Account of practice:

From self-evaluation to school improvement

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Cheltenham Bournside School is a mixed secondary foundation school for pupils aged 11–18. Following a full inspection in May 2012, Ofsted said:

Self-evaluation is well organised and effective so leaders and managers have a clear view of the school’s strengths and weaknesses, and act decisively on the latter. School improvement planning is an active process and constantly evolving; its strengths are evident in the school’s effective reaction to a drop in attainment in 2011. In particular, a sharp focus on improving teaching through careful performance management has been effective, and students’ attainment and progress have quickly improved to the previously above-average levels.

In this extract, Gareth describes what he believes to be the essential elements of the school self-evaluation process.

The self-evaluation form

The senior leadership team (SLT) takes overall responsibility for completion of a customised version of the once-compulsory self-evaluation form (SEF). This document is still useful in giving an evaluative overview of achievement and progress, behaviour and safety, teaching and learning, and leadership and management. RAISEonline data, published in January and validated in April, keeps the SEF current.

A dynamic school improvement plan

Although this approach to self-evaluation is quite common in most schools, the introduction of Gareth’s dynamic school improvement plan (SIP) – a plan that quickly responds to and feeds into SEF judgements – is proving very effective. It consists of three key elements:

- the department response plan (DRP) and fortnightly meetings
- monitoring, self-evaluation and review (MSER)
- relative performance indicators (RPIs)

Department response plan

The department response plan (DRP) is a simple word-processed form that is held on the school’s intranet. It identifies 10-15 targets for each department, agreed between the department and the SLT. The DRP shows timescales and the person responsible for each target. This limited number of targets is sufficient to keep heads of department (HoDs) focused on what is required without being too onerous. It is the job of the SLT to finalise each target. It is the responsibility of the individual department to update the DRP in response to the ongoing collection of data, while also making observations on overall progress.

The DRP has four review points through the year: September, January, April and June. Meetings occurring during these DRP ‘windows’ are dedicated to the review of targets. Professional dialogue, based on the information collected from various sources between the review points, inform the judgements on the status of each target.

Targets deemed completed are formally signed off following authorisation by the SLT. New targets are added if required. Gareth says: “The HoDs have ownership of the process but crucially, the accountability lies with an SLT member who has the final say.”
There are five sign-off codes for a target:
- **C** = completed
- **N** = not completed
- **A** = abandoned
- **PT** = partly completed but on track
- **PB** = partly completed but behind timescale

Targets coded C, N or A are removed. Abandoned targets relate to any mid-stream changes due to external circumstances such as changes in government policy.

**Fortnightly meetings**

Meetings held with the relevant SLT line manager track interim progress towards targets between the review points. A departmental folder of evidence, held on the school's intranet, contains the necessary evidence-trail to each judgement. It holds teachers' monitoring reports, student reviews, work scrutiny outcomes and the analysis of data. Adding to the folder is an ongoing process, building the evidence-base to ensure that judgements are based on a clear rationale. The frequency and regularity of these meetings keep progress information relevant and up to date throughout the year.

Gareth has learned that the DRP and fortnightly meetings have a number of distinct advantages:
- They demonstrate to HoDs and staff that senior leaders have an up-to-date overview of the SIP and can update the SEF when required.
- The ownership of the ongoing revisions by HoD's staff keep them connected to live and relevant content.
- Regular interim reviews keep the quality of professional dialogue high.
- The signing-off process holds everyone involved in the process to account.

Gareth says the DRP approach has been well received by staff:

It was something that departments had mentioned, about a year ago; it was something that had come from them, there wasn’t a big selling job at all. The key features were ownership and the signing-off of a manageable number of targets.
Monitoring, self-evaluation and review

A monitoring, self-evaluation and review (MSER) process feeds into the DRP. This comprises three student assessment points a year and three periods for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.

Student assessment

A member of the SLT co-ordinates the analysis of student assessment through book scrutiny across subjects and key stages. Interviews collect information on the prevailing views of the student body. Outcomes inform the DRP via the folders of evidence.

Quality of teaching and learning

External consultants, some of them practising Ofsted inspectors, carry out lesson observations and give feedback. The outcomes for each member of staff and department are tracked over time.

The major benefits of external sources for monitoring are as follows:

- An accurate picture of the progress of teaching and learning is built over time.
- Joint observations ensure that senior staff and external consultants moderate and deliver consistent judgements across the school and the education system as a whole.
- Appropriate continuing professional development is identified.
- Outcomes are included for discussion in the performance management process.

Gareth remembers:

Three years ago we were downgraded by Ofsted from ‘good’ to ‘satisfactory’. Staff were aggrieved at this but now understand the value of using external observation to verify the quality of teaching.

This process is now embedded and internal judgements align with Ofsted judgements, although consultants need to remain up to date with the most recent Ofsted framework to ensure continued alignment.

Gareth outlines the next steps for the school:

We are trying to involve other senior leaders, heads of department in particular, in the monitoring of teaching and learning. HoDs now jointly observe lesson practice, holding their own staff to account for the quality of teaching and learning in their subject.
Relative performance indicator

The relative performance indicator (RPI) measures the performance of a student relative to others in the school. It also measures how the pupil has performed across subjects. RPIs are calculated after the August test results, focusing primarily on Year 11 performance for each teacher and each department. Degrees of difficulty, using the previous year’s RAISEonline report factors into the calculation the national performance for all students in that particular subject. The RPIs also feed into the DRP.

Gareth gives an example:

A student with an RPI of -2 for a particular taught subject indicates performance two grades lower than they have performed in other classes or subjects. The argument there would be that, since this is the same student, there could be issues requiring further investigation. These might include teaching effectiveness.

It is the role of the SLT line manager for that specific department to oversee this investigation and instigate a response. He has noted that RPI variations between subjects are falling as discrepancies are quickly dealt with through the DRP.

The data leader

The current Ofsted framework places heavy emphasis on the collection of evidence of a school’s progress over time. Therefore, the accuracy of data in supporting key decisions made by a school is very important.

To help with this, a data leader collates and analyses data four times a year, feeding it into the DRP. Incidentally, this removes an element of workload from HoDs and middle leaders, allowing them to concentrate on the analysis rather than simple computation. The data leader makes initial comments on what the data might imply, expressing it in a form that HoDs understand. The HoDs can respond to the comments through the DRP.

This well-presented and analysed data has enhanced the status of the data leader, who maintains a clear delineation between the job of a statistician and a teacher: responses to analysis, causes, solutions and suggested provision are all matters for teaching staff.

Whilst the monitoring data is clear and transparent, it is also non-negotiable. The headteacher is currently involved with the data leader in the analysis and presentation of data to HoDs, a process that is consistent across the school.

Performance management

Whilst the RPI figures give a relative measure of the strength of teacher performance in each subject, there is a school-wide common pupil progress objective, and the wording is identical for all staff:

The performance of my group of students will have a RPI of greater than −2.

Pay progression is directly linked to this. If this objective is not achieved, there is no progression. This holds people very tightly to account.
The governing body

The governing body is involved in the whole-school SEF, concentrating primarily on the leadership and management aspects since it is part of that process by statute. The governing body approved the introduction of these SIP processes through the curriculum committee, with final approval granted at a meeting of the full governing body. Governors see these processes as a desirable internal mechanism to support achievement whilst maintaining challenge and accountability. They take a back seat when it comes to implementation of the processes and are clear that this is a role for internal leadership and management.

Summary

This account of practice has emphasised the responsibility of senior leaders for setting evidence-based targets to inform school self-evaluation. It encourages middle leaders to participate in the identification and review of those targets and to hold to account those responsible for their delivery at classroom level.

Gareth says:

Our capacity to self-evaluate to a high degree of accuracy is at the core of what we do and provides evidence of our achievement.

Finally, he gives this advice on making school self-evaluation (SSE) work:

Listen to staff. Consult, but remember decisions may not always reflect individual views because the final decision lies with the SLT. Sell the benefits of SSE to staff. Keep SSE processes relevant, up to date and easily accessible across the school system.