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Case Study: London Academy of Excellence

Overview

London Academy of Excellence is a proposed Free School for Sixth Form pupils (Years 12 and 13) in Newham, East London. The proposal is led by independent school Brighton College, working in partnership with other independent and state schools including Kingsford Community School. London Academy of Excellence seeks to overcome educational inequality by preparing London's brightest, but least privileged, teenagers for entry to Britain's top universities. Russell Group universities lament the fact that they receive so few applications from students from deprived backgrounds. The London Academy of Excellence aims to address this by supporting students to pursue those A levels identified by top universities as the most desirable, and giving them the expert guidance to make the best possible choices about university. LAE would cater for 400 pupils in due course, and hopes to start with between 150 and 200 Year 12 pupils in September 2012.

Background

The idea for the London Academy of Excellence has its roots in a partnership between Brighton College and Kingsford Community School that has been in place for the past four years. Each year, Brighton College offers 100% scholarships to two or three sixth-form students from Kingsford. This scholarship scheme has provided a lifeline for a small number of pupils, but there was an interest in finding a way to reach a much larger number of pupils. The Free School programme provided the impetus to embark on a much bigger enterprise to raise the aspirations of 200 pupils per year. The proposed outreach programme included in the plans for LAE, in which pupils would go out into the community for two afternoons each week, would contribute to raising academic aspirations and awareness in existing schools as well.

Simon Smith, who is now overseeing the London Academy of Excellence project, feels that the initial vision for the school - catering for students from deprived backgrounds who achieve 5 A grades at GCSE - has remained fairly consistent throughout the application process.

“If there is one thing that has changed it is that originally we spoke about admitting pupils with 5 A*s, but in Newham there were only a handful of those.”

The Group

The team leading this proposal includes a number of key people from Brighton College including the headmaster and the bursar, as well as Simon who is the recently-retired second master. The head of Kingsford Community School is also among the proposed Governors of the school, along with figures from education, the law, finance, and local government representatives. Representatives from a number of other schools are also involved in the plans for the London Academy of Excellence. A significant amount of time has been dedicated to the project already, and it is expected that if the application is successful, Simon will be working on the Free School full time in the coming academic year.

The Application

The preparation of a Free School application requires a huge amount of work. The decision was taken to appoint someone as a Research Assistant to work on the application in collaboration with members of the team. The Research Assistant was a trained teacher who will be joining Brighton College as a teacher in September.

“In terms of the curriculum and educational plan section of the application, we were able to replicate quite a bit of what we do in our sixth form at Brighton.”

The survey of parental demand is a key aspect of the application, and Simon is grateful to colleagues from Kingsford Community School for managing this element. The financial section of the application posed a bit of a challenge, even with the expertise and experience of the bursar. The group found it difficult to estimate how much various aspects of the physical plant would actually cost, even after having identified a preferred site. Knowing how many staff will be needed for each particular subject posed another financial hurdle.

“It is difficult to quantify how many students will be taking particular subjects. We have no idea how many of our first tranche will be doing each subject, so it is difficult to know how many staff you will need to employ.”

Relationships

The group has established support for the LAE project in a number of different ways including the parental questionnaire. Using the independent school connection, the headmaster of Brighton College wrote to all HMC schools in the Greater London Area to explain the plans. Six of these have already indicated that they would like to be involved including King’s College School in Wimbledon, City of London School, Hampton School, and others. It is anticipated that some of these schools would sponsor or run particular areas of the school (for example Forest School, Snaresbrook has a particularly strong university guidance team). It is not anticipated that the partner schools would necessarily second staff to LAE, although one has indicated that they will do so. Others might serve as mentors for the LAE team. The head of Kingsford has enlisted the support of other 11-16 schools in Newham as well as managing the process of establishing parental demand. Simon is keen to stress that ***“this is not just a Brighton College initiative - the project is being undertaken in tandem with other schools.”***

The group has had some contact with the Local Authority, and Simon will shortly be meeting with the Director of Education in Newham.

“One of the most sensitive issues will be to work closely with a Council that might need convincing that this is a worthwhile venture.”

Media

The involvement of high profile independent schools has, unsurprisingly, generated a fair amount of media interest in the London Academy of Excellence. Simon did an interview

with Radio 4 discussing the need for this sort of school; the headmaster of Brighton College wrote an article in The Times; and there has been local coverage as well. There have been some criticisms levelled against this Free School, namely that it is a grammar school by another name, elitist, or not in the spirit of 'education for all'. This is fuelled by the fact that sixth form Free Schools, unlike other Free Schools, are permitted to be academically selective. Simon is not concerned by these criticisms: ***“Some people do have more academic ability than others, and we want academic aspirations to be raised.”***

Premises

The group has identified a preferred site for the London Academy of Excellence - a former school, near the Olympic site, that was built in the 1960s. The building was state-of-the-art when it was built, but is now a bit tired. ***“Ideally when you are starting a new venture like this you want to have a state-of-the-art, cutting-edge new build, but that is not always possible. This will be simply a question of reconfiguring rooms and upgrading the site.”*** LAE is not the only Free School group with an interest in the former Rokeby School site. The two groups have spoken to each other, but this is something that may need to be negotiated with the DfE in due course.

Recruitment

The LAE group have not yet identified a Principal Designate for the school, but will use the independent schools in the consortium as head-hunters to identify and attract a suitable candidate to take on the role if the application is approved. The team will take as long as necessary to ensure that they recruit the right person for the job. This may be an existing head, or an experienced member of a senior management team. The other senior management posts (Deputy Head Academic & Outreach, Deputy Head Pastoral and Co-Curricular, and Bursar) will be recruited through channels such as the TES, teacher.net and other agencies, with the interview process taking place once the Headteacher is in place.

Reflections

There have been challenges in the Free School application process so far, but Simon thinks that the hardest part is yet to come. He feels that the process really begins once the proposal is accepted, with the greatest challenge being the process of generating sponsorship to enhance the level of education offered to pupils. Simon is confident that the LAE application will be approved - ***“The difficult bit is going to be what comes next.”***

The advice that Simon would offer to someone considering a Free School application has to do with ensuring that applicants have a clear vision for the school and know exactly what they are trying to achieve.

“You have to have a clear vision that you can sell to possible sponsors. In our case, it is a clear vision for an academic timetable for able pupils.”

The LAE group consider the Free Schools movement to be a great initiative. ***“I see it as the beginnings of a brave new educational world, allowing schools to be freed from the shackles of LEA control. Independent schools have been doing this for a hundred years.”*** The group is confident that they have developed a model that will have a positive impact on educational aspirations and attainment.

“We would like this sort of sixth-form college to spring up in cities around the country.”