

St Francis Xavier Catholic Primary School Special Measures to Outstanding – one school’s sustainable journey

Summary

The school has worked hard to embed sustainability since a new headteacher came into post in the late 1990s when the school was on special measures. A priority to improve the learning environment quickly progressed from the building to the school grounds and the world beyond the school gates. Since then, the work has developed to encompass all the sustainable schools doorways, developing strong links with outside organisations in the process.

The head provided the inspiration and the leadership team was responsible for articulating the vision to the school community. ‘Quick wins’ were used to raise interest levels, sustainability issues were planned into meetings for staff, governors and SMT, and leadership for sustainability became increasingly dispersed with teachers and non-teaching staff managing individual projects. The site manager has been key throughout.

Impacts: The process of creating a new and exciting place to learn had a significant impact on pupils, who have become increasingly aware of the environment and their responsibility to protect it. The active learning approach required for sustainability suited the learning style of many pupils, improving performance. Pupils now know how to act sustainably and why it is important to do so and have inspired and motivated the wider community. As well as consistently achieving the LA ‘Charter Mark’ for sustainable development, in 2007, the school was placed on OFSTED’s ‘Outstanding Providers List’.

Key leadership role: Headteacher and leadership team

St Francis Xavier Catholic Primary has been on a long and often challenging journey over the past ten years. The school has worked hard to embed sustainability throughout this time and believes the sustainable schools agenda isn’t just about recycling and wind turbines!

How did they do that?

St Francis is located in the urban West Midlands in an area of above average social deprivation. The school is overlooked by the roaring M5 motorway and surrounded by heavy industry. Prior to its sustainable schools journey the environment both within and outside the school was less of a priority than the work that took place inside the classrooms. The school was placed in special measures in 1998 and was placed on OFSTED’s ‘Outstanding Providers List’ in 2007. Mary Simmons took over as headteacher during special measures and set about inspiring the team to improve the learning environment in the short term – an initiative that even she didn’t realise would lead to the school developing such a commitment to sustainability. “I wanted to make the school an attractive place to be,” she says. “Our priority was to improve the building but we soon realised that the area outside the building needed care and nurture too.” Mary says that the process of creating a new and exciting place to learn and the impact it had on the pupils led the school to realise that it could have a significant impact on the world beyond the school gates, too. “We took the positive impact of caring for the building and started to think

*Setting
the vision*

**Buildings
and
grounds**

about the impact we could have if we were to address education for sustainability.”

Engaging others

The school leadership team was responsible for articulating the vision to the school community. ‘Quick wins’ were used to raise levels of interest within the school – for example taking part in a community litter pick, setting up an e-link with India and developing composting facilities. This ‘drip feed’ approach proved to be highly effective. At leadership level, staff meetings, governors meetings and SMT time also needed to be planned for over a number of terms. Over time, sustainability became a feature of the school and something everyone wanted to be part of. The leadership for sustainability became increasingly dispersed with teachers and non-teaching staff choosing to take responsibility for leading and managing individual projects. As momentum gained amongst the school community, links with outside organisations began to develop, too. The school has always had strong links with the Sandwell LA officer for sustainability but over time has widened this link to include the local litter charity ‘Tipton Litter Watch’, the British Council International Schools team, UNICEF, other schools and a number of volunteer gardeners. It also has a very strong link with a local tram service provider. All of these links emerged over time and the school found that slow and steady progress with sustainability was most usefully set in the context of a clear and definite vision with some ‘quick wins’ thrown in for good measure!

Distributing leadership

Looking outward

Looking outward

Connectors – the big picture

The school has focused very firmly on healthy schools, with numerous healthy eating and activity initiatives taking place such as weekly awards and even ballroom dancing tuition during curriculum time. They have looked closely at transport issues by developing a travel plan and working with the local tram service provider. A global school partnership has been established with a focus on fair trade and ethical purchasing leading to a pupil led mini enterprise in both the UK and India. The pupils are involved in maintaining the school grounds and have worked with local businesses to arrange recycling collections. The site manger has been a key partner throughout – working with pupils to find eco-friendly cleaning products and helping to reduce water waste by limiting the size of toilet cisterns. The school even recently won the National Bog Standard for school toilet hygiene!

Promoting student voice

Resource provider

The school sees funding as only a minor issue. They found that the majority of initiatives required little or no funding to set up: for example purchasing recycled goods where possible, making a link with a school in India and setting up a school conservation club all cost very little but had a huge impact. “We found that once we had worked for a while with the basics and spent some time engaging with partners we were better placed to apply for grants and other funding,” says Mark Hinton, the school’s deputy head and international coordinator. “One of the most useful grants we have been awarded is our DFID Global School Partnership with our Indian partner school, but that was a fairly recent addition”, he adds. “We didn’t have that kind of funding when we started out.”

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| Food and drink |
| Travel and traffic |
| Global dimension |
| Procurement and waste |
| Energy and water |

What did they achieve?

Pupils became increasingly aware of the environment and its quality but also aware of their responsibilities to protect it for themselves and future generations. The school found that the type of activities it was providing for pupils as part of its commitment to sustainability suited the learning style of many of its children. These activities have included: community litter picks, weekly recycling collections (weighed and reported in assembly), gardening clubs, curriculum time for conservation activities (leaf collections, bird feeding, planting and growing food), fair trade projects with the partner school in India, healthy eating awards and water conservation activities. The children at St Francis not only know how to act sustainably but also understand why it is important to do so.

**Inclusion
and
participation**

*Setting the
vision*

The school has published a sustainable schools action plan for many years and has renewed its LA 'Charter Mark' for sustainable development on three occasions. The whole community has become engaged and educated as a result of the school's work: whole families have made changes to their lifestyles as a result of work the children have undertaken in school. The pupils have been able to engage with their community far more widely and they have enjoyed learning through sustainability.

*Engaging
others*

**Local well-
being**

What can we learn from their experiences?

The school lists its main achievements as:

- Inspiring and motivating the whole community to lead more sustainable lives.
- Helping children to learn in a range of ways beyond 'chalk and talk' and seeing positive benefits in performance as a result.
- Evolving into a whole community that has sustainability at its heart – pupils, staff, governors, parents, families and the wider community.

The school says its key learning points have been:

- Starting with a project that is manageable and short term.
- Involving the whole community wherever possible.
- Constantly reaffirming the vision and allowing all staff to lead where possible.

*Promoting
student voice*

The school now hopes to continue developing its strengths and researching the role of pupil guided and dispersed leadership as part of its work with the Sustainable Leadership community of practice.