

Consultancies - A Way Forward for School improvement?

Phil Warren considers why consultancies are increasingly being recognised as instrumental in bringing about real school improvement in the face of constant external demands

Schools have shown in the last 10 years a remarkable capacity to adapt and change to meet external demands for an improved education service. The result in many cases has been a transformation in our view of what is possible in schools. This change has come at a cost however, both in the strain on the lives of those who work in schools and in increasing pressure on young people to fit into what school requires to meet externally driven targets.

As the emphasis on schools' ability to sustain improvement and allow a sensible work-life balance for staff has grown, so I believe there is a growing recognition of the benefit that consultancies can bring to schools. A number of factors have produced this movement in attitudes:

- The growing complexity of school life means no school can provide all the solutions it needs from within its own staffing resources
- The greater independence and diversity of schools means they increasingly want solutions tailored to their own requirements
- There are an increasing number of consultants with successful school experience who are able to facilitate change in schools
- Research shows the value of outside input to schools that can progress schools in areas in which they do not have the expertise
- Consultancies often have long-term benefits for the CPD of staff involved in such projects

There are a number of constraining factors however that still inhibit a wider use of consultancies:

- Many leaders and managers in schools are suspicious of the need for outside help as they feel it reflects on their own expertise. They also may have only limited previous exposure to consultancies and may not know how to find the right consultants.
- Smaller schools have difficulty funding consultancies and may need to work with other schools on joint projects. This makes tailoring the consultancy to individual needs more difficult
- One-off training day consultancies are expensive and although often enjoyable may have little long-term impact on the school and their pupils
- Some consultancy businesses are seen as more interested in profit for themselves than in the development of the school for the benefit of pupils

Nevertheless more and more schools are developing long-term relationships with consultant organisations to the benefit of both staff and pupils. Such relationships work best when the school has a clear view of the improvement area it wants help in developing, and knows what outcomes it wants from the consultancy.

Schools need to find a consultant organisation that shares their commitment to quality and improvement. Consultant organisations are increasingly able to assess clients' needs and deliver bespoke training and development programmes that move the school forward and then leave them in a position to lead and manage their own future development.

CCDU has developed a new range of consultancies that we believe will address some of the issues currently facing schools:

- Creativity
- Coaching
- Skills for Middle Leaders
- Behaviour Management

A First Steps Checklist for School Leaders – useful questions to ask yourself

- **Are there areas of school improvement that we may need outside resources for?**
- **How important is this improvement and what financial resources are we prepared to commit to it?**
- **How quickly do we want it done?**
- **What outcomes do we want from the improvement?**
- **Is it suitable for a school-based consultancy?**
- **How will we go about finding the right consultants?**

Philip Warren was a successful secondary headteacher in Wakefield before joining CCDU, and has taught and managed in various schools in the Yorkshire and Humber region for most of his career. Contact him on 0113 283 8611 or email philip@ccdco.uk for further information.