warman, Principal, BSix)



The outcomes

The Ofsted report May 2009 described one of the key strengths of the college as: 'effective strategies to improve success rates'. The report stated that:

"Students make excellent progress from an exceptionally low base. Although many success rates are below average, they are rising steadily. At level 3, high pass rates in two thirds of sector subject areas include a high proportion of high grades. Progression to higher education and training is good. Three quarters of level 3 students go to university. Value added measures place the college in the top 5% of schools and colleges."

Ofsted judged the college to be good at leadership and management, capacity to improve, meeting the needs and interests of learners and in some of the subject areas supported by advisers.

The impact

BSix's pro-active approach to continuous improvement throughout the adviser support and since that period is evident.

By April 2009 applications were up 100% compared to the same period the previous year. Presently (2012) the college has increased its student numbers by 50% and has five applications for each place available.

In 2009 the college achieved the best value-added in the whole of the state sector (over 3,000 schools and 400 colleges) and they continue to consistently place in the top 5%.

Since 2009 the college has been recognised formally through several awards including:

- AoC Beacon Award in 2010 for Staff Development in Further Education. This award demonstrates innovative best practice

- The London Education Partnerships Award 2010: driving achievement forward: achieving successful outcomes post 16. This related to the College's work with students on Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) courses who then progressed to Level 3 (advanced) programmes and then to university
- The London Education Partnerships Award 2011 for the Raising Aspirations programme of long-term work with universities
- Two TES FE Awards in 2012: Outstanding Provider of the Year and Outstanding Marketing/Communications Team

Success rates have steadily risen from 61% in 2007 to 79% in 2011.

"We are committed to long term sustainable success for our students and the college; that sort of change does not happen overnight. We remain focused on our strategy and driven by our belief that all young people deserve the very best education, and we are committed to providing just that. The external recognition is a reflection of the hard work and success of both students and staff; it has added a real sense of pride to what we do." (Ken Warman, Principal, BSix)

The lessons learned

Ken Warman reflects on lessons learned and key factors involved in improving success rates and value added. These points could be used by any provider:

- Have a clear strategy which is simple and based on firm values and beliefs. Ensure that everything you do embraces that strategy
- Be honest and open with yourselves and external bodies about where the college is at in terms of development
- Act quickly. Tackle issues whatever they are but be transparent in your approach
- Emphasise and invest in professional development for all
- Take teaching and learning seriously as it is central to success
- Create a structure which attracts and retains the very best teachers. We are developing teaching progression routes including new roles such as Senior Teachers and Teacher Learning Advocates
- Implement initiatives whereby staff and students come together to improve the learning experience. Last year our students conducted an inspection of our college following training from an Ofsted inspector. Their report was incisive and provided a 'real' view of the college; it is included within our self-assessment report. This year they will do a monitoring visit.
- Focus on how the targets are achieved rather than purely on the targets themselves

- Understand that only success itself can improve a college's reputation. You can't project an external image of success until you have genuinely improved
- Remain focused on continuous improvement; be both outward and inward-looking. We are proud that more people are visiting our college to see what we do. We know we have the expertise now to self-improve, but we still work with consultants and remain keen to learn from other providers

Useful links

Brooke House Sixth Form College website www.bsix.ac.uk

Links to related case studies

If you would like further information regarding this case study please contact Ken Warman, Principal, Brooke House Sixth Form College

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