

Shortened KS3 Learning Programme

Fact Finding Visit to Staffordshire Schools by Members of the Ponteland Schools Partnership

Introduction: Following a suggestion from the high school, discussion has recently taken place within the Ponteland School's Partnership of the possibility of shortening the KS3 syllabus to two from three years. This would mean testing pupils in Year 8 of the middle schools and not Year 9 of the high school. Such a move was seen as addressing the problem of the three tier school system not fitting within the assessment procedures of the national curriculum, specifically in terms of the KS3 SATs with two years learning taking place in the middle school and the final year and testing procedures taking place in the high school.

The high school saw real advantages in adapting a policy of this kind in order to allow them to concentrate on their GCSE learning from the start of year 9, the first year of the high school. One of the two feeder middle schools also seemed to be expressing their willingness to introduce a policy of this kind. The other middle school felt however, that this would be a difficult step to accomplish and questioned the benefits of such a system for their pupils. This opposition was expressed in the form of a statement from the curriculum committee of the school governors.

It was suggested that it would be in the interest of all parties concerned to go and see more closely what the introduction of a shortened KS3 programme would involve. As there was already a link established with Staffordshire LEA, an authority with some middle schools, this seemed the ideal area to visit. It also turned out that one of the schools was part of the project to investigate the feasibility of a shortened KS3 syllabus.

A group of 6 teachers therefore, made up from the headteacher, deputy head, and heads of English and Science from the high school, together with the headteacher and head of Maths from one middle school traveled by train to Staffordshire to be met by Ms Diane Ellicman and Ms Frances Burgess, inspector/advisors. The party began their visit by traveling to Leek to go to Churnet View Middle School. At the end of this visit, the high school teachers moved on to spend the afternoon in a local high school and the middle school party and high school headteacher went to a second middle school in Leek, St Edward's. This report focuses on the middle school visits.

Churnet View Middle School

"We will create for everyone an environment of opportunity within a culture of success." Mission statement

Churnett View Middle School presented as an exciting learning environment where there was a real sense of purpose with tangible evidence for the impact of a new headteacher on the dynamics of the school. A typically uncompromising school premises had been partly transformed through the judicious creation of new group learning zones and the opening up of some corridor and classroom areas through the use of glass dividing walls. A commitment to new technology was evident through the number of computers in school, one for every 6 pupils, and the five interactive white boards installed and clearly impacting on learning in the school. There was also the use of

technical assistants to ensure the full use of these facilities with the assistants taking out groups of children to work on computers. This seemed to be symptomatic of the changes which had evidently taken place and pointed to a new enlightened approach to the whole business of middle school learning. Part of these changes involved the adoption of the shortened KS3 course as an associated school.

The reason for the move towards a shortened KS3 course was a concern to show what pupils were able to achieve at the middle school. In this school however, the approach was not a blanket one and the particular nature of the education structure in this part of Staffordshire, one middle school feeding a single high school, meant that it was possible to adapt the process to the needs of the individual school. Churnet View Middle School provided the shortened KS3 course for English, Maths, Science, ICT and Design Technology, they also limited the children participating to those they felt were ready for it, leaving out pupils in the lowest set. Only two thirds of the pupils, or two out of the three sets, were therefore involved in the fast track approach. There had been some affect on the time allocated to different subjects in the timetable due to the adoption of the new compressed KS3 programme with an increase in Science lessons in Years 7 and 8 from 3 to 4.

The new system involved current Year 7 pupils and had been introduced officially from September, although as we shall see, a number of curriculum areas began their work in Year 6 after the KS2 SATs. The school was not officially part of the project, their associated status enabled them however, to access material and work plans to facilitate the delivery of the shortened course.

It did not prove possible in the time to have the same detailed level of discussion in Churnet View Middle School as proved possible in the second middle school. In particular, there was not the same chance to talk to the different curriculum leaders to hear their views on the school's involvement in the new project. The general impression from talking to the headteacher, Mrs Julia Turner, was that the school was confident of being able to cope with delivering the new measures. However, the general impact on the school would be reduced because only a number of key curriculum areas were participating and the weakest children were not included in the programme.

St Edward's Middle School, Leek

This is a very large middle school with 770 pupils, making it one of the largest 9-13 units in the country. The school building itself strongly reflected its secondary origins and was a vast and rambling two storey edifice with long corridors and self contained, enclosed classrooms with traditional workshop areas for practical subjects. Although it had been possible to make a number of changes, such as garden area designed by pupils in an outside courtyard area, the nature of the school buildings made it a much more complicated procedure to transform the learning environment. The atmosphere of the school was very friendly and as with the previous school there was a real sense of purpose to the learning which was taking place. The commitment to technology was also apparent with a similar use of marginal areas to create additional ICT zones. Is this due to a more enlightened approach from the LEA, with an active programme to create and fund additional group and individual learning areas?

The message on the walls was an uncompromising 'Quality at all times' and there were a number of pointers to the focus on standards and achievement. On arrival we had

lunch with the senior management team in the headteacher's office. As a large school each member of this group had a designated area of responsibility in a way that was perhaps more typical of a secondary school approach. The secondary approach was also evident in other ways, with formal team portraits for activities such as chess, the quality of the work and the nature of the environment in the art and design area and the offering of latin as a subject to selected pupils in Year 8.

Given the nature of the school, it is evident that this would be precisely the kind of middle school which would feel most at home adopting a compressed KS3 approach. It is also unsurprising that they would take a different approach to the previous school with a more complete and orthodox version of the system. Here all pupils of whatever ability are involved in the project which encompasses all the KS3 areas of the curriculum. The school is an official partner in the national project being run in 20 schools across the country to review the feasibility of compressing the KS3 programme from 3 to 2 years.

The headteacher of St Edward's, Rev. John Kime described himself as being a fervent supporter of the middle school and saw the introduction of the shortened KS3 system as a method of proving the worth of this system by showing the results pupils were able to achieve by the end of their time in the school. At present Ofsted was focusing on KS2 results to provide evidence for pupil progress, this was a way for the middle school to be judged on the achievement of pupils over the four year period. He felt that by freeing up Year 9 from the constraints of KS3 work, high schools would have the opportunity to introduce new curriculum areas such as business and media studies, place more emphasis on vocational courses and enable them to concentrate on GCSE work, on which the future employment of pupils depended.

In this school it had not proved necessary to change the time allocated to each subject on the timetable. The school's involvement in the project had begun last February with the current Year 7 the first cohort of pupils to be involved. This group would then be taking their KS3 SATs in May 2005.

While the project had only been in operation since the beginning of the term in September, an initial impression was that pupils were generally able to cope, although for some pupils in some areas this might prove uncertain. A recent questionnaire given to parents, indicated a positive response from them, with no great concerns about the pressures being placed on their children through the introduction of a further testing period in the middle school. The staff response to the project varied from firm support expressed by members of the senior management team, through a more guarded response by some curriculum leaders and a number of concerns expressed by others. They had agreed however, to participate in the project on the request of the headteacher and would give it 'their best shot'.

The school went out of its way to enable us to pursue the fact finding mission of the visit and as we toured the school with the headteacher, we were able to spend time talking to individual subject leaders about the project.

Some concern was expressed in Science about the need to squeeze what was supposed to be a three year course into just 5 terms. For the ablest pupils there would be no problem for them managing this, similarly pupils operating at attainment level of 4+ would manage reasonably well. However, it was felt here that the weakest groups of

pupils would struggle. What was required was to trim to the bone the QCA scheme of work to enable completion of the curriculum requirements in the two year period.

In ICT similar concerns were expressed. It was felt that level 5 pupils would benefit from the shortened KS3 scheme. It was admitted that it had proved very hard going and it was taking longer than expected to cover the material. A move had been made to introduce the first unit into Year 6 prior to the official beginning of the project. What was raised as a concern was the academic maturity of pupils of this age and how well they were able to apply their skills within the contexts demanded for the KS3 testing. The ICT curriculum leader felt that it might prove impossible to cover enough of the material before the KS3 SATs in May 2005.

In Maths, the syllabus had also been started in June, when the target pupils were in Year 6, with number work. This had proved a difficult topic with which to start and a more suitable topic would be used as a starter in future years. It was felt that the pupils were generally coping tolerably well and also, that the shortened course was easier for Maths than for some other curriculum areas. The problem was raised of those pupils who changed schools and went to an alternative high or secondary school where they would find their learning was out of kilter with other pupils of their age.

The curriculum leader for English felt the project was a way to provide the middle school with ownership of the KS3 SATs results and that there were fewer problems in English than elsewhere in the curriculum, because there was less input of factual knowledge. She felt it was important to take a pragmatic approach and not to panic. Pupils did have good skills but there was again, a problem of their maturity as they dealt with the language texts. Concern was also expressed about the amount of pressure they would be able to place on the weaker pupils. She was clear the high school would benefit and that the literacy elements of the KS3 syllabus were a natural cut off point before the different emphasis of GCSE work. Introducing a project of this kind would be a way to justify the middle schools which were currently under threat. It would be important to reserve judgement on the new measures until the process could be reviewed in a year's time.

Conclusion:

The fact finding visit proved very worthwhile. It provided us with an excellent chance to investigate the impact of introducing a shortened KS3 course on two very different middle schools. Certain underlying themes could be identified in the decision taken by the schools to go down this particular path. In the first place was a concern to deal with the perceived threat to middle schools and the anomaly of the three tier system in a country which is almost universally two tier. The key stages of the national curriculum were designed for the two tier system and it was always going to be difficult to audit the affect of first school learning on KS2 results and middle school progress on KS3 results. This measure is a way of giving to the middle school ownership of the KS3 stage. It was also seen very clearly as a way of catering for the ablest pupils by ensuring they are able to fully achieve the levels of excellence of which they are capable.

The benefits to the high schools from this system were evident and frequently mentioned. It appeared sometimes as though this was the prime consideration when adapting a shortened KS3 syllabus. This consideration was perhaps associated with the need to appease high schools, which might be the motor for any initiative for the

restructuring of schools back to a two tier system. The members of the party who visited the high school would have a better view of this issue.

The visit did however raise a number of issues and concerns. These centred on the logistical and resourcing problems associated with squeezing a three year course into two years and also the maturity of pupils and their ability to achieve the standards required of them from the final year of the KS3 package. Put at its most simple, how is it possible to take a course designed for pupils aged 13/14 for use with pupils a year younger.

We have seen that one solution was that proposed by Churnet View Middle School where only the more able pupils are involved in the advanced learning programme and only a limited number of curriculum areas are included in the scheme. While this dealt with the problem of suitability, it raised a further concern of exclusiveness, with some pupils being offered a different curriculum to others of the same age. There was also the associated problem with the need to provide different work for the two groups of pupils once they moved on to the high school. In a situation where two or more middle schools fed into the high school, the problems associated with different approaches would be harder to resolve.

Where the reduced KS3 syllabus is introduced to all pupils and covers all curriculum areas as in St Edward's Middle School, a new set of problems becomes apparent. Concern was raised about the ability of weaker pupils to cope with the material being introduced. Would they have a sense of failure by being unable to achieve a reasonable level in the KS3 tests towards the end of their final year? Associated with this was the concern raised by a number of curriculum leaders about whether pupils would have the academic maturity to be able to handle the material and to access the skills required of them. Where the subject involved accessing knowledge, such as in the humanities, there would be a problem of what to leave out. While it was generally felt that a good deal of the KS3 syllabus involved repetition and revisiting different topics and that this would provide the opportunity to discard some material; there is an argument that says that it is precisely this revisiting process which leads to the material becoming properly acquired and part of the pupil's knowledge.

To make a decision following the visit to the Staffordshire middle schools as to the viability of introducing a reduced KS3 curriculum to pupils in Years 7 and 8 of the middle schools would be difficult. While the advantages of taking ownership for the achievements of pupils at KS3 is desirable and the possibility of extending the learning of the more able pupils commendable, the downside to these advantages are too large to ignore. I personally feel, I would be unwilling to persuade middle school teachers to take on all the additional work involved in introducing the shortened course without having a clearer view of the advantages of the system. It may well be that once the first year of work has been achieved by the project members and their associates, that the benefits will become clearer, at the present time there is not enough evidence to provide the answers we require.

While the advantages to the high school are clear I am not persuaded by the argument that the way to protect the middle schools in the future is through this method. KS2 testing is already placing considerable pressure on the middle schools to achieve suitable results compared with what are judged to be similar schools. To include a further testing stage into the middle school is likely, without a real sea change in perceptions, to create additional tension for pupils and schools. It would also seem to reduce the middle

school to an intermediate status in the learning structure where many of us would see it as a period when pupils are able to develop life long skills.

However, this measure is unlikely to go away and it may well be that there will be a change in government or LEA policy which will force the issue. In the meantime, it will be important to continue to work closely with the partnership to see whether there is a compromise position with some curriculum areas becoming involved in work of this kind, through proper consultation with the curriculum leaders in the areas concerned. It will also be important to continue to work closely with the Staffordshire schools who so generously gave their time to show us around their excellent schools and the opportunity to talk to their teachers.

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