

Case study 3: Massive improvement... and quickly. How did he do it?

This case study is incredibly revealing as the dramatic improvement came about with basically the same team of teachers, just one new member - a really effective new head of department. When Nick arrived at the school only 26% of students were achieving an A*-C grade in history with a dire subject residual. Within a couple of years the A*-C had soared to nearly 80% and the residual figure was a staggering +1.03. Nick's team had added value of approximately 2 grades to the average performance of students in history. Nick would be the first to say that things were already improving before he arrived. Nevertheless the figures speak for themselves. Nick has kindly analysed his success for us and has picked out 5 or 6 factors that he thinks are key.

Factor 1. High expectations

Nick developed a robust system of tracking students' performance even before the Autumn Package, using CAT/Yellis. The system used did not matter as much as the need to set clear ambitious but achievable targets based on potential. The students' progress was then regularly checked against this target, thereby reinforcing high expectations. Although some teachers in neighbouring schools found teaching full ability GCSE classes difficult, Nick saw it as a challenge and rose to it. He would say that he raised the level of attainment across the board. Had many of the poorly motivated boys been in 'bottom sets' they would not have achieved the results they did, of that I'm sure.

Factor 2: Image of the subject

Along with a couple of the other case studies, Nick's example highlights the need to promote a positive ethos in GCSE classes. Nick's main approach was to adamantly refuse to allow his colleagues or the students to believe in the myth that history is too difficult for lower-attaining students. He not only denied it, he refuted it. He would focus on what hard-working students had achieved in the past. The message was clear. Hard work, enthusiasm and commitment play a large part in GCSE: it's not just brains. Nick spoke of his team having the key to unlock GCSE success, and got the students to believe him. There was plenty of stress on improving the literacy skills needed to be successful at GCSE but the students bought into the success story. Gradually their confidence rose, but the insistence on being in this together was never relaxed. Work was marked regularly; students were rewarded positively using the praise ratio of 4 to 1. Letters were sent home congratulating students moving from an F to a D grade. Nick got to know as many students as possible and would wander into other GCSE classes to praise individuals on recent improvement.

Factor 3: Teaching that makes students want to come to the lessons

No magic bullets here, just plain common sense. Teachers tried harder than usual to be enthusiastic, to make lessons fun and varied. Nick knew that he had to answer students' question "What's in it for me?" So lessons moved from being ones of note making and listening passively to being varied and thought provoking. Lessons started on time with an absorbing starter engaging the students immediately. The department's style had not been like this before, but they were well-supported and were won over.

Soon they were recognising students' different preferred learning style. They saw themselves as better teachers too. Simple things were made to matter such as: presenting work well; insistence on correct books being brought to lessons; making sure missed work was copied up; making sure students felt they were there to learn and any misbehaviour was damaging others' life chances. Staff worked hard to convince all students that their progress and achievement was the department's number one priority.

Factor 4: Course planning

The department made a big deal of coursework and results shot up. It was carefully structured to allow access to all students. Lots of mini-deadlines were set with students and always enforced. Coursework-based lessons always had short regular inputs from the teachers throughout the completion period. Very soon the team had generated a very positive working atmosphere in lessons where very little time was wasted and the sense of drift had vanished.

It goes without saying that the course was well structured with tight timings, but Nick very early on grasped that schools tend to teach for as long as it takes rather than ensuring that there is no over-run.

Nick believed in regular testing at all stages, even on the non-examined parts, not least to show students that the gaining and retention of factual knowledge is vital to GCSE success.

Factor 5: Resourcing well

Students were always given high quality resources, and the department set a high standard in the material they produced, which 'rubbed off' on the students. All students had a textbook for each topic which was heavily used for homework but also had to be brought to lessons.

Factor 6: High quality revision throughout the course

Revision was considered to be really important as students at the school tended not to work hard on revision in any subject. Rather than revising once in a big block from April onwards, Nick built revision into every stage of the course so that the students learned techniques and were well-prepared when it came to the summer. The revision booklets which were given to each student were very well-targeted, short but to the point. Because they weren't intimidating they were used. Specific time was set aside for revision classes. These always took the same format; a short activity to test learning done at home before the lesson; a couple of quick answer plans done together; an exam question followed by students using an adapted mark scheme and marking and grading each other's'. Work.