

Case study 1. Mike transforms the subject results, options numbers and his team.

In the first few years at his new school Mike improved GCSE results from a disappointing 54% to 85% A*-C and significantly strengthened the residual too. Much of this was down to Mike's own inspirational teaching. A year later students achieved a massive 96% and a whopping residual. So that all students who took the history GCSE scored a whole grade higher than they did in the average of other subjects. This was achieved **right across the ability range** and was really impressive as all teachers made a strong contribution. At the same time AS results were astonishingly good. So how did he do it? Mike kindly drafted his ideas which I have added to, using my knowledge of his exceptional department.

Mike's department realised early on that the key to success in GCSE history is based on the sort of high quality teaching that makes students excited about coming to history, often seeing it as the best lesson of their day. GCSE history can easily become death by note making, given the seemingly excessive amount of knowledge students need to know. Not in Mike's department! Every lesson I observed over a number of years contained engaging activities and memorable moments! These activities were designed to make students sit up and take notice. When fully engaged they were much more likely to grasp the concepts that lay beneath the carefully crafted activities. From re-enacting the Journey West (for SHP students of the American West), to handling a trepanned skull, the students never knew what was going to happen next. The department spent far longer than most figuring out ways to engage even the most recalcitrant 16 year-old.

Mike now takes up the story

We worked out early on that written work had to have a thinking element to it, with a strong emphasis on removing basic note-making from our teaching. We believe that students can, and should, write answers to real questions, both in and out of lessons. This is always restricted to a maximum of 15 minutes per lesson.

Much discussion has taken place over the importance of exam technique. Given the sometimes bizarre requirements of AQA's SHP mark schemes we have found it to be essential to regularly practice exam technique. To try to avoid an artificial rote learning of formulas, we have mapped out 'majoring' and 'minoring' opportunities to practise exam technique. These will include: formal exams; teacher-led modelling lessons; peer marking; improving each other's work; as well as using sources or creating brainstormers as starters and plenaries. These are always in response to exam questions.

Throughout the course, target setting takes place which involves the student, the classroom teacher, AND the subject leader. Students work through a target-setting booklet, looking at average prior attainment for students of similar ability as shown by average End of KS3 SATs scores (crude but a useful benchmark). A challenging target is then set in consultation with the class teacher. These targets are then regularly reviewed throughout the GCSE course based on performance and attitude. This process has the effect of making students responsible for their GCSE result, creating a dialogue between the student and their teacher and allowing the subject leader to ensure that appropriate expectations are being set consistently in all lessons.

When I took over as subject leader, the department consisted of three teachers who had only one or two years' teaching experience, not all that at GCSE. At least there was no baggage! This had two unexpected benefits. Firstly, it created a very close knit team who needed and wanted to talk to each other about their experiences and their students. The department had not developed a *patch mentality* where their pupils are **their** students. This has allowed us to share the marking load with teachers marking all of one question on a course work task or all of one section of a mock exam. The benefits of greater consistency of marking removed the need to moderate in detail.

A crucial priority for me was to have a detailed knowledge of all pupils who were studying GCSE History – all 300 of them. Although this may seem impossible it actually proved straightforward. Each term I met with every teacher and discussed how their class was getting on as a whole and any key individuals or issues. In addition if any of my teachers is absent I always try to cover their Key Stage 4 lesson leaving my Key Stage 3 class with a cover teacher. This personal understanding of each and every student has left all teachers feeling well supported and students feel they are valued, seeing themselves as part of the team.

Data played a key part as a tool in improving standards. At the start of year 10 I created a data base with all the students' average point scores and English levels from their Key Stage 3 SATS. This is kept in whole Department format on a spreadsheet, but also split into individual classes. Students' names are colour-coded depending on likely achievement including those on key border lines. This allows the teachers to get a real feel for the likely performance of the class before they even start the course. Throughout the

two years pupils have five opportunities to complete a full exam under GCSE conditions and their results are entered onto the data base. By January of Year 11 therefore we are not left guessing predicted grades for pupils, whereas three years previously only 49% of pupils achieved their predicted grade now it is 90%.

One of the new innovations in the departments has been the bench marking of performance. The **residuals** and the **Autumn Package** give us genuine support in identifying how well the Department has performed. They both have their limitations. In a school with many weak, or indeed strong departments, residuals can either look very high or very low without indicating how well groups of students have performed. With this in mind we have set targets for what we, as a department, are capable of achieving with any given group of students. This year we converted 100% of pupils with an average point score of 38 to an A* - C grade. We also converted 75% of those with an APS of 35 to 37 to an A* - C, 71% of those with an APS of 30-34 and 25 % with an APS of below 25 to an A*-C grade. These figures are significantly above what the autumn package suggests students of different ability should achieve. These results have led us to setting slightly higher targets for our current Years 10 and 11. In future we hope to share data with other Local Authority schools taking the same GCSE specifications so that we can produce a data base of hundreds of students GCSE results compared to their APS in an effort to identify even further what represents good achievement.