



Notes on SIP visit to Cantell School on 9th December 2024

Report to Governors

This visit was arranged to coincide with a peer review focused on KS2-3 English, reading/phonics across the school and the use of the teaching and learning ingredients to create subject experts.

This is the first year in which the peer review process designed and led by Mark Bagust has been introduced to the trust. At the time of my visit a programme of similar peer reviews was underway in primary schools in the trust and this was the first review for Cantell. My role was to observe and provide feedback on the process for Cantell which can be read alongside Mark's report of the review.

We were joined by three colleagues from Mount Pleasant, Mansbridge and Bevois Town schools as well as three members of Cantell's SLT. The two faculty leaders for English and the reading and interventions leaders met with the review team. During the day we visited some 16 lessons on learning walks and student voice groups comprising students from each of the three primary schools met with their former teachers. During the day we collated examples under the heading 'what went well' and 'even better if' which Mark skilfully brought together as the day progressed.

This process differs from inspections and reviews carried out by multi-academy trusts whose role is one of accountability. This review was very clearly a non-judgmental and non-threatening, professional dialogue designed to inform evaluation and improvement work to which everyone in the trust is committed. That ethos therefore encouraged and welcomed honest and open discussion about strengths as well as areas for development. It was certainly rigorous and provided a degree of thought provoking challenge which was welcomed by the Cantell colleagues. The English Faculty at Cantell has always strived to develop and improve further under the outstanding leadership of Pru and Sarah and their openness and engagement was a major factor in the success of the review. It is further evidence of the strength of the professional culture with Cantell which values and trusts staff and is totally committed to their professional development.

For Cantell colleagues it was extremely beneficial to have the expert input of primary specialists shining a light on the effectiveness of transition and the progress of students who had joined. For colleagues from the primary schools it enabled them to gain insight into what happens beyond transition who commented that they were returning their schools with valuable ideas and feedback to share as well as a detailed insight into the way Cantell operates. Cantell staff taking part in the Primary school reviews will benefit in a similar way. In this way the reviews are genuinely a two way process benefiting all schools involved in the trust supporting curriculum continuity and consistency of practice. The process is therefore strengthening the collaborative community within the trust.

One thing that struck me during the excellent introductory briefings given to us by the Cantell staff was the degree of confidence with which senior leaders expected us to see in the lessons. This proved to be fully justified. The high expectations were evident at all times. We did indeed see all of the 'ingredients' implemented in lessons, we saw engaged students demonstrating pride in their work, listening and participating actively in their lessons and above all enjoying their lessons. We all saw the calm and orderly atmosphere everywhere with visiting colleagues commenting on the quality of relationships between staff and students and how well senior leaders know so many students by name when they meet them in the corridor. None of that differed from what I always see when visiting Cantell but the process and the reactions of the visitors were useful triangulation of that.

A question I had brought to the process in my mind was whether this process would help Cantell to move forward and build on its many strengths in view of the vast amount of data and evaluative evidence already possessed by the school. The answer was a resounding yes. It would have been easy for the school to stand still after such a successful inspection but it clearly has already moved forward. Though the report highlights a vast amount of excellent practice as I would have expected it provided some very useful pointers for further development as well as strong endorsement of the work the school is doing on the areas of focus. The timing of the visit helpfully coincides with the English Faculty development week feeding the findings of the review into that.

I would like to pay tribute to Mark's excellent leadership of the process and the high quality documentation underpinning it. My conclusion is that this process is a real strength of the Aspire Trust which is well worth continuing and building upon. I am sure that many other schools could benefit from the opportunity to take part in a similar process.

Date of next SIP visit: Wed. 26th March to join a peer review focusing on Maths.

Brian Lightman