The Bemrose School, Derby

BlueSky

Supporting the focus on literacy and middle leadership

BlueSky helps the all-through school guard against a 'tick-box' culture for performance management and puts staff in control of their development

About the school

The Bemrose School is an all-through school in Derby with pupils ranging in age from 3 to 19. It has double the national average of disadvantaged pupils, the proportion with SEN and/or disabilities is above average and three-quarters of the children are from minority ethnic groups.

Led by Executive Headteacher Neil Wilkinson with separate headteachers for the Secondary and Primary phases, its 2018 Ofsted report found the school to be Good overall, with a determination among the heads, leadership team and staff to enable every child to succeed.

Having first implemented the solution in 2008, all 230 staff are engaged with BlueSky. All teachers have a performance management target related to the Pupil Premium and to literacy, which they identify themselves.

How is BlueSky supporting the Bemrose School?

BlueSky is a key strategic tool for the school, enabling Neil and the leadership teams to evaluate staff performance, supporting staff professional development and helping to pinpoint areas where capacity and skills need to be strengthened to meet long-term improvement goals.

Key benefits

- School leaders can ensure that individual development targets are aligned with wider school goals
- Simple and intuitive user interface drives comprehensive adoption from all staff
- Flexibility of the platform allows organisation to set higher goals and support continuous improvement

"BlueSky has a number of modules and elements and we make these work for us," Neil says. "For example, with performance management, it allows me, as the school leader, to pull up everyone's targets, look at them and align them to school priorities to ensure everyone in the school is pulling in the same direction, while still allowing colleagues to develop themselves professionally. There is an ongoing dialogue between managers and their staff about the targets, so there is substance to them; they are not there to tick a box, they are authentic, and when I look at them, I can expect to see notes to indicate what the individual has done to keep on track with their targets."

Neil uses BlueSky to support conversations with other colleagues about targets, discussing whether

they are SMART or sufficiently robust. "It allows me to check and track that our staff are moving forward with their development, and if there is a query or problem, we can press the pause button and go back to line managers to ask how they are defining targets to ensure they are realistic and they serve the purpose we want them to serve.

A key advantage of the system for staff is its simplicity, he adds: "BlueSky is simple and intuitive enough for everyone to use. If staff initially see it as 'another job to do', they soon realise that it's something that helps them to do their job more efficiently and effectively and they are quickly on board with it."

What is the impact?
BlueSky enables the all-through school to easily identify priorities for each setting and to uncover areas that are particular strengths so that these skills or practices can be shared across the wider organisation.

"For example, we have had a big focus on literacy and now have a literacy monitoring tool that we use for our learning walks, which enables staff to share good practice and feedback," says Neil.

"We used the BlueSky templates and tailored them for this purpose. Using the tool, you can drill down to the staff level, department level, stage level, whole school, secondary or primary, extracting rich data which you can analyse to see where the strengths are. You can then align that with performance management and assess whether the work that someone has done to develop their literacy teaching skills is reflected in the outcomes for children in the classroom."

In 2018, Ofsted recommended Bemrose make improving the quality of middle leadership a priority, so the school has since focused on department heads and key stage leaders, using BlueSky to support them to clarify and hone their role in realising the vision for the school.

"BlueSky has helped middle leaders to understand how whole school priorities relate to, for example, work scrutinies," Neil says. "As one of our priorities is literacy extended writing, presentation and so on are embedded in our scrutinies, which are recorded on BlueSky, helping to raise the profile of specific aspects of improvement for individuals, within a team or wider.

You can then use the insights to check whether something is working or needs to be rethought, to inform development of your provision further, and to see what else you might need to put in place."

What's next?
Continuing the focus on middle leadership, Neil is drawing up plans for leadership development activity for all Bemrose middle leaders.

"We are currently exploring how we can develop them to be even better leaders which could include creating triads around leadership development with a 360 activity, using the module within BlueSky. The module is predicated on the national headteachers' standards at the moment, but we are talking to BlueSky about adapting it to support the development of our middle leaders.

"The great thing about BlueSky is that you can adapt it for your needs, as and when they change."