



**partnerships for schools**  
building schools for the future

This case study demonstrates how culture and cultural learning can contribute to the development of community engagement with a school.

### Key project information

**School:** Dagenham Park Community School  
**Age range:** 11-18  
**No. of students:** 1,200  
**Location:** Urban  
**School type:** Community  
**Specialism:** Arts  
**Free school meals:** 45 per cent  
**Ofsted:** Satisfactory and improving, Autumn 2008  
**Local authority:** Barking and Dagenham

## Dagenham Park Community School: an example of whole-school community engagement

### Background

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham has a vision that all their schools will become hubs of the local community. They understand that by sharing resources and locations, schools, children's and community centres, neighbourhood and health facilities, libraries, police and other providers can deliver more effectively. They aim to avoid unnecessary duplication and waste, whilst ensuring services are consistent throughout the borough.

Dagenham Park Community School has made a clear commitment to facilitating community engagement and delivering the curriculum through culture and cultural learning, by ensuring a high profile and status for the performing and visual arts. Talent, creative thinking and aspiration are valued and recognised for their impact on young people and contribution to learning across the curriculum.

### Project description

Dagenham Park Community School is a specialist arts college of 1,200 students in an area which is

very ethnically, economically and socially diverse. There are 53 different languages spoken and nearly half the students have a home language other than English. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is triple the national level, and the number of students with specific learning needs is also above average.

The school has a fundamental belief that every one of their students has a talent and supports that individual's journey. A wide variety of exciting and creative options enables all students to enjoy and achieve educationally and be stretched to their full potential.

Dagenham Park Community School recognises the multiple intelligences and skills of their students and has created opportunities for young people to follow individual learning pathways, with academic routes offered alongside vocational qualifications. This flexibility has encouraged students to build on their creative talents in music, dance and art, and progress into further learning.

The school offers Arts Award (Bronze, Silver and Gold) and a range of BTEC courses alongside other

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accredited programmes. The school has also been piloting the Creative and Media Diploma with some students, who report that they are finding it enjoyable and challenging. This broad approach ensures personalisation for individuals and the opportunity for everyone to leave with recognised qualifications. This is enhanced by a wide range of after school activities, including African dance and drumming, jazz and singing groups.



There is recognition of the challenges facing young people in inner-city areas and the curriculum has been structured to practically support those who may potentially become disaffected or involved in anti-social behaviour. The school also recognises that whilst some students have supportive families who intrinsically value education, some have chaotic or troubled home situations. The creative approach has had a clear impact on the young people. Students who were identified as at risk or vulnerable in Year 7 have become positive contributors to the community and role models to others. The current head boy was one such pupil; being able to discover and develop his talents at both dance and sport has opened up new opportunities and possibilities for his adult life.

All students study dance, drama and music for an hour each week during Key Stage 3. A full range of GCSE and vocational performing arts courses are offered at examination level at Key Stage 4 and Post-16. This formal learning is supported by productions which take place throughout the year, so the theory is solidly supported by practical experience of the arts. Recent students have progressed onto HNC and HND in performing arts and theatre studies with Barking College, as well as other universities and colleges.

The partnerships developed by the school with cultural organisations have enriched the curriculum offered to students, provided them with positive role models and identified career opportunities. These partnerships have extended out into the community with age-specific and intergenerational projects, and regular events that have a positive effect on community cohesion. For example, the regular and well attended tea dances bring older people into the school buildings, and dispel some of the older community's anxieties around young people, simply through being together and sharing the space.

Successfully leading or participating in other community projects such as Barking and Dagenham Inclusive Theatre (BanDit) offers a safe, supportive, positive environment for young people aged 7-16. They meet weekly during term time to learn drama skills, whilst learning effective ways in which to communicate and debate with each other. Established in 2001 by the theatre company Chickenshed, Dagenham Park School and the local education authority, this is one example of a long-running partnership.

Dagenham Park Community School hosts another successful partnership on behalf of local primary schools: the Royal Ballet School's Dance Partnership and Access Programme, Primary STEPS, launched in 2006. Funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families, this junior school programme provides Year 3 class groups (7-8 years) with a positive introduction to ballet; and initial ballet training for selected children who would not otherwise have the opportunity. The weekly classes continue until the children are 10 years old when the Royal Ballet School then advises pupils of suitable local opportunities to continue dance training.

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**Dance offers the students opportunities to develop their creative, imaginative, physical, emotional and intellectual capacities.**

**The Dance Academy programme (Xcellerate) is led by Dagenham Park Community School in collaboration with three other secondary schools. The programme provides specialist dance experiences and opportunities for students who show potential and talent in dance. Twenty two places are offered at the start of each academic year, and students go through an audition process, giving them an insight and taste of the rigours of entering a highly competitive profession.**



Music is taught in a variety of ways to capture the interest and talents of the widest range of students, who can use state of the art music technology to produce and perform.

Music at Dagenham Park Community School includes a solid grounding in theory and different styles of music from around the world. This appropriately reflects the diversity of the students as well as the breadth of teaching skills and abilities. The school has invested in ICT and software and made a commitment to teaching music to industry standard by providing the opportunity to work with professionals whenever possible. As a result, music is extremely popular in both Key Stages 4 and 5.



The drama department encourages students to explore and take risks as well as developing a sense of responsibility and supporting their independent learning. Through drama, students develop specific and transferable skills such as empathy, tact, teamwork and confidence which will prepare them for life after school, whether or not they pursue a career in the field. Again, there is recognition that confidence through performing can assist students in non-creative careers and in gaining jobs, through having solid presentation and communication skills.

Teaching staff in the art department have a variety of specialisms, so students are able to explore the full range of media and explore their own skills and interests, as they progress through the school. The teaching areas are purpose built, with specialist facilities for ceramics, printing and photography; and computers for digital manipulation, as well as the more traditional fine art and graphics. The sixth form have their own studio where they can spend quality time working independently.



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## Successes

- Dagenham Park Community School uses the performing arts to engage with students and offer more choice; this approach has transformed attitudes to learning with a tangible impact on attendance and attainment.
- The school has a regular and well-established programme of community activities and events; this has led to an improvement of the local environment – a reduction in graffiti and people feeling safer leaving events at the school in the evening.
- In its most recent OFSTED report (November 2008), inspectors found that: “The proportion of the students, a half, gaining five or more A\* to C grades in 2008 was the highest in recent years. Over a third of students gained five higher grades that included English and mathematics. Students performed exceptionally well in the school's specialist arts areas.” Attendance is also on a steady upward trend, from 93 per cent in 2007 to 94.1 per cent in 2008.
- OFSTED has commented positively on the students' contribution to the community through their work with neighbouring primary schools.
- Year 13 outcomes are improving year on year. In 1999, five students went on to further and higher education. By 2007, this increased to 33 and 24 in 2008. In 2009, there are 41 students going onto universities like Bangor, Birmingham, Brunel, De Montfort, Lancaster and Warwick. A number of students are going on to study at London colleges, including Kings and University College.

## Key lessons learned

- Hiring out spaces within the school and sharing new sports facilities, for example, can be a useful source of income as well as being fully accessible to the community.
- An integrated and strategic, whole-school approach supports sustainable improvement and increases students' aspirations.

## Potential pitfalls

- There has to be strategic planning and delivery by the local authority and school, and a shared approach to delivering priorities for the community and students. This should be tied into the borough's arts strategy.
- The headteacher, leadership team and governing body should have clear core values, which are shared by students and actively promoted and implemented throughout the school.
- The school leaders will need to invest time and energy in gaining and keeping the full support of staff and parents, as well as a strong, involved and committed governing body.
- There must be an equal commitment to academic and vocational qualifications that provide for a wide range of young people because it takes account of different learning styles and intelligences.

## Key contact

Simon Weaver  
 Headteacher, Dagenham Park Community School, School Road, Dagenham, Essex RM10 9QH  
 E: [SWeaver@dpcs.bardaglea.org.uk](mailto:SWeaver@dpcs.bardaglea.org.uk)

Michael Brown  
 BSF LEP Programme & Project Manager  
 Building Schools for the Future Team  
 E: [Michael.Brown@lbbd.gov.uk](mailto:Michael.Brown@lbbd.gov.uk)