

# Report on the South Gloucestershire Schools Teachers' International Professional Development (TIPD) Visit to Jefferson County, Kentucky, USA 11 - 18 April 2009



<b>Summary profile</b>	
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Reference and Title of Visit : (e.g. 'SV300 : Teaching & Learning Strategies')	SV967: Personalisation
Provider :	British Council
Country / Region visited :	Kentucky, USA
Types of schools visited :	Middle Schools and 1 High School
Age of students observed :	11-14, 15-19
Language/s used:	English
Key Educational Purpose of the Visit:	To research personalisation curricula, pedagogies and resources

## Introduction

Jefferson County Public Schools District in Kentucky is the 28<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the US, with 99,000 students and 154 schools. Its principle of 'A Place for Every Child' is extending beyond a comprehensive range of special schools and alternative provision to address the social, emotional and learning environment and the quality of learning in the classroom.

Two of the main elements of its 'Theory of Action' are to 'Provide high –quality, personalised instruction that challenges and engages students in authentic work' and to 'Ensure equitable access to a consistent, inquiry-based curriculum. The initiatives to achieve them, include: the 'Every 1 Reads ' literacy programme, the diagnostic use of data, professional development on differentiated teaching and learning, the new students assignment plan, the adoption of new Math and Science programmes and the introduction of the 'Classroom Instructional Framework. Some of these initiatives were at an emerging stage and therefore there was variation of practice between and within schools. Moreover, our observation of them required an understanding of the social and educational contexts to which they are being introduced>

### The intended aims of the visit By South Gloucestershire schools were:

- To research models of personalisation in the host country's schools
- To enquire into the range of curriculum models that have been developed in the host country's schools, and evaluate their relationship with the culture of the host country's school communities
- To observe personalisation pedagogies in the classroom and discuss their development and impact with teachers in the host country's schools. This will have a particular focus on brain-based learning, personal, learning and thinking skills, social emotional skills, and the development of literacy and numeracy.
- To observe and interrogate assessment models and strategies that inform personalisation
- To investigate resources, including software and web-based materials, that facilitate personalisation

### The expected outcomes of the visit: were to:

- To reflect on curricula, pedagogies, school and LA organization in England in order to reinforce strengths and accurately identify areas for development
- To engage colleagues in development of pedagogies, curriculum and assessment models that facilitate effective personalisation
- To adapt and deploy a range of personalisation strategies in the classroom, drawn from observations of classroom practice during the visit

These were to be identified and recorded by:

- Discussing developments with District Education Superintendents, School Principals and Vice-Principals, Teachers and Students Observing classroom practice
- Observing and engaging with classroom and school practice during 'pairing' activities
- Meeting as a group daily to discuss and record the outcomes of the above

## Report of the experience

The organization of learning, and curriculum models are established by the state and the district. This is also true of the standards that schools should be working towards. However detailed curriculum planning is organised by the individual schools' Site Management Teams (the equivalent of Governors in the English system). The curriculum models and choice of electives seem similar across middle schools. Each school teaches a core of Social Sciences. This includes History, Geography and other areas that in the U.K. would be classified as the humanities. The other core areas are Mathematics, Science and Language Arts. Modern foreign languages are offered at some Middle Schools and most High Schools. Religious Education is not taught in any school; however there is a brief focus on world religions within Social Sciences. The non-core areas are classed as Electives. Students can choose these subjects on entering middle school and can continue these in high school or can change them each year. Depending on the school, these electives are taught either right through the year or on a carousel system each semester or trimester. In general there seems to be a planned movement from six/seven period Semesters to 5 period Trimesters.

Specialisms within electives are developed by teachers with particular skills and are often supported/facilitated by local communities, even to the point of informing recruitment of good teachers/instructors in specific areas. Schools seem to have a strong PTA contribution. Staffing did not appear to be an issue in the Electives that were offered in that staff only taught within their specialism. Ample funding of these subjects meant that learning was personalised in terms of the elective subjects that students could choose

Students within the local community have the right to attend to their local schools (resides). However students can also apply to other schools outside of their catchment area: students in inner city areas are able to attend schools in 'partner' suburban districts. The school bus system and the allocation of school places in the district were introduced to facilitate integration in schools in the 1970s. It now facilitates personalisation by providing access for students and parents to schools that provide a curriculum that matches students learning preferences or ambitions. For example, in the case of one middle school, 'applicant' students are attracted by its reputation as a strong school for foreign languages and art. .

Some schools take this further by being 'Magnet Schools' i.e. schools with a definite area of expertise that are able to provide an accelerated curriculum in their specialist areas. This system is being introduced to High Schools: schools in each of 3 district areas will assume 1 of 5 specialisms proscribed by the District and students can travel to the High School that offers their preferred specialism. The disadvantages of this are the length of journeys and the early start to the day for young people as well as the potential strains on community cohesion.

The high school we visited is a magnet school for information technology. Students are able to study for industry-recognised external qualifications. Some senior students are also offered paid internships at local companies. These companies will often pay college fees later on with the understanding that these students come back to work for these companies. Therefore students learning and progress has a real relevance to the world of work. In the core curriculum advanced students can 'bank credits and hours' for university. In other words, they will not be expected to take many of the classes in their freshman year as they will have already covered this ground.

The middle school core curriculum is usually taught by teams of teachers. How these teams are structured depends on the school. Some middle schools favour a rolling model where the same teachers teach the core subjects to the same students throughout the years. This 'Looping' covers all three Grades, 6 to 7 and 8 and then back down to 6 again.

Curriculum development in Middle Schools appears to be significantly influenced by teachers' subject expertise. The communities of all of the schools that we visited actively support the resourcing of elective and enrichment programmes and it appears that teachers of these subjects are specialists. However, a number of core subject teachers in the middle schools are not subject specialists and are supported by the purchase of programmes recommended by the district. The delivery of these programmes is determined by the requirement of schools to grade students every 6 weeks. It is also determined by the

District Pacing Guide which ensures that schools teach the same topics at the same time of the year so that transfer between schools should not disrupt a student's learning.

In High Schools the Jefferson County Administrators are trying to encourage a model where 'Freshman' students are taught by teachers that specialise in the transitional period between Middle and High schools. Some students had found the transition difficult and were failing to pass the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. By giving them a dedicated team and teachers and even a specific part of the building, it is hoped that the pass rate into the 11<sup>th</sup> grade would be increased. Around 5 schools so far follow this model, but it is up to the schools' own educational boards to decide.

High Schools also operate a scheme called Advanced Placement where students that were achieving highly could gain college (university) credits and, therefore, would not be expected to take as many of the classes in their freshman year as they will have already covered this ground. The benefits of these to both the students and their paying families were used as a natural motivation. In the high schools and in the Gifted and Talented Magnet middle school that we visited there was evidence of setting in the core curriculum. In the electives however (certainly in the High Schools) there are not only students that are doing advanced and normal programs in the same class, but students from different year groupings all in the same class.

To progress through the curriculum students are expected to gain a certain number of credits. Opportunities are given throughout the year to allow students to achieve these. These may be assessed as part of the school work or homework assignments. Some homework assignments are optional to allow students that are behind on their credits to catch up. Assignments can also be accessed through the school's website. Students who do not gain enough credit scores do not progress into the new year. Assessment within middle schools was a comprehensive program of clearly defined assignments. Students seemed fully aware of assignments through a clear briefing system and a structured deadlines programme. The assessment process was very much content driven, with students' attainment mainly based on 'what' not 'why'. Evidence of personalisation seen in assessment was through how work was presented. Students had the opportunity to choose the format of the assignment but this was reliant on the skills they possessed to complete it. A good example of this is in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class where the assessment aim was to investigate and report back on a country in the Olympics. This was personalised for students in that they were offered a variety of formats such as: PowerPoint, Written report, Posters, Sketch or News article.

Students were intrinsically motivated to be successful in their assessment because their progression through school could not be assumed: all students were expected to meet the 'grade level' in order to graduate to the next year. This culture was evidenced in individual lessons in the relationships between teacher and students and between the students and their work. The attitude that students were workers in the school and teachers were their supervisors meant that the responsibility to complete their assignments and achieve favourable grades was firmly on the shoulders of the students.

Students and parents were regularly (weekly) updated with assessment deadlines and students were kept up-to-date with their current progress in accumulating credits for their graduation. The assessment process at high school began as students started in grade 9 and gathered credit throughout their whole school experience towards graduation; this meant all student assessment has relevance and worth. Those students who failed to make the grade were given opportunity to supplement their work through extra credits; this was offered throughout the year as additional assignment, weekend work or summer schools.

Each day students would have lessons in the four core subjects, Maths, Language Arts (English), Social Studies and Science. This led to high standards of literacy and numeracy for the majority of students. The 'Every 1 Reads' programme was a catch up programme to enable weaker readers to achieve a higher standard. There was a strong emphasis in the core subjects of teacher-led lessons, supported by the use of text books, with the material being at a high reading level. At times this meant that some students were seemingly "left behind" and others were disaffected by the learning process, yet the responsibility was still on these students to produce the work. Tasks in some lessons perhaps needed to focus more on developing students higher order thinking skills, for example open questioning could have helped to develop understanding or the ability to form opinions. Interaction in some lessons was minimal between staff and students, whilst in others the teacher facilitated learning and promoted team work. However, in one school there was excellent practice in terms of a project-based curriculum. Students worked through their Social Studies lessons by making choices in terms of how they learned and the style of their assessments. There was a strong focus on using their preferred learning style throughout the entire course.

Jefferson County could only suggest resources for schools, but most schools opted to follow their suggestions. This was especially apparent in the Connecting Maths course and the Science boxes. Although the national exams constrained some subjects in what needed to be taught, in others they were freer to choose.

In some schools, students were used as a resource in classrooms and in-house services such as counselling, peer mediation and the IT help desk. A very strong emphasis was on enriching students' experience of school through giving them responsibility. This was very effective and students were engaged, responsive and appreciative of the roles that they were able to undertake. Senior students were encouraged to support and, in many cases, lead lessons for younger students. The interaction between all involved was very positive.

IT development in South Gloucestershire is at a more advanced stage than in the schools we visited, although the availability of laptops on trolleys that could be booked by staff freed up dedicated computer rooms and meant that IT could underpin many lessons. Interactive whiteboards were installed in some classrooms although not necessarily used to their full capacity.

All the schools that we visited had online class pages that each teacher could design and edit to suit their needs. Students and parents could view these sites to gain extra information about class work and homework, as well as key dates. This system seemed to be used frequently by the majority of all. There was no reliance on IT technicians in using this facility. In the High School a new course was available through a "Virtual High School" where all lessons, teaching and assessments were on-line and connections made with schools across the country.

Disruption in lessons was kept to a minimum by the facilities on offer around the school. Pens and pencils were available from vending machines in the corridors and each classroom had a sharpener attached to the wall for student use. In some rooms the tables were joined to the chair, so that students could not rock back and forth. Every student in all the schools that we visited had a locker. Students were not allowed to bring bags and coats into classrooms, just the books and resources required for each lesson. This cut down on the clutter in classrooms and meant that there were fewer distractions.

Other services and resources were set up to deal with pastoral issues and administration. For example, the PA system allowed immediate information to be passed to all, freeing up teachers to plan and set up their rooms. Posters to remind students of expected behaviour and to inspire them to greater achievements were in every classroom and other places around the school. Several initiatives were county wide through elementary, middle and high schools. Examples of this were the voice levels and CHAMPs (conversation, help, activity, movement, participation). All members of support staff and management teams had short wave radios so that they could be contacted if an incident arose. What became apparent is that the role of a teacher was simply to teach or impart knowledge. There was less expectation that a teacher was accountable for the student's achievement, or behaviour; this rested firmly with the student.

## **Evaluation**

### **Summary of the key educational outcomes**

- The district plays a significant role in facilitating personalisation through coordinating the development of 'magnet' schools at high school level, supported by the extensive transport system. Magnet schools, particularly at High School level, seem to have many positive outcomes, though we feel that asking students to specialise at Middle school might be a bit too early for some students.
- The state and district also play a significant role in the standardisation of assessment in both middle and high schools. This supports the flux of students between educational establishments both by age and geographically. The state and the district also play a significant role in setting standards (e.g., Grade A High School graduates have a full grant to attend the State University) and facilitating school improvement, but the curriculum is decided by the Kentucky equivalent of a school governing body. This results in a higher degree of personalisation in elective provision, but the opposite in the core subjects.
- The range of accelerated curriculum models sought to provide choice and a personalised learning experience for more able students. They proved to be a great motivator for them.

- There is a potential for the curriculum to be quite narrow up until 9<sup>th</sup> grade, especially for the high achievers, although we realise a narrower curriculum could benefit the lower achievers.
- The 'carouselling' of electives gives a more intensive period of study and allows students to develop their skills. It encourages deep learning, particularly within practical subjects. We feel that there was some high quality work being produced.
- The implementation of a graduation structure leads to students having ownership of both their progress through school and also their achievement; the onus to pass and do well is promoted to students throughout their school career. Assessments support this as they are inherently more relevant to the students and their progress. This can be a great motivator, although High School students who did not pass classes were made to re-sit, which could have the opposite effect
- In contrast to students' ownership of assessment, there was little evidence of students being given the opportunity to take ownership of their learning in their four core subjects, but more in their elective subjects.
- Freshmen academies was a new solution to try to ease the transition from Middle schools to High schools and increase personalisation through the development of teacher-student relationships
- We were impressed with the continuity of teaching across all three middle schools. We thought that in a system where there is no pastoral continuity, the looping system operated at one school was effective. It gave many students a sense of belonging and stability. This is true also of the team system, used in all the Middle schools, which gave a sense of community and identity. This sense of identity is strong throughout all the schools, and students will identify themselves as being a member of a team as well as the school. The team spirit that was evident at all schools, we feel was very positive. The student's pride in their school and their team and community was extremely powerful.
- It became clear that current personalised learning pedagogies in South Gloucestershire schools seem to be more advanced than the practice we observed, particularly at KS3.

### **How can the findings be applied to the UK context?**

- The US system of elective subjects in Middle School does not happen in UK schools until GCSE options. The idea of elective classes at KS3, as early as year 7, is one that could be interesting to consider. Students that signed up to specific specialised programmes seemed to have a greater ownership of their learning and were extremely motivated
- Core teams to teach year 7 could be developed to help the transition from primary school to secondary school.
- Practical subjects could be taught on a carousel basis for the reasons listed above.
- Establishing high expectations of students' engagement with the written and spoken word would serve to improve their access to learning.
- A standardised approach to assessment may facilitate a more transparent deadline structure.
- Students should be given the choice of homework tasks to allow them the opportunity to personalise their own learning outside the classroom.
- Empowering students to take control of their own learning and development can make success the paramount motivation for students.
- Each teacher should be able to design and edit their own online class pages for access by students and parents.
- Systems for disseminating school information could be improved to allow more time for teachers to teach.

- Pen and pencil vending machines widely available to students would move the responsibility of providing lesson resources back to the student.

### **How will you apply them to your work?**

- Discussions with colleagues about how to engage students in buying in to shared identities (Subject badges? Sporting or club sweatshirts?) and therefore developing a team spirit and pride in the school. This could also serve to celebrate students' talents.
- Get involved in planning of curriculum and try to explore the possibility of Art and other practical subjects to be put on a more intense carousel system, but definitely not losing time over the year.
- Seek to establish methods of communicating subjects deadlines to students at the start of the academic year (or perhaps term), along with target grades to allow students to keep tabs on their own progress and plan their time more effectively over a longer period of time.
- Seek to offer, where possible, alternatives for students in the approach they take with their assessments and giving them options that will encourage them to take ownership of their own learning outcomes.
- Consult LA colleagues and Headteachers re. the promoting of schools' specialisms in the Admissions Booklet and other documentation and the support for Talented students in accessing specialist learning

### **How do you now intend to disseminate the findings of your visit?**

(eg staff meetings, articles for professional journals, presentations, web-sites etc.)

- Each school representative intends to present our findings and recommendations to their Head teachers and Senior Leadership Teams
- They also intend to present our experiences, findings and recommendations to colleagues in professional development opportunities, Subject Best Practice Forums, Subject Leader Meetings And Subject Team Meetings
- 3 representatives will present our present our experiences and findings in a seminar at the South Gloucestershire Personalisation Conference
- The LA representative will share outcomes of the visit with colleagues involved in the South Gloucestershire KS3 Personalisation Project and in a range of Best Practice Forums. He discussed the idea of personalising teachers' professional development with Secondary CPD Coordinators on 22<sup>nd</sup> April.
- Copies of this TIPD report will be sent to schools and colleagues in the Learning & School Effectiveness service and will be placed on the LA Learning Platform

### **Proposals for future developments and continuing links**

(eg return visits, shared projects, e-mail etc.)

- The group will continue to meet to discuss issues relating to teaching and learning and support each other with initiating change in their own practice and change in their schools
- Individual members will maintain contact with colleagues in Jefferson County with whom they established close ties

**General advice for other visitors to the country/region:**

(e.g. useful sources of information, general cultural information, climate, food etc.)

- Find time to visit the Muhammad Ali Centre and the Louisville Slugger Museum
- If you have transport (hire cars were invaluable), visit the Mammoth Caves National Park, but choose your tours carefully – some last more than 2 hours! – and watch out for time zone changes
- University Sports Games are possibly of a higher standard than minor league games
- It was easy to find places to eat in downtown Louisville, including the 4<sup>th</sup> St Complex (though Vegetarian options are limited) and there are a number of good places for music: blues, Country and Western and Jazz
- Try to be there for 'Thunder Over Louisville' the fireworks display that opens the 2 weeks of events, leading up to the Kentucky Derby (unfortunately, we had to leave on the day it was due to start)
- If you have a 7 hour stopover at Newark, make the effort to visit Manhattan either by train or taxi
- The people of Jefferson County are very welcoming and friendly – go out and meet them as soon as you can, you will make friends quickly!