

Learning outside the classroom: Neston High School

URN: 138318

Local authority: Cheshire West and Cheshire

Date published: 20 November 2012

Reference: 120355

Brief description

This example shows how Neston High School secures high attainment and levels of progress through a well-integrated curriculum with a broad programme of learning outside the classroom (LOTC). This includes many residential visits, day trips and activities in the local environment. A 'can do' culture, more than any of the formal systems, adds the most value to enabling students to achieve well and thrive.

Overview – the school's message

'For me the reason for encouraging learning outside the classroom as a key philosophy is that it enables students to apply their learning in different and real contexts and to broaden their horizons and aspirations for their future lives. I am absolutely convinced that the ethos and culture in the school are vastly enhanced by the high level of participation. These activities are systematically and collegiately organised, evaluated and analysed, and are the heart and soul of our school.'

Steve Dool, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Background

Neston is a vibrant and high performing school. The vision of the headteacher, Steve Dool, and others, over many years has built a culture of enthusiastic learning through various means beyond the classroom. It has been driven by the effective leadership of all members of the senior team. Staff and students are confident that they will do well by taking the learning where it can be done better,

‘The Conway Year 7 residential gives students opportunities to gain the confidence to become learners of the future.’

planning carefully and having high ambitions for the students. They take managed risks. According to Steve Dool, this culture is as important to the school's success as any systems or procedures.

Simple and effective procedures

Of course, the school's procedures are well organised. Straightforward [systems for authorising learning outside the classroom](#) also ensure equal opportunities. There are carefully negotiated and managed links with the Conway Centre, in North Wales. Community partnerships are well established and consequently require little staff time in planning. The effect is to liberate people's energy. No re-inventing of wheels or overbearing bureaucracy!



LOTC is coordinated and recorded through the [EVOLVE software](#), which is promoted and managed by the [local authority](#). It tells everyone what is happening at any one time, enables audit trails for every activity, ensures straightforward risk assessment, and includes advice from the local

authority's expert team. Usually, activities are planned well in advance. This alleviates teachers' anxieties about students missing lessons for LOTC activities.

A student taking A level physics spent four weeks working alongside scientists at the Higgs Boson experiment in Cern. In a personal statement, he highlighted the many benefits of this to him, including gaining access to specialist knowledge in a truly world-class environment and expanding his knowledge to areas beyond the curriculum. It raised his aspirations, gave him valuable experience for university interviews, and confirmed his desire to follow a career in physics research.

Whole school commitment

Prospective staff are asked at interview about their commitment to LOTC and it is included in job descriptions. With this commitment comes support. For example, an annual large-scale residential visit attended by all students in Year 7 is used to induct and develop staff, and engage their energy and passion, in a well-controlled environment. It is also a vital part of succession planning for broader residential activities across the school. On residential visits, staff, rather than external organisations, arrange and lead the activities so that they are fully part of the curriculum. For example, art work about identity on a residential is led by the school's artist in residence. Science work about pond food chains continues directly from work in lessons.

The school's LOTC coordinator, an assistant headteacher, has a wide and influential [role](#), especially in ensuring quality. It moves well beyond the traditional role of the Educational Visits Coordinator (EVC), focused principally on



health and safety. This senior teacher leads a key team, including, among others, the school sports coordinator and the Duke of Edinburgh Award coordinator.

Language exchanges gave students their first experience of a different culture. Although this made them nervous, especially if they had not been abroad before, sharing the visit with friends gave them confidence in the language and improved their fluency. These experiences also lead to high aspirations:; one student decided to seek a future career as an interpreter.

Exciting curriculum

The broad extra-curricular programme, called [eXL](#), is popular. The eXL branding makes it inclusive and enticing. Early analysis suggested that lower-attaining students were underrepresented in the activities, so the school canvassed students, giving them activities they wanted, such as a visit to a German Christmas market. Thirty students attended this activity, all of whom were lower attaining students in literacy. All students expect to participate in eXL, which is also the main professional development programme for staff.

LOTC takes place regularly both within and outside the eXL programme. Activities include:

- the use of school grounds, for eco work, and as an outdoor classroom
- students taking their sketchbooks and cameras to a nearby university botanic garden to find and organise their ideas for jewellery, using natural items as a stimulus
- language and cultural exchanges in France, Berlin, Madrid and with three schools in South Africa
- Duke of Edinburgh Award
- musical bands and choirs, performing locally to a very high standard
- sports teams participating in local and international events
- an annual [summer activity week](#), involving all students.

One student visited the World War I sites in Belgium. A relative of hers had lost his life there. She was able to take part in leading a memorial service and said, 'It made it real for me. I understand now.'

Effective evaluation

The LOTC programme is carefully evaluated. [Evaluations](#) are shared with governors. The school is working towards linking these evaluations still closer with student outcomes. All departments are expected to contribute to the LOTC programme and are benchmarked against each other. If a subject appears not to be incorporating much LOTC, or is not engaging all student groups, senior leaders have the evidence needed to raise this with middle leaders, and to assess the possible impact on students' outcomes.

A student visited three partner schools in South Africa. He said, 'It was amazing. It changed me as a person. The kids there had nothing but they're happier than us I would say.'

The school's background



Neston High School is a large secondary school, located in the south Wirral. The students come from a broad range of social backgrounds and with widely differing levels of prior attainment. 7% of students are known to be eligible for free school meals. The selective system in a nearby authority means that some higher-attaining students do not join the school. The school has more than 40 feeder primary schools, with students travelling from a wide area.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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