

Implementing the SEND Reforms: Using the Structured Conversation approach to involve parents as real partners in their child's education Portland Academy, Sunderland

Background

To involve parents as real partners in the planning and review of their child's provision in line with a central principle of the SEND Code of Practice. In turn, this supports transition into the academy at Year 7; the sharing of targets with parents and further developing home school relationships to address academic progress; personal and social development which can be barriers for learning, e.g. poor sleep patterns resulting from the need for night time routines.

Context

Portland Academy caters for 156 students between the ages of 11 and 19 who experience severe learning difficulties, and profound and multiple learning difficulties. It offers co-educational day provision from a catchment area covering the city of Sunderland and beyond. A growing number of pupils have Autistic spectrum condition (approximately one third have some identified autistic traits noted on their Statements). Approximately 10 percent of pupils are working below P4 across a range of subjects.

Portland Academy opened in August 2012. It is a founding member of the Ascent Academies Trust along with Barbara Priestman Academy. In February 2013 Springwell Dene Academy joined the Trust, followed by Castlegreen Academy in July 2014. The Trust now encompasses all

“My daughter’s teacher got to know her much better through Achievement for All and I got to know her teacher better too. I now have a better understanding of what my daughter is doing at school and it has helped with issues at home as well as at school.”

Parent

secondary aged special schools in Sunderland and is currently in the process of sponsoring Ash Trees, a special primary school, in Stockton.

Approach

Portland has a long established history of positive relationships with parents but was keen to respond to the raised expectations of the new SEND Code of Practice in enabling parents to be more fully involved with decision making about their child's education. On joining Achievement for All in 2013, staff undertook Structured Conversation training and despite some initial reservations from some, initial rounds of conversations with parents proved extremely positive.

A TLR3 post was created to ensure a systematic approach to the programme and this member of staff supported the Deputy Head teacher in moving forwards. Two groups of students were identified in the first year, 13 Year 7, plus 10 students from KS3 and KS4 identified as not on track to make

two levels of progress in two or more strands of maths and/or English.

Students' parents were invited to a preliminary meeting where the Achievement Coach introduced the programme and answered questions. Initial turnout was poor, but this was followed up on a 1:1 basis by class teachers and the TLR to gain parental engagement. With such a wide catchment area, staff at Portland concluded that a range of times and dates needed to be offered to ensure maximum engagement and this was introduced. Cover for teachers was provided beyond their normal PPA or TLR times. The Academy provided transport for one particular parent with transport issues, and where face-to-face meetings couldn't be arranged, telephone conversations were organised.

The group of students identified was diverse, and Structured Conversations provided as much information as possible about each individual to help identify any further barriers to learning. During the conversations parents were encouraged to identify at least one target that would support the student within the home environment. These included introducing night time routines, visual supports to increase the child's independence, supporting communication by use of communication aids including training for parents. Teachers then discussed two focussed targets to support the students academically, and which could be implemented both at home and school.

The Structured Conversation approach was used once per term formally, however teachers were available to discuss strategies and progress on a daily basis via a home school book and/or telephone.

“The on-going support from our Coach together with the challenge she provided helped us to remain on track even when things were not going exactly to plan.”

Head of School, Portland Academy

A recording system was developed providing clear targets and identification of what each party committed to doing to support reaching these. A no-blame culture was adopted so that if support had not been delivered the discussions were positively focused in order to maintain engagement and strengthen relationships.

This proved to be supportive of the annual review process and when parents came to meetings they appeared more confident to express views and opinions.

The outcomes for the students were very positive with both groups of students showing progress in their academic achievements and all but two in their attendance.

Impact

A survey of parents was conducted on the impact of the Achievement for All Structured Conversation approach. Responses were overwhelmingly positive:

- 77% reported that meetings have helped teachers gain a better understanding of their child
- 69% gave the Structured Conversation approach 10/10 with an average score of 9.2/10

- Many felt strongly that the discussions had helped them support their child better at home and were happy with the impact this was having on their child's progress
- Parents felt more involved in setting targets and how the school was supporting their child

Some teachers initially had been reluctant, and there was an impact on workload, but they also recognised the positive impact the approach was having and that the improved relationships with parents was making more rapid and sustained progress. Towards the end of the pilot year teachers not involved were asking when they would be part of the programme.

Key Learning

Parents welcome the Structured Conversation approach and the school feels well placed to embed the culture of the SEND Reforms to give parents a real voice in agreeing what is important for their child.

The school appreciates parents as the first educators and the knowledge they hold about their child – this coupled with the pedagogical knowledge of the teacher creates a powerful partnership.

Parents valued the teachers' time and the links to other resources and professionals that were made available to further support the development of the child.

The school has identified a need to provide a personalised offer to parents in the same way as is done for students.

Next Steps

Portland is continuing with Structured Conversations with the parents of the Year 7 group who have now moved to Year 8.

Conversations with parents of students transferring to the school in September 2014 were carried out in July 2014 – the initial feedback was again positive. Year 6 parents felt more secure and comfortable that their child's teacher knew them well and could focus on their individual needs.

Portland intends to move this approach throughout the Academy by introducing the Structured Conversations to each new Year 7 group over the coming years.

The school also intends to invite Year 11 parents to attend Structured Conversations prior to the students moving into the post-16 provision as this is a key transition point.

Contact Us

For further information visit our website: www.afa3as.org.uk

Or call: 01635 279 499