Integrating coaching, mentoring and performance management

Case study: Secondary

Resource
Integrating coaching, mentoring and performance management
Sweyne Park School

In just seven years, since two undersubscribed and static secondary schools merged to become Sweyne Park School, the new school has succeeded in:

− developing a very evident culture of mutual respect – staff and students alike
− raising performance levels in national tests by nearly 20 per cent
− significantly increasing the number of students on roll. Demand for places is now high.

Recruitment and retention of staff has also benefited. The school recruits many of its own graduates and staff turnover is very low.

The context

Sweyne Park School is a large secondary school in Essex. It was formed in 1997 by the amalgamation of two undersubscribed schools. It is a training school and specialist science centre. More than 20 per cent of the staff have undertaken their initial training at the school and are familiar with coaching from initial teacher training. There is little recruitment from outside of the school and turnover is low. The school is involved in a range of outreach work, including a Leading Edge partnership. The school is very serious about its public commitment to mutual respect, including respect for students, in which coaching and mentoring play a key role. It also does a lot of work on confidence building with both staff and students.

Why coaching?

The school has long used mentoring as part of its involvement in ITT and graduate training. NQTs start at the school and soon become used to coaching which is at the heart of their CPD. The head teacher, Kate Spiller, put coaching and mentoring at the centre of the school’s development from the start. “For student success, you have to have effective staff. How? Make sure you recruit the right people and then coach and train them throughout the time they are at the school. Creating a climate of continuing professional development is an essential part of being a leader.” She regards coaching and mentoring as “part of people’s entitlement to be all they can become within a learning community. We try to get people to achieve things they didn’t think were possible. Even very good teachers need help to get better.” Building confidence and self belief amongst staff and students is part of the school ethos, and coaching and mentoring are the means by which people are given enough challenge to succeed.

What sort of coaching and mentoring is used?

The school is clear that it regards mentoring as more about personal support, reflection and facilitation and coaching as more about knowledge, experience and subject specialist skills. For example, new teachers and trainee teachers will have a mentor plus a specialist subject coach. Both coaching and mentoring are integral to a whole-school monitoring system. The more people buy in to coaching, the less monitoring they need. Line managers, subject heads and year heads both mentor and coach staff, although departments organise their coaching according to their expertise.

The school uses a coaching model which assumes that the coach has greater expertise or knowledge than the person being coached. In the past two years, teachers have also introduced the Peer Observation Project (built around the Research Lesson devised by the Networked Learning Group). This uses a reciprocal coaching model in which colleagues jointly plan and observe each other as they experiment with different teaching strategies. The school also makes use of specialist coaching by external consultants, often at the express wish of the teachers concerned.
How are coaching and mentoring used at Sweyne Park?

Identifying needs and goals

Staff coach each other all the time in a number of different contexts. Coaching needs are frequently identified by the school leadership team, either as a result of the regular departmental reviews or through regular monitoring – and mentoring – by line managers. Needs are also identified by the teachers themselves, who will make a request for coaching on a particular aspect of their teaching. Unlike many other schools, Sweyne Park has integrated coaching and mentoring of teachers with its performance management system. Performance management is made central to teachers’ professional development by incorporating coaching and mentoring.

Building on strengths

The school has developed a database of staff expertise which is used to support staff who may be struggling or wishing to develop a skill or practice. Staff may be encouraged by their line managers during a mentoring session to observe a colleague who has been identified as having particular skills in a particular subject or teaching strategy. Staff feel comfortable about being observed and discussing aspects of their practice where they have identified a problem or where coaching support has been offered.

Observation

Observation is at the core of the school’s coaching practice. Observation is used for:

− line management (all line managers coach and all staff, including heads of departments and deputy heads have line managers)
− departmental reviews
− the development of classroom skills and knowledge
− initial teacher education (the school has both PGCE and graduate training programmes)
− peer coaching to introduce new ideas and teaching strategies and to evaluate their effectiveness.

A learning culture

Teachers recruited from other schools are made aware of the school’s commitment to observation before they apply and given extensive support during their induction period to help them adjust to the culture at Sweyne Park. As one member of staff explained: “If the culture of the school is not open then people won’t want ASTs coming into their classrooms. People have to want to keep developing their practice.” Despite knowing that their practice is extensively monitored, teachers seem to feel very supported. “No one wants to leave,” according to one of the deputy heads. An NQT recruited from the previous year’s graduate training course said: “You and your students know that anyone can walk into the classroom at any time – for all staff the support structure in place is fantastic. The staff are all learning at the same time as the children.”

Pupil voice

The school also makes extensive use of pupil voice to monitor developments. Pupils are accustomed to evaluating lessons and teachers are very much aware that the pupils are serious about their learning. They want to do well.
What takes place?

The school’s pervasive coaching practice is designed to ensure that nothing in a performance management session should ever come as a shock. Each member of staff is observed about three or four times a year by senior staff and, in turn, will also have plenty of opportunities to observe their colleagues with identified expertise in particular areas.

Leaders are coached too. Developing leadership skills is an aspect of coaching that runs throughout the school. For example for two weeks of the year the assistant year heads act as heads of year; deputy heads each spend a week as acting head.

More and more staff are taking part in the Peer Observation Project. Every teacher prepares a summary of all the feedback from their lesson observations, including the peer lesson observations, to discuss at performance review. Pupil data is also used by teachers to help focus in on areas for development.

The headteacher acknowledges that feedback can sometimes be uncomfortable and line managers are trained to give feedback without undermining self-confidence. Praise and appreciation are used extensively and the normal pattern of feedback is for observers to offer five positive comments and identify one area for further development work.

All the staff interviewed during the case study visit, including a NQT, felt valued. It was clear that observation was directed at the teaching behaviours rather than at the person concerned and that staff regarded the process as supportive rather than undermining. (However the school recognises that observation by the leadership team conducted during the annual departmental reviews is more formal than the ongoing observations during which teachers plan, deliver, observe and offer feedback to each other.)

The school runs staff development workshops once a week, while new staff have an additional weekly session in the first year. A regular group of consultants is used by the school and staff tend to prefer working with them in their classrooms than going on courses. ASTs are also used extensively within the school to raise the quality of teaching.

What skills and attributes are needed?

The school identifies the following as essential skills and attributes for effective mentoring and coaching:

− strong emotional intelligence and empathy
− the ability to suspend judgement
− the ability to see potential in others
− self-confidence
− knowledge of the nuances of language and how to use it effectively in coaching conversation
− expertise and experience.
Resources: how is it funded?

Although development days are scheduled at times of low cover costs, line management coaching is timetabled and the costs are met from the school budget. The school believes the investment to be well worth it. The benefits are such that middle managers who were originally reluctant to spend allocated time on coaching now make sure that they take the full timetabled allocation.

What obstacles and challenges had to be overcome?

Time presents a continuous challenge. The school has to ensure that time is allocated for observation and debriefing. Older staff have been less inclined to open up their practice and challenge the way they do things. The weekly staff development sessions have been useful in overcoming some of this reluctance.

What are the benefits?

Staff appear to agree with the head that: “Coaching in line management is one of the most powerful things the school has done.” The pupils’ evaluation of lessons have had a big impact on teaching too. There is now a shared commitment to wanting to make things better and to get involved in improving teaching and learning. It was very clear talking to staff that there was a deep, shared knowledge of the pupils’ expectations: “Our pupils would never accept that.” Grades have gone up and recruitment and retention have improved very significantly.
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