

Firwood School

Leadership of collaborative Partnerships-Project Search



Our organisation

Firwood is a secondary school (11-19) for students who have severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties. There are around 90 learners and 80 staff, with a focus on providing individualised learning that maximises independence for all students as well as ensuring staff are highly trained through extensive development opportunities. Firwood have recently (April 2012) moved into brand new premises in a building shared with a mainstream all-age academy. This situation offers unrivalled opportunities for inclusion - promoting students' make a valued contribution, yet is able to provide the specialist input needed for students. Specialist facilities (e.g. hydrotherapy, state of the art sensory room, flat, etc.) compliment shared areas such as the LRC and Restaurant.

The school focus at 16-19 is very much on gaining independence; the employment programme has been a great success and has put several of students into real paid employment for the first time.

Our approach

Prior to September 2010, gaining any sort of employment had been virtually impossible for students at Firwood (a special school for students with Severe or Profound Learning Difficulties) – either when they left at 19 or subsequently. The school had however worked hard on inclusion through close collaboration with the local mainstream secondary and the resulting plans for a co-located and shared re-build. The overall aim of this was to create a community that allowed students with severe or profound learning difficulties and or disabilities to have a valued role and gave them the respect that their important contribution to the community deserved.

Following a presentation on Project Search by the Project Directors from Cincinnati, Firwood was successful in gaining a place on the first trial in England, as one of 12 centres that included one other school.

The key motivations for the Project were to provide an improved quality of life for people with learning difficulties and or disabilities with knock-on effects that could include:

- An improved public acceptance and attitude to those with learning difficulties and or disabilities
- A greater level of independence through life and less reliance on benefits;
- A lesser reliance on adult social care – including significant savings calculated for each person employed;
- Greater freedom for parents of those with learning difficulties and or disabilities to work;

Partners

All project partners, including the **education setting (Firwood High School)**, the **key employer (Bolton Council)** and **employment support organisation (Remploy)** had to sign the partnership agreement. Clearly all three organisations needed to be convinced of the viability of such a project prior to sign-up. Factors influencing this belief included:

- Being able to convince partners of Firwood's emotional and moral commitment to making the project successful.
- The Council's Senior Leadership having a moral commitment to the Bolton community and valuing inclusion.
- The School having previously delivered projects successfully at short notice
- The School having been awarded two specialisms (Cognition/Learning and Applied Learning) by the Specialist School and Academies' Trust specialisms, including being rated as a high-performing special school.
- The existence of a signed agreement that clarified each contributor's role.
- Clear evidence of the success of the project in America
- Ensuring all were aware of the financial viability of having employees with learning difficulties and or disabilities and providing examples of how organisations sometimes made significant savings as a result of employing people with learning difficulties and or disabilities .

The signatories agreed to “**collaborate and cooperate**” and “**foster and facilitate the acquisition of jobs**”, as well as defining each named person in the organisations' specific roles. The students involved would have a base outside

The students

Once the written agreement was in place, information and presentations could be made to potential students and their parents. Year 14 Students were given the option of taking up a place, as were some students who had left school but were under 25. Each student was assessed against a range of Project Search factors that could affect their employability and the appropriate students offered a place.

It was vital to the ethos of the project that participants should move from students to employees. Their base for the year would therefore no longer be the School, but an Office in Bolton Council.

The Project Search Year:

Three 10 week “internships” are arranged through the year. Each is split in half with a “workshop week” and the first is preceded with a two week “orientation”. Workshops and orientations focus on learning the range of skills required for that particular employer, health and safety information, and so on.

The range of internships available was a blend of looking at students' specific interests and negotiating with Heads of Departments / Managers over what placements could be made available. Often a presentation made to a group of senior leaders paid dividends in opening up additional internship opportunities. The benefit of working with a large organisation like Bolton Council meant that there was a greater range of employment openings. Internships included work in catering, sign making, clerical duties, deliveries, refuse department, caretaking, to name but a few.

Mentors were assigned from those working alongside the Project Search Student, with weekly meetings being held to identify successes and targets to be worked on. Accreditations through the Asdan “Employability Skills” were undertaken alongside the project.

The Project Search Day

An hour was spent in the office base at the start and end of each internship day to resolve or work on any issues arising from students’ placements. Students then spent between around 10.00 and 2.30 p.m. in the workplace. Focussed support by School and Remploy staff was slowly faded as the individual became more familiar with tasks. New tasks were taught using systematic instruction.

Where possible students would start to learn to use public transport to increase their independence further and make it more likely that they would be able to hold down a job post-Project Search.

Students under 19 on the project were put onto Firwood’s role, generating the usual income to schools via the Local Authority’s Scheme for Financing Schools (although this funding may be lagged).

Non-school role students posed a bigger problem in that it needed to be shown that school resources were not being used to support them. Contributions towards the costs of this group were made by Adult Social Care, given the potential reduction in their on-going costs over several years if students were successful in gaining employment.

Outcomes and impact of the work

At the end of the first year 4 out of the 6 students gained some sort of real paid employment. This ranged from a day a week to a contract working 5 shortened days each week. A term after the end of the first cohort, another of the 6 students gained a 10 hour per week permanent post. One student left early after 2 terms to take up paid employment, having been so successful in his placements.

Key Influences on Success:

“Total immersion” in the workplace, through:

- Having a base within the key employers organisation from which students work, rather than attending the School.
- Taking part in real and extended (10 week) “internships” in the key employer’s organisation, rather than being based at the educational institution and taking part in a single fortnight or one day per week of works experience.

Sharing work on employability skills:

- Special school staff utilised their expertise in solving problems around teaching (often using systematic instruction) or explaining different situations and tasks to students;
- Remploy utilised their expertise in finding placements and real job opportunities, then supporting the students post-employment if necessary.
- “Job mentors” being allocated by the employer partner (Bolton Council) who worked with other partners to identify areas of work possible for Project Search Students and supported them in the workplace. They all reported finding the opportunity highly rewarding and learned much.

The role of significant others:

- The commitment of parents or significant others in the students' lives to the programme was absolutely essential in gaining success. The expectation that the students should adopt an appropriate work ethic was needed; parents and others needed to value work. The very occasional student has been let down through difficulty in this area.

The attitude of the Students:

- Having a strong work ethic – the students all really valued their internships, which gave them increased self-esteem and ensured they worked hard to complete tasks.
- Being a cheerful and positive presence around the workplace;
- Providing a situation where other employees felt they had to set a good example.

One manager said

*“If I had £10,000 to spend on staff training, I wouldn't – I'd employ *****.” True to his word, he did!*

Next steps and future plans

Project Search is clearly an effective way of gaining employment for those with LDD. With 83% of last year's students now having some form of paid employment and one of this year's students already having left to start a paid job, it is vital the work continues.

Two challenges will always remain; firstly funding the project and secondly finding appropriate opportunities for real employment.

However, the team have needed to remain aspirational in their thinking for the project to become embedded within the school.

Its continuation has depended more on this determined approach than a more easily accepted “realism”. The school have committed to delivering these outcomes for people with learning difficulties and or disabilities, then worked on finding a way to overcome any financial difficulties. Finances can be an excuse for the demise of anything!

Case study prepared by Jonathan Steele, Head teacher at Firwood Special School.
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