



partnerships for schools

This case study looks at the efforts made to create a sustainable school in a deprived area of North Swindon which benefits not only pupils, but their parents and the community too.

It examines how pupils were involved in the decision-making process to shape the look and feel of the school, the innovative use of technology including a TV and radio station, and plans for onsite adult literacy courses in the future.

Key project information

School: Seven Fields Primary School

Local authority: Swindon

PCP Pathfinder project cost: £6.5 million

No. of pupils: 300

Seven Fields Primary School – providing sustainable education improvement

Project description

Seven Fields Primary School serves a local community within a socially deprived housing estate in North Swindon. There is a wide range of social housing and a small percentage of owner/occupier housing within the school's catchment area. The majority of pupils come from white British ethnic backgrounds with a very small percentage coming from Somali and Nepalese immigrant families.

A large number of pupils come from one-parent families, have had disruption to their early years, or have families with significant social and health issues. This has a significant impact on the readiness of children to start school and information on pre-school children shows a significant percentage of families are supported by Children's Fund workers, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Sure Start and the NSPCC. These links are continued within the school, which works extensively with children's services to provide extended school support to all parents. Stepping Stone assessments on nursery children show very low levels of social skills, speaking and listening and literacy skills.

The main aim of the school is to provide children with a good education that equips them with the relevant skills they need to give them the best possible start in life. The prime focus of the teaching and learning has

been to tackle the low literacy and numeracy of the school's children and families and raise the standards of attainment of all children in these areas.

Pupil engagement in school design

In September 2007 the school moved into a temporary site from their condemned school building. After a 15-month construction project the Seven Fields Primary new-build school opened on the original site in January 2010.

The pupils were involved at all stages of the design and their ideas were heard and responded to through a range of organised and informal channels. The architects, site manager and project manager paid weekly visits to listen to the pupils' ideas of what they would like to see in the new building and provide feedback on what was viable and what was not. This ensured that the pupils felt well informed throughout the process and that their input was having an influence on the school that was being built.

A key finding from these sessions was that the pupils felt that the flooring of the new building was vital, as many of them choose to work on the floor. Their comments were taken on board and the flooring installed was one that they had all been consulted on. Because of their level of engagement in the decision-making the pupils initiated an idea that they should all

Seven Fields Primary School – providing sustainable education improvement

have indoor and outdoor shoes to ensure the new flooring is kept clean and mud free. On the first day in the new school building all of the pupils arrived with their two pairs of shoes.

Throughout the construction process the school sent out regular bulletins keeping the pupils informed of progress and letting them know what was happening and when. There were also viewing areas so that everyone could see the progress for themselves.

The design of the new school has seen the Early Years Foundation Stage department centrally placed within the building, directly next to a large Community and Family Learning Base. It is a large free-flowing space linking Nursery, reception and Year 1 with a large atrium and outside learning spaces. The Community and Family Learning Base includes a range of rooms, spaces, offices and community sport facilities so the school can continue to deliver its extensive range of extended services for families and children.



The classrooms are now large flexible learning spaces. The school has been developing the Reggio Emilia approach (*see below for more details*) to Early Years development of language and an important design aspect of this approach is the opening up of classroom areas and removal of the 'four wall syndrome'. Teachers have flexible walls, which can be moved to create a wide range of learning environments, all supported by interconnecting Web 2 technology. Large corridors can be used to create areas for learning for vertical groups of children and creative cross-curriculum delivery.

Headteacher Zita McCormick explained that when the school had researched the Reggio Emilia approach to primary education, which originated in northern Italy, they noticed that many of the schools in the region had large terraces running around the outside of the building. This design element has been incorporated into the school to facilitate outdoor learning and also serves as a 250-seat theatre with built-in audio and lighting.



Being 'green'

The new building has been constructed from materials that help to reduce the longer-term carbon footprint of the building. The school has achieved Bronze level of the ECO Schools Award Scheme and the students' contribution to this was increased through on-site recycling and incorporating it into the curriculum with research into the recycling of plastics.

As part of the bid for Silver level the students will work on developing the outside environments to attract a wider variety of wildlife. One project has already seen them working to attract insects to pollinate fruit trees in a community orchard, which forms part of the community nature reserve that Seven Fields faces – Wiltshire Forest. The school has also developed close links with the community through involvement in the management of the community orchard. The development of an on-site nature reserve has been a key element of the new school design and this is due to be completed in April 2010.

ICT innovation

The school has invested in new ICT hardware and software and teachers all have laptops with wireless internet. Students in history classes have been researching buried treasures on the internet and using their iPods and mobiles to send the articles and images they have found to the whiteboard. These discoveries are being broadcast across three lessons so collaboration has vastly increased. Zita McCormick said: "The technology is engaging their enquiring minds and the students are really enjoying the new learning spaces and want to come to school. In the first week of term we had six out of 10 classes seeing 100 per cent attendance, compared to the usual rate of around 94 per cent."

Seven Fields Primary School – providing sustainable education improvement

The school has its own TV channel, Life, and projects that the students have created are displayed here and through the whiteboards. Recent subjects have included cyber-bullying, a visit to a Roman museum and a GPS research trip to Cumbria. Many of the projects are also included in the school's newspaper, which is researched and written by the students, created using Microsoft Publisher and then sold for a nominal fee within the school. The funds raised by the newspaper sales are used to support the development of a school library.

The next project is the launch of the school radio station and the teaching staff have just been trained on the use of the technology. Zita McCormick advises: "It is important to train the teachers first and ensure their skills are well developed to demonstrate these new technologies to the students, who then pick them up rapidly and start teaching the teachers new things!"

Looking forward

Now that they have moved into the new building there are plans to further develop their cross-curricular and

vertical group teaching and integrate ICT more fully into all lessons. The new outdoor spaces will be used to enhance science and the performing arts while the new larger internal spaces mean dance and drama opportunities can be further developed.

The school is also hoping to further extend their links with the community by expanding onsite literacy courses for parents and hopes that they will be encouraged to learn in an environment that they know and are comfortable with. Plans to make Sure Start access easier are also being researched as traditionally only 27 per cent of parents engage with the organisation before their children join the school. It is hoped that the satellite working opportunities provided by the new building will help them engage with difficult to reach families.

Headteacher, Zita McCormick, said: "Most importantly, we want to provide sustainable improvements. Our standards and attainment have been improving since 2005 and we want to ensure that continues; the new learning environment will enable us to cement these plans."

Key contact

Zita McCormick, Headteacher
Seven Fields Primary School
E: head@sevenfields.swindon.sch.uk

Further information

The **Reggio Emilia** approach is an educational philosophy based upon the following principles:

- children must have some control over the direction of their learning;
- children must be able to learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing;
- children have a relationship with other children and with material items in the world that children must be allowed to explore; and
- children must have endless ways and opportunities to express themselves.