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partnerships for schools
building schools for the future

This case study looks at the innovative 'Designs for Learning' course, part of the student engagement programme for Nottingham City Council's BSF programme.

Nottingham was shortlisted in the 'Innovation in student engagement' category in the *Excellence in BSF Awards 2008*.

Key project information

LEP: inspiredspaces Nottingham Ltd, comprises Carillion, Nottingham City Council and BSFi

Key suppliers: Carillion (Construction and FM) and Ramesys (ICT).

BSF Wave: Wave 2 and 5

Schools: Eight schools in Wave 2, c£89m

The LEP is expected to deliver upwards of £300m of capital investment in the city's schools and colleges over the life of the partnership, plus investment in other areas such as leisure and regeneration projects

Innovation in student engagement: Nottingham's 'Design for Learning' course

Project description

Nottingham City reached Financial Close on Wave 2 of its BSF project in June 2008. Deep involvement and sense of ownership for all stakeholders -but particularly for young people - is central to Nottingham's approach. The Education Manager within Nottingham City Council's BSF Team has been committed to finding meaningful ways for students to contribute to the process from the earliest stages of the programme.

The aim of all student involvement has always been to move well beyond the 'I want a swimming pool' wish list stage, to instead develop deeper thinking, challenging the current norms around curriculum, timetable, whole-school organisation and social space.

The project has included some highly innovative ways to get students engaged with the design problem at a deeper level (see 'Designs for Learning' course below) and has offered some students the opportunity to share their ideas at local and national conferences, giving them valuable real-life experience.

Engagement strategy

The engagement strategy devised and implemented by Nottingham City Council's BSF Team and the *learning-space* consultancy has been to involve as many students as possible over the course of the project, devising methods to enable students to think how their new environment could act as a catalyst for new ways of learning and being together. In all this work, the students were explicitly given permission to challenge current school organisation and brainstorm alternative models for a learning community, anticipating future trends in new technology.

Activities organised to engage students included:

- A six week course in partnership with the local e-Learning Centre, for a group to investigate ways new technology could influence the design, e.g. the use of personal, mobile devices for every student;
- Questionnaire devised by a students group for all students in school to discuss and complete in Tutor Groups, outlining likes/dislikes of current environment and suggesting radical new ideas;

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- Groups facilitated to question the current norms around school organisation and environments, then showcase their findings at local and national conferences;
- Groups to plan and facilitate an evening session for parents, showcasing their ideas and gathering thoughts/comments from the parents;
- Regular updates and chances to input ideas throughout the whole visioning and subsequent design process, through Tutor Groups and Year Group Assemblies;
- Engage in local Architecture Centre, OPUN, 'How Places Work' programme, where larger groups of students visit specific regional examples of innovative design, and talking to the designer about the concepts behind the design. Students then think whether any of these concepts are relevant to a new school design;
- Involvement in regionally-based, student-run BSF Conference and Designs for Learning Course;
- Involvement in two stages of Competitive Dialogue design process, allowing for initial input at an early stage and then a second session to review emerging design and check that their suggestions had been taken on board and incorporated;
- Current involvement in making interior design decisions during the current detailed design stage.

The 'Designs for Learning' course

One innovation by Nottingham is the 'Designs for Learning' course, which ran between January to June 2006, consisting of 10 half-day sessions involving a group of 12 14-year-old students. The programme was aimed at Year 9 students with an interest in architecture or design as a possible career choice.

The programme involved the group working in a variety of cultural/business environments across Nottingham, e.g. Boots' open-plan Head office, the University School of Architecture design studio and the Lakeside Arts Centre. The students worked in these spaces with their facilitator, John Mitchell, *learning-space* consultant, getting a feel first-hand how these new environments impacted on their learning. They then had a reflection session back in school to investigate what aspects of the non-school environment could be useful for a school design brief. For instance, how can the shopping centre be welcoming to everyone and yet feel safe and controlled?

It was intended that the programme would provide:

- Accredited learning and skills development for the participating students;
- An insight into the importance of design in the learning environment;
- Raised aspirations for students and an insight into possible career opportunities in architecture and design;

- A group of 'expert' students to engage with the upcoming design phase of the BSF programme at Big Wood School;
- An opportunity for ongoing experimentation around innovative learning environments in Big Wood School.

Findings from this course impacted directly on the Output Specification and hence the final design. Examples are the creation of the public parkland at the front of the site which can be freely accessible or closed to the wider community and the core school space being a highly flexible double-space which can accommodate a wide variety of uses and groupings.

Some of the students on this course provided feedback during the design process, where their critical evaluation skills and general confidence to interrogate the design were evident.

Other platforms for student involvement

Nottingham City Council's engagement strategy hasn't just been about gathering student views - it has also provided a range of platforms for students to develop new skills and enjoy new experiences which otherwise would not have been available to them. Examples include:

National Conferences: Students have been given the opportunity to present at national conferences. Students have produced presentations, including video clips and enacted role-plays, to illustrate the shortcomings of their existing school environment and analyse the effect of good design on aspects of teaching and learning, such as the teacher-student relationship. Big Wood students have presented and answered questions at three national conferences: at one conference the feedback stated that their session was 'the most valuable part of a two-day event'. The boost to student self-confidence through recognition of the importance of their ideas was immense.

BSF Conference: The Education Manager within Nottingham City Council's BSF Team, in partnership with OPUN the local Architecture Centre, facilitated the development of a BSF Conference with a difference: this conference was planned and delivered by students, for students. The organising group, comprising students from six schools across Nottingham City, planned and delivered a whole-day Conference for students from schools across the East Midlands at the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Headquarters, including 14 different workshops on areas as wide-ranging as, toilets, uniform to the role of new technology.

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Staff and student feedback

The feedback below clearly demonstrates how engaged the students have been with the process:

“Students were so perceptive during the engagement meetings with the various bidders. They knew when they were being “enticed with trinkets” and when genuinely innovative designs and options were being suggested.” Teacher 1

“Year 7 students were fascinated by the environmental features explained to them when they visited Nottingham University. They were keen to see similar features in their new school. They were also very impressed with the dining hall and its non-institutional furniture.” Teacher 2

“Working with an architect, our younger students were able to clearly articulate features that they saw as vital in the new school’s toilet. Cleanliness, brightness, privacy and freedom from bullying were paramount.” Teacher 3

“Pupils who engaged with parents and others during the public information evening showed a side of themselves that I’d not seen before. One girl, normally shy and not especially academic, stole the evening by ensuring that every visitor was guided round the displays and asked for their opinion.” Teacher 4

“I liked the grass roof. Can we have one?” Year 7 pupil

“It’s going to be brilliant. Can we come back next year?” Year 11 student (Big Wood is an 11-16 school so the answer was, unfortunately, “No”)

“Standing in front of that lot was scary but I’m glad I did it.” Year 9 student after performing a piece about the new Big Wood School that he and his peers had written for a gathering of educationalists at the Jo Richardson Community School, Dagenham.

“Teachers don’t spend their breaks in the rain. Why should we?” Year 10 student who helped develop a video script, denouncing existing school buildings and regimes.

Top tips

Have **very high** expectations of the level of thinking pupils can offer, Don’t ask “What do you want?” Instead explore “How good can learning be in the future?”

Ensure a **range of approaches** are taken to involve as broad a **cross-section of pupils** as possible: this is too valuable an opportunity to only involve the School Council.

Provide support/ideas for schools to develop their own student involvement, ensuring involvement is not limited to authority/LEP led sessions.

Linked to above, provide support/ideas for schools to exploit their project as an authentic learning context throughout the visioning-design-build process, across the whole curriculum.

The last two tips should allow the involvement to snowball and develop useful awareness/empathy between pupils and teachers.

Key contact

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Further information

For more information about Nottingham’s BSF programme and LEP activities, see: www.nottinghambsf.co.uk/