

The Role of Cluster Leader

Cluster Leaders:

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We are all thoroughly enjoying the role of Cluster Leader. **The role requires us to lead Joint Practice Development (JPD) within a cluster of schools as part of the Network of Shared School Improvement (NSSI).** This network is the Pathway Project for the Learning Leaders Strategy developed by the Department of Education. We are involved in leading the Department's and our partnerships' vision of improving teacher confidence and skills which will ultimately lead to better educational and reconciliation outcomes for all our students. This new concept is directly linked to recent academic research which supports collaborative approaches to professional development. **We are part of a team pioneering new strategies to support professional development.** These strategies will involve a combination of academic research, sharing of practice, identification of new practices, observation of learning and engaging in self-evaluation to assist in the transformation of practice.

As Cluster Leaders, **we adopted a three-pronged approach to ascertain JPD opportunities within our partnerships.**

- The first thing we did was to analyse each school's development plan to gauge the common needs.
- Secondly, we held a meeting with all HODs and pastoral leaders to find out the aspects of professional development in which they would like to engage.
- Finally, we produced a 'Needs Analysis' questionnaire to identify the areas in which staff would like support and training. By doing this, we were giving ownership to the staff involved meaning that engagement in programmes is not enforced but something that they wish to do.

Once potential JPD areas were highlighted, we worked alongside the lead teachers to produce the action plans for each JPD programme. Again, this gives staff ownership of the programme and incorporates the concept of co-construction from the outset of the process.



One of the challenges has been gaining teacher support and overcoming the restrictions of industrial action. We have begun to change mindsets and enthuse people to get involved. We need to inspire people to take ownership of their own professional development and to invest in themselves. Upon carrying out research using a focus group from our partnerships, a major concern which

emerged was time: the time to attend training, the time for observations and the time to reflect. In a post- primary setting there is a lot of pressure relating to exam classes and teachers were concerned about leaving their classes to partake in JPD. Therefore, it is essential that the timing of the JPD programmes are strategically planned to ensure the minimum disruption to exam classes and completing courses. **This has been one benefit of our engagement in the Cluster Leader Programme as it has provided us with time to plan, implement and reflect on practice.**

We believe that the benefits of our involvement with JPD will greatly outweigh any challenges that we may face. Furthermore, our partnerships hope that by engaging in Cohort One of the NSSI, we will be at the forefront of professional development in Northern Ireland.

The role of Cluster Leader has provided us with opportunities to link with other practitioners and develop as professionals. We have been upskilled in specific areas and have had the experience of visiting other educational settings.



This has had a great impact on our own teaching and we are sure it will be of great benefit to the students we are working with. The training provided by the Education Authority and leading academics (Prof Mark Hadfield and Dr Andrew Morley) has been invaluable. Moreover, the support provided throughout the journey by the SESP Coordinator Paul Close and his Development Team has made the position both enjoyable and rewarding.

Moving forward, we are very excited about the future of the NSSI and we are very proud to be involved. **We are now looking at teaching through a different lens and consider ways in which to measure impact and collate evidence that demonstrates improved outcomes for pupils.** The impact of the programmes on the teachers within our clusters will help shape the future professional development strategies we employ within JPD. We were delighted with the direction of travel regarding the NSSI and feel that our viewpoints are being considered throughout this co-design process. **This is an exciting initiative for teacher professional development and our partnerships are completely committed to this cross-sectoral collaborative network vision.**

