

MORTIMER COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Previously, the reputation of Mortimer Community College, a South Tyneside 11-16 comprehensive school, was one of poor behaviour. Although attainment was good, progress in many departments figured in the bottom 5% nationally. Mortimer was experiencing a significant budget deficit, along with substantial falling rolls, and only 53 first choice preferences were registered for incoming year 7 students, contributing to low staff morale. The start of 2017 saw a change in leadership: a new Headteacher, Simon Hignett, and Deputy Headteacher (Quality of Education), Joanne Thornton, were appointed, along with a new governing body.

Prior to 2017, a focus on quick fixes resulted in only short-term impact without addressing the root cause of the problem including a disproportionate amount

of time being spent on KS4 'catch up' because the KS3 curriculum was not fit for purpose. Additionally, students' behaviour, poor aspirations, lack of pride and low expectations hindered student progress.

A Section 5 Ofsted inspection (May 2017) downgraded Mortimer from Good to RI, although leadership and improved behaviour were deemed as strengths. Despite disappointment, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) agreed with the findings, with Ofsted confirming Mortimer was now on the right track. Indeed, the report galvanised the school community and gave everyone the belief that we were heading in the right direction.

Simon Hignett reflects 'It was very clear from day one that staff just needed to be backed. There was a feeling of resignation amongst staff that the challenges they were facing were the norm and there was an acceptance, from some, that this was just what 'Mortimer students' did. The majority of staff wanted, and were ready for, change. Outlining our new unapologetic strive to make our best better in everything we do was made very clear to all stakeholders. Having high expectations and looking after the small details such as uniform, pride in work, conduct around school and in the community has and always will be non-negotiable.'

Mortimer needed an overhaul of identity and school life and this was acknowledged by all stakeholders. In consultation, a new, smarter uniform, driven by





the students, reflected a rise in expectations. The pastoral system was revamped, from vertical house groupings to year groups with non-teaching Heads of Year appointed. The launch of social media outlets further opened communication lines with families. These changes resulted in a significant increase in behaviour standards and expectations, leading to a much calmer learning environment that was built on mutual respect and a love of learning. This was extended to social times and travelling to and from school. New dining furniture that allowed students to sit in large friendship groups was ordered and clear new queuing systems were introduced and welcomed by students.

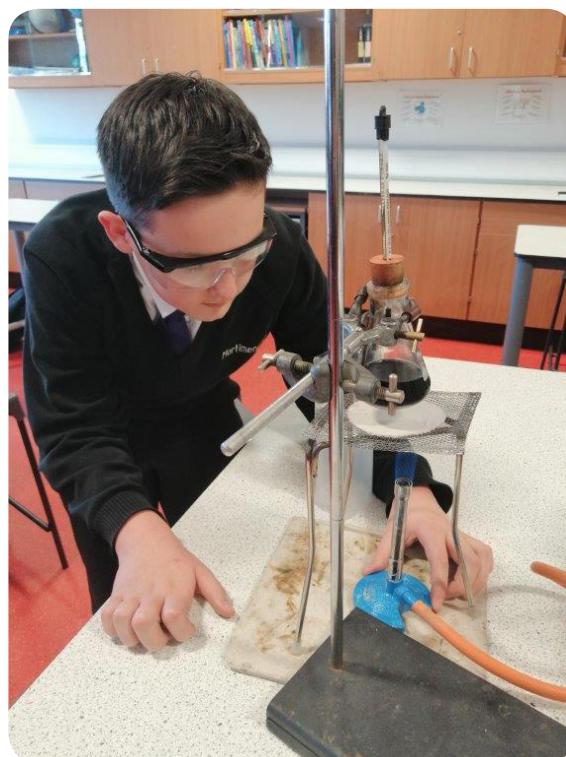
Recently, a consequence scale system has been removed to further push expectations even higher at the school and two internal promotions were made of non-teaching Key Stage Co-ordinators to drive standards and expectations higher. New safeguarding policies have recently been introduced to allow a more transparent, efficient, safe environment that all stakeholders feel protected and comfortable operating in.

One change that staff really wanted was a clear vision and path for teaching and learning (T&L). At this point T&L was made priority for the school and has remained so ever since. The school made a conscious decision to move away from data and self-imposed ceilings; targeting students; flight paths; whole-school intervention and unnecessary assessment: this resulted in our cohort of 50% disadvantaged students achieving the best results in South Tyneside (2019). As part of our strive for excellence, clear, unambiguous, leadership roles and responsibilities were streamlined and, under the leadership of the Deputy Headteacher, bespoke support and continuous professional development (CPD) provision was put in place. Alongside this, two staffing restructures have been necessary for a number of reasons ranging

from financial to improving the school; these changes ensured all staff were pro-active rather than reactive.

Genuinely supporting staff has been a priority: wellbeing, reducing workload and SLT support for staff were all prioritised, and remain pivotal in school improvement. This led to opportunities to have more professional freedom and take risks.

Joanne Thornton explains, 'We don't always get it right but we learn and improve on it. As a school, learning has to be at the centre of everything we do, both as students and staff. All decisions have to be based around what is best for our students; if it is not having an impact then why are we doing it? As teachers, what we permit we promote.'





Middle leaders were given autonomy to run their faculty in the way they saw fit; monitoring was given back to Faculty Leaders, allowing for a closer focus on the curriculum. Opportunities were created to allow for opinions at all levels to be shared – giving everyone a voice without prejudice. This created the culture of everyone being a leader with a part to play, meaning staff morale and trust improved and has stayed high throughout.

In order for this to really work, SLT and staff had to come together in the best interests for the students. SLT needed to be viewed as teachers, who were visible and committed to a journey that took into account key stakeholders and learning being pivotal. However, this did not mean being devoid of personality: Mortimer is a community where staff interests and accomplishments are celebrated alongside that of students. Teaching very much has a face – and charisma.



A conscious decision was made to avoid flooding staff with too many new initiatives; it was decided to focus on pedagogy in the classroom, priority check-in of regularly identified students and live feedback. This strengthened what being a teacher at Mortimer stood for: using time efficiently and effectively in lessons to reduce workload, using responsive teaching to inform the planning and delivery of lessons and ensuring assessment was purposeful and formative to ultimately improve student progress.

In the past an overload of unnecessary data had led to a stifling of T&L. It was not informing teaching and was creating excessive workload issues. Policies were adapted, using current research, to continue to improve the experience for our students while having a positive impact on the workload and wellbeing of teachers.



CPD was a major drive in the professional improvement and wellbeing of staff. Although staff were asked to step out of their comfort zone, this was presented in a low-stakes environment; slowly building teachers' confidence, encouraging a love of T&L and the freedom to take more calculated risks. Teachers were encouraged to talk openly with peers and share their experiences via a termly T&L challenge which was shared in a newsletter. This allowed choice and professional development at a subject-level. The newsletters assisted teachers to communicate outside of their faculties; sharing resources, evaluating their practice and encouraging staff to visit each other's lessons. This 'open-door' environment allows us to strive for consistency and end 'show lessons' ensuring a shift in culture; establishing a high challenge, low threat learning climate for both students and staff.



Quality opportunities for staff to engage in research-informed professional learning reinforced the new direction Mortimer was heading in. Staff were encouraged to showcase their knowledge and skills in sessions including ‘TeachMeets’ and showcase stalls. This allowed teachers to confirm that there was ample quality teaching ideas already present in the school. More recently, CPD has focused on more bespoke, subject-specific development of staff.

Students were confidently expecting more feedback in lessons and enjoying this positive shift in their attitude, towards a culture of learning. They were given ample opportunities to be listened to as new SLT members were approachable and visible around school and initiatives, such as ‘An Audience with Mr Hignett’, were introduced. A conscious effort to highlight and support mental health, along with other safeguarding issues, ensures Mortimer tries its hardest to support its

students and families and prepares them for their next steps as well as life in Mortimer. We ensure that students are given opportunities and a broad and balanced curriculum that challenges and enriches them.

Our families responded well to Mortimer’s more open approach: questionnaires at parents’ evenings ensured any negative comments were addressed immediately; social media allowed families to share in our successes and events, such as the revision conferences and coffee mornings, gave them more opportunities than ever before to talk about the progress and happiness of their children.

We enter 2020 positive for the future: attainment and progress are improving; we are oversubscribed; links with the community, including our partnership with South Shields Football Club, are thriving; we are financially stable; the students and staff are happy and Ofsted graded us as Good in September 2019. However, we continue with our priority of striving to make our best better in everything we do and so we still push on, together.

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