

Penny Richardson's Development Work
**Fostering student leadership through
'Learning to Lead'**
at the Hertfordshire and Essex High School,
Bishops Stortford

Penny was the 'link teacher' for the 'Learning to Lead' (LtoL) programme in her school. It was her responsibility to initiate and develop the programme as a key strand of the work that arose from the school's special leadership status. Penny hoped that LtoL would enable a large proportion of the students to become actively involved in all aspects of school life. She was keen to encourage students who did not usually nominate themselves for leadership roles to become involved.

The Learning to Lead initiative began in the Blue School in Wells, Somerset as a way of enhancing student engagement. The LtoL model involves a school wide survey and discussion to identify priorities for action. Students are then invited to join project teams focusing on those priorities. These typically include teams such as 'The recycling team' or 'Improving the school playgrounds team' as well as ones dedicated to caring for chickens and growing food in the school grounds. Each team is provided with induction and support to enable them to become self-leading teams able to take action to transform their schools and communities. These teams all report back to the School Forum which makes decisions about how best to support the process. The School Forum, facilitated by students themselves appoints representatives to join a committee which includes senior leadership team members to ensure cooperation.

Penny and her school were involved in a national pilot scheme in which Learning to Lead was evaluated by a team at the University of Cambridge (Frost and MacBeath, 2010). The report makes the practice visible and identifies the benefits to the students and to their schools. It concludes that the type of student leadership supported by LtoL has enormous potential to transform the experience of school for young people and, in so doing, transform the school itself. The evidence points to radical shifts in student dispositions, marked improvement in the quality of relationships and the development of participative school cultures which enable young people to flourish

and achieve.

At Herts and Essex School Penny enabled over 100 students to establish 6 teams: the Beautiful School team, the Recycling team, the Energy team, the Toilets team, the Transport team and the Sixth Form team. She provided each team with a half-day training workshop in which they were inducted into the key techniques for self-management including reviewing experience, seeking consensus, action planning and so on. Thereafter the team meetings were held at lunchtimes and led by the students themselves.

The initiative was introduced to staff at the start of the school year so that all colleagues were aware of the aims of the project. Colleagues were positive in their feedback and acknowledged the value of the work planned. Penny trained the students, starting with the Senior Prefect team, in order to pilot her training material which had been given to her by the 'Learning to Lead' company. The team was very enthusiastic and keen to leave the school with a legacy; they produced a detailed action plan for introducing vertical tutoring into the Sixth Form. It was the first session they had held as a team and it helped them to focus their aims. They gave Penny useful feedback on the training material which she was able to adapt and use with the other teams.

Penny was then ready to introduce the project to the whole school and arranged for an online survey to be administered to all students during a two week period in October. She booked the IT room for every form group during a twenty minute afternoon registration period so that all students had the opportunity to complete the survey. It focused on the following topics, expressed as 'Have your say' statements.

- Have your say about food and drink in our school
- Have your say about communication in our school
- Have your say about learning in our school
- Have your say about the use of rewards and sanctions in our school
- Have your say about the outside of our school – is it a green and pleasant environment?
- Have your say about the use of the library and its facilities
- Have your say about the inside of our school. Are you threatened by other students in the toilets? Are there places to

go at break and lunch / are classrooms comfortable places to learn?

- Have your say about the use of energy / recycling / litter in our school.
- Have your say about transport to and from the school. Do you feel safe on your journey to school / in the bike sheds / riding a bike in the long school skirts?

Once Penny had received the results of the survey she planned a tutorial session ‘This is Our School Whole School Planning’ session in which the students analysed what the school community had said about aspects of school life and agreed what would be the single most important change to improve the life of the whole school community. It was at this point she really began to appreciate the challenges she faced. One such challenge was finding time to work with the students; it was recommended that the ‘This is Our School’ session ran for two hours but she was only able to use the brief afternoon registration session. Her strategy was to adapt the material and persuade the form tutors to incorporate the session into the briefing period.

This careful planning ensured that every form provided written feedback which enabled her to agree the six teams: Senior Prefects, Beautiful School, Energy, Recycling, Toilets and Transport. Penny ran three lunchtime sessions when students had the opportunity to sign up for a team and to find out more information. The initiatives that the students were keen to be involved in varied from painting the classrooms in different colours, installing wind turbines, creating a garden, to having full size mirrors and hand dryers in the toilets. Finally Penny ran a team training session at the end of which each team produced an aim and a plan for their first project.

Penny acknowledged that Learning to Lead had wide ranging impact on the students.

- It gave students lessons for lifelong learning through doing
- It involved students across the whole school from Year 7 to the Sixth Form
- It was inclusive of all students
- It met the ‘Every Child Matters’ goals
- It developed students as active citizens
- It developed students’ enterprise skills
- It developed students as self directed learners

- It provided opportunities for enjoyment

For the school, the initiative helped to develop in the school a culture where the views of young people were respected and they were seen to be at the heart of the school community.

As a member of the HertsCam Network, Penny became aware that a number of teachers in other schools were creating opportunities for student leadership; she wanted to create networking opportunities so that ideas could be shared and opportunities created for the students involved in the various initiatives could contact each other. She led a discussion group at the HertsCam Network event under the title: 'Creating a Network for Teachers Leading Student Leadership'.

When the evaluation study was published in the following year, Penny was invited to take a group of students to share their experience at a national conference at the headquarters of the National Union of Teachers. The event was sponsored by the NUT and the HCD foundation which supports student leadership work at the Faculty of Education. The session led by Penny and her students was an inspiration to the teachers and students from schools throughout the UK.

References

Frost, D. & MacBeath, J. with Stenton, S., Frost, R., Roberts, A. & Wearing, V. (2010) *Learning to Lead: an evaluation*. Cambridge: Leadership for Learning, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.