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Local G&T networks: a model for school-to-school support and development

Ellen Leggate explains how G&T coordinators in the Bishop's Stortford area are learning from each other via a local cross-phase network

The STAGE (Stortford Talented and Gifted Enrichment) network consists of 23 primary and secondary schools in the Bishop's Stortford area (Hertfordshire), supporting each other to enhance provision for their most able students. The purpose of the network is threefold: to promote enrichment opportunities for G&T learners; to disseminate up-to-date information on G&T pedagogy and innovations; and to share best practice among its teacher members.

Establishing the network

The STAGE network, established in 2007, was championed by Liz Stockley who is headteacher of Little Hadham Primary School. The initiative was inspired by a similar scheme already running in Hertfordshire. An initial interest meeting attended by representatives from 11 of the 23 local primary and secondary schools established the principles and aims of the network, and from there its functioning developed organically into its now-established pattern (see below).

Initial LA endorsement and support for the network has sadly dwindled, but this has galvanised the network into functioning successfully independently of external support.

How it works

STAGE meetings for the participating schools take place after school approximately once a term, attended by G&T coordinators or staff with responsibility for G&T (typical attendance is around 10). Key to the meetings' success has been the non-hierarchical involvement of both primary and secondary teachers, helping to ensure that discussions are relevant, contextual and student-centred.

The most tangible outcomes from the STAGE network are two-fold: enrichment days for primary pupils and access to relevant CPD for staff. Enrichment days involve selected primary pupils attending a themed day hosted at one of the STAGE network schools. These enrichment days may be led by teachers in the host school or by external providers. Examples of the wide variety of themes

covered include French, drama for writing rollercoaster design. The case study below discusses the impact of the annual Y5/6 G&T science day:



Primary science day at The Hertfordshire & Essex High School

Concept

- Yr5/6 students spend the day involved in extended practical investigation researching a science question.
- The pupils present their findings in tabular and graphical form, justifying their results in oral presentations to the rest of the group in the final plenary.

Impact

- Primary schools report that pupils returned to school motivated and enthused.
- Participating students engage more deeply with scientific method.
- Pupils are challenged to develop their ideas and theories and defended their decisions to peers and teachers in an unfamiliar environment.

Participating pupils pay a small fee to attend enrichment days; this is used to cover administration costs and also to finance the STAGE network's second main area of activity: teacher CPD. In recent years the money has paid for key speakers at STAGE meetings, such as Philosophy 4 Children expert Jason Buckley; or for subsidising staff attendance at regional and national G&T CPD events.

The STAGE model also enables new initiatives to develop and flourish, harnessing the expertise and enthusiasms of its teacher members. Since the network comprises local schools, it is also perfectly placed to respond to the specific needs of the G&T learners in those school communities. An example of such a recent initiative is discussed in the case study below:

'World War II in a Box': Y13 students teach primary pupils

Concept

- G&T Y13 history students design and deliver a two-hour workshop, 'World War II in a Box', to a small group of G&T Y3/4 students.

Impact

- The Y13 students develop skills in communication, presentation and the synthesis and preparation of resources.
- Y3/4 pupils are given access to extended G&T provision to which, if out of school, they may otherwise be considered too young to travel.
- Primary pupils return to their classroom to cascade what they have learned; primary staff said that they 'come back buzzing!'.

Some of the key benefits to staff and pupils of establishing a local G&T network, as exemplified by the STAGE network, are summarised below.

Benefits for teachers

- Access to a wider resource base. The STAGE network can act as a conduit for dissemination of regional information and training; its finances can be used to access CPD.
- Links into a bigger pool of ideas and strategies for G&T education which have been demonstrated to work in the local context.
- Clearer understanding of the needs of G&T learners and of teacher expectations cross-phase.
- Motivation for the typically 'lone' G&T coordinator by facilitating meetings with colleagues in the same role.

Benefits for pupils

- Being forced out of their comfort zone to work with peers from other schools and hence developing communication and interpersonal skills.
- Experiencing a new environment which may be empowering and motivational.
- Being able to place their learning and experiences into a wider context (vital for G&T learners).
- Taking on the role of peer-teachers: pupils attending enrichment days are generally required to present back to their year group, key stage or whole school.

G&T coordinator comments

'Our school has benefitted enormously from STAGE, especially from the enrichment days. It is so brilliant for our Yr3/4 children, and there's nothing else like this in our area. It's great to come to the meetings and bounce ideas around and working cross-phase benefits all of us.'

Sue Smith, Reception teacher and G&T coordinator, Layston First School

'We've also found that it helps the social and emotional side of learning. We sent a child with autistic spectrum needs to the secondary science day and it was the making of him. It really made a significant difference. He flew with it. Now we're not so worried about how he'll cope with primary to secondary transition.'

Clare Tozer, teacher with responsibility for G&T, St Michael's Primary School, Bishop's Stortford

Conclusion

The STAGE network provides high-quality school-to-school support between schools in both the primary and secondary sectors. Thanks to the commitment and infectious enthusiasm of its key founder, Liz, and the robust systems which have developed since the initial days, the network continues to promote G&T education in its member schools. Furthermore, the model has shown it has the ability to survive and thrive, despite shifting government agendas and in response to the changing needs and experiences of its teacher members.

The challenge now is to maintain this vibrancy; plan for succession as G&T coordinator posts change or disappear; and ensure that G&T remains a prominent feature of the local educational landscape.

Author details

Ellen Leggate

Ellen Leggate is able, gifted and talented coordinator at Hertfordshire and Essex High School