

Belling School: Developing the outreach role of a special school.

1. Introduction.

Belling School is an all age special school for pupils with a physical disability or serious medical condition. It is on a split site, with pupils aged 2 to 16 years educated on its main site, and post 16 education based in a purpose built school 6 miles away. *“Belling school regards inclusion as a process, which develops the capacity of a class or school to provide a broad and balanced education for all its pupils”* (Belling School inclusion policy statement 2003). The school serves a large catchment area that also includes a neighbouring unitary authority that has no provision for pupils with physical disability.

Belling School reflects the changing role of special schools that is advocated in the ‘Removing Barriers to Achievement’ document. It is committed to “promoting collaboration, outreach, training and other activities” (See section 2:13) to enable other schools in the area to become more inclusive. One head teacher who recently visited talked about the value of integrating support services into the special school system:

“The special school should evolve in an area with district multidisciplinary teams & support services all running from the special school and feeding the area’s school; in this way becoming much more inclusive on the basis of individual pupil need. All services will be very clued up about the pupils in the community and can prepare jointly for education / medical provision.”

Through Beacon and Technology College funding the school works with many mainstream schools. Technology status was achieved jointly with a neighbouring high school. The school is developing a role as a Key Learning Centre.



The photograph shows Val, the ICT specialist teacher at Belling school working with mainstream teachers to show them different software packages that can be used by students on a laptop.

Additional to building the skills of mainstream staff and providing outreach support, the LEA will provide funding to support pupils in the mainstream sector who have physical difficulties.

The specialist support for this group of pupil is therefore effectively sub contracted to Belling School, and the aim of the service is to build capacity in the mainstream sector to meet the needs of all pupils. Belling is also an ICT resource base for the area with the school providing staff training, outreach support, support services and ICT assessments.



Mainstream school staff are also able to try out and loan appropriate equipment from the school.

2. The ICT department.

The ICT department is a major department within the school with a number of experienced and skilled teaching and support staff. The team comprises:

- Val, an Advanced Skill Teacher
- Ginny, a specialist teacher
- Kim, a communication development manager
- Colin, a technician, and
- Denise, an outreach teacher.

3. The training and outreach work of the ICT department

➤ Developing skills within the special school

Val, the Advanced Skills Teacher has had a dedicated role in teaching ICT to pupils and training staff for over 10 years. Pupils of all ages, abilities and disabilities are taught to use ICT to the best of their ability. She has been able to develop, write and teach courses, supported by Ginny, the specialist teacher, and Colin, the technician. It is possible to develop techniques in school and for Val and Ginny to trial these with pupils and school staff before sharing with mainstream colleagues. It has also been possible for colleagues to work with the outreach teacher to develop 'in house' courses in mainstream schools that are tailored to participants needs.

➤ **Working with CAP centres to develop more specialist skills**

There are a wide variety of ICT facilities used within the school so that staff and pupils are regular users of a range of hardware and software and ICT support can be provided for pupils no matter how severe their disability. Staff work with pupils to assess their IT needs, and pupils are able to feedback and take an active part in their assessment.

Colleagues at Belling are CAP contacts with several CAP centres. Staff in the department are therefore able to have training across a range of specialist computers and programmes for a range of disabilities.



This is Mark who has a degenerative visual condition (Retinosa pigmentosa) and specific learning difficulties / dyslexia.

Mark presently needs contrasting colours on the keyboard, large key board letters and large print on the screen. He also has difficulties with recording, particularly spelling, and needs to use predictive text. Val, the specialist teacher is working with Patrick from Abilitynet, Mark, and his parents to work out what will be the best computer and computer software for Mark. In the future it is likely that Mark will need to be able to touch type.

Because Patrick could bring along more specialist equipment it was also possible for Mark to try out other facilities such as voice recognition and feed back on how useful they were. Sometimes pupils and parents hear about more sophisticated equipment and want to try it out, but it is frequently the case that the technology they have heard about is not particularly helpful to them.

We will later see Mark working with teachers from mainstream schools to demonstrate his computer, show them how to use it, and discuss with them the pros and cons of this particular system.

➤ **Multidisciplinary assessments can now be carried out by the ICT team from Belling School.**

Assessment and provision for pupils with communication difficulties is also very important and the school Communication Development Manager ensures good communication between speech and language therapists, school teaching staff and colleagues with IT expertise, thus allowing pupils to have multidisciplinary assessments within the school. It is therefore possible to ensure that pupils who have little, or no

expressive language, are provided with an aided or alternative system of communication. This may include a symbol system to aid literacy skills, signing using the Makaton vocabulary or a voice output communication aid, as appropriate.

➤ **Preparation for working with mainstream schools.**

Initially there was a need to empower special school staff to realize their potential and knowledge base and to give them 'mainstream credibility'. Frequently colleagues in the special school were as fearful of working in mainstream schools as mainstream colleagues were about working in special provision. It was important to enable both mainstream and special colleagues to understand that they each had skills and knowledge to offer each other when promoting inclusive practices.

A series of work-shadowing link visits between mainstream and special school teachers took place, both in mainstream schools and Belling. This is part of a programme called 'Developing a Resource for Inclusive Practice' which aims to alleviate fears, promote positive attitudes and a readiness to accept new challenges. The acronym 'DRIP' was meant to signify that Inclusion is a process and that by changing slowly together they would all contribute to a more inclusive education system.

➤ **Training mainstream school staff with the support of special school pupils.**

The school is developing a network with many schools in the LEA based on an offer of skills training through a variety of models. Most of this builds on the credibility of special schools colleagues have as they are 'hands on practitioners'. ICT is a major area of outreach. This is done by providing general courses and specialist assistance with assistive technology. The fact that trainers are also 'hands on' teachers means that the orientation of the training provided is geared to the needs of pupils, teachers and other school staff. The reaction of teachers when shown what is possible using more specialised I.T., such as an alternative mouse, Alphasmart, speech feedback programmes, etc is often 'Wow!!'. It is interesting that pupils often feedback that they prefer this more specialised I.T. to straightforward laptops because it meets their needs better, is very light and less intrusive in lessons.

Frequently it is the case that the technical barriers to installing such equipment in a mainstream school are very low. Few teachers have time to spend experimenting with computer technology themselves. That mainstream colleagues can see teachers and pupils working with different computer systems, different hardware and software can give them the confidence to see that they can learn with the support of their special school colleagues.

- MARK has visual and specific learning difficulties (dyslexia). He is explaining to staff how he used his computer to aid his access to the curriculum.

This is Mark, who we saw in an earlier section, taking part in an assessment for more sophisticated equipment, showing mainstream staff how he uses his portable IT to access the curriculum.



Mark has visual difficulties and specific learning difficulties / dyslexia. His main difficulty is with spelling / recording. He enjoys working with IT and can explain the issues for him in using different systems.



Mark's confidence in working with staff can be seen from the photographs. Although the aids he uses at present have proved adequate in the past Mark explained that he now needed something more sophisticated to aid his recording, and was able to describe the assessment he was to participate in to identify what might be best.

BARRIE is blind. He is showing staff how he uses specialised symbols and software to record his work.

As well as specialised symbols and software Barrie had raised keys on his keyboard so he can recognise them. As he learns to touch type he becomes much quicker at producing his work.



Barrie was able to explain moon symbols to the group. He also explained that the software package he uses says what each button is as he presses it. This is good when learning the keyboard.

Barrie said that he now knows his way around the keyboard and is much faster. He now switches off the sound that says what each key is. He is able to press a switch so that the computer reads back what he has written.

Barrie explained the importance of having the same software on his computer at home so that he can continue to work on projects both at home and school.



Some pupils who have some vision used raised keyboards, but with letters rather than moon symbols. Others, like Mark above, have the usual keyboard but using large letters and contrasting colours.

That different pupils can explain their needs to mainstream staff enables colleagues to appreciate the continuum of need and different provision that might be made. They commented on the need for accurate assessment that involves the child or young person to ensure that the most appropriate I.T. and software is obtained.

- FRANCIS has poor hand control so she explains the pros and cons of using voice recognition to record her work.

Francis is in Year 11. She has cerebral palsy, is a wheelchair user and told us that the thing she loves best is talking.



Francis does not have good hand control and finds it difficult to use a keyboard. Early on in her school career she used a head pointer to control her computer. As the curriculum became more complex Francis wanted something that would be quicker, and more sophisticated. She was assessed for a voice controlled mouse when she was in Year 9.

Francis was able to explain to mainstream staff about the pitfalls of voice recognition and the time and patience it took to programme the computer to recognise her voice. In her opinion this is good for people in High Schools who are committed to making it work and have the ability and patience to stick with it.

After 2 years of using this particular equipment Francis says she can now work a lot faster and more independently. She explained that this is necessary to get through all the course work in preparation for her GCSE's.

- DAVID has multiple difficulties and loves to talk. He explains the pros and cons of using a communication aid to assist his speech.



David has multiple physical, medical and communication difficulties. He has a computer that he can use to speak for him. When people are used to David's speech they can understand him, and he loves to talk. The computer gives David the choice of using his voice or the computer. He was able to explain to the group that he prefers to talk but needs to use the computer to ensure people understand him sometimes.

Pupils like David, in this and other case studies explained how specialist I.T. has given them the opportunity to be independent of adults when communicating, to make choices about the vocabulary they use and when to communicate.

Specialist I.T. has given the control back to the young people and enabled them to 'have a voice'.

➤ **Working with parents and the community to raise awareness of the use of Alternative methods of communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology for Learning (ATL)**

As more children and young people use AAC and ATL it is important that their parents, other children, and the community are able to understand how this technology can help, and they can communicate with people who use aids to support their communication.

Kim and Colin have co-ordinated courses for the parents of children and young people in mainstream schools and they have run more informal communication summer schools for parents and children. This is important if children are to become confident in their use of technology.

➤ **The Standards and Inclusion agenda: Working with the Quality Learning Services – Support & Development**

The issue of inclusion is on the agenda of all Services within a LEA. In this LEA there is partnership and collaboration between the Service responsible for school improvement and training and Belling School. This ensures that the two agendas – raising standards and inclusion - can be brought together and monitored appropriately.

Hence, although the outreach support is provided by Belling for pupils with Physical, Sensory, and associated learning difficulties, the service is also integrated with a wider service provided across the LEA. This means that Services can work together in a seamless way, with the Special School taking an appropriate, specialized role.

4. In Summary

It is felt that this model of training is successful because it is done by practicing teachers for practicing teachers. Pupils in the special school are also able to share their expertise alongside their teachers. Because the students hear very clear messages about their value to this work they are self confident, have high expectations of themselves, good self esteem and are happy to share their knowledge and expertise with visiting mainstream staff.

