



Raising the bar – from special measures to good in 15 months

*Stuart Mclaughlin,
Bower Park*

Bower Park Academy principal, Stuart Mclaughlin, spells out the wide-ranging and thorough courses of action that led to a startling improvement

In 2018, Bower Park Academy was one of 135 schools named by Ofsted as having consistently failed to be judged 'good' since 2005. It had received a DfE academy warning letter from the regional schools commissioner in April 2016 and was asked to join the Empower Learning Academy Trust (ELAT), led by Hall Mead School, an 'outstanding' provider. The trust was established on 1 September 2016. In December 2016 Bower Park Academy received a full Ofsted Inspection and was placed into special measures, receiving inadequate judgements in all categories except for personal development, behaviour and welfare, which was judged as RI.

The Ofsted report identified a number of failings to be addressed, including:

1. Leaders and governors had been far too slow to improve outcomes for pupils - progress was inadequate.
2. Previous governors had not held leaders to account or challenged them to improve the quality of education.
3. Performance management was weak.
4. Leaders were not rigorous in their use of self-evaluation, including evaluating the impact of teaching on learning.
5. Teachers were not consistently using the school's feedback policy - too many pupils were unable to move forward with their learning.

6. Disadvantaged pupils, including the most able, made inadequate progress.
7. Teaching lacked challenge, particularly for the most able.
8. Assessment processes were not giving leaders the information needed to accurately evaluate the quality of teaching.
9. There was a wide variability in the quality of leadership at all levels.

Fifteen months after this inspection, in March 2018, the school was taken out of special measures and judged to be good across all categories, including overall effectiveness. This constitutes a remarkable transformation in the fortunes of a school in a very short time span. Here are the key strategies that contributed to this rapid improvement.

Initial actions

As a result of the warning notice and joining the trust, action was taken to strengthen and support the leadership of the academy. The governing board was disbanded, and an interim transition board (ITB) was established with a clear and limited focus on improving outcomes for pupils. All business ran through this single forum, which met every six weeks.

The trust put in place Johanna Yates, who was ELAT's proven school improvement lead. Her principal focus was on improving the quality of teaching. ELAT's CEO dedicated time to supporting the academy's leadership team. Faculty links with Hall Mead School were established to support middle leaders of the weaker departments.

The trust immediately launched the SSAT Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP), with three days of high quality CPD for all teachers, and established a calendar of intensive CPD for the year ahead. This gave a valuable framework for rapid improvement in the academy's quality of teaching.

Once the December 2016 Ofsted inspection outcome was known and the absent substantive headteacher chose to retire with effect from 31 December 2016, the trust acted quickly. I was seconded from within the trust to Bower Park on account of my previous experience of leading two schools out of poor Ofsted categories.

Stage 1: Creating the environment for rapid improvement (January to July 2017)

With the full support of the trust, I used the period from January to July 2017 to prepare for transformational change in September. The aim was to create a 'new' school with higher expectations, greater rigour and an unswerving focus on improving teaching and learning. It was vital that the whole school community understood why change was necessary and how the academy would benefit from what was proposed. There were five main changes:

1. An ambitious vision for transformational change: school transformation requires a crystal clear and ambitious vision that provides a roadmap for improvement and gives everyone hope for a brighter future. Hence, the governors and I determined to reset the vision, values and strategy of the academy. Workshops were run for parents, pupils and staff to gather key stakeholder inputs. These were honed by SLT and the ITB before being disseminated to the community to help create the momentum for change and to secure their support and belief in our direction of travel. It was also important to win the hearts and minds of prospective parents, who needed to believe that their child's new school would provide a good quality education in the future.

This vision was equally important in terms of recruiting new staff. It takes a leap of faith to join a school in special measures, especially if, as we did, you recruit teachers from good and outstanding schools.

"Being part of this journey is my proudest moment

professionally so far. Having left an established outstanding school, which outperformed private schools and had a true culture of excellence, joining Bower Park was a true leap of faith. Strategic recruitment of staff and a relentless focus on quality first teaching meant that although I was no longer in an outstanding school, outstanding characteristics were being embedded."

Afolabi Joseph, head of English

2. An effective improvement plan that was fit for purpose: I put in place a very focused post Ofsted action plan (POAP) based on the eight key areas for improvement from the Ofsted report. I knew that HMI would be testing the academy's progress against these during monitoring visits.

Each strand of the plan was delegated to a senior leader to oversee. Each priority had both ambitious interim milestone measures and end of period targets, laying out the steps to achieve the required changes in practice and process that we believed were necessary. For example, although the prior intake of the academy is significantly below national average for KS2 outcomes, we set out all targets in line with national averages. Hence, in order to achieve these, the academy would have to secure rapid progress for all students.

The POAP was judged 'fit for purpose' by HMI in February 2017, and became our road map for improvement. It was also the key accountability document used by the leadership team and the ITB. In effect, all senior leaders were very clear about our improvement strategy, what they needed to do to achieve the targets we had set, and were rigorously held accountable for achieving them by the ITB.

Staff and students were also clear about our key priorities, as they were communicated on posters and displayed in every classroom. They were also regularly referenced in assemblies and staff meetings.

3. A rigorous staffing structure: the leadership structure that was in place when the academy was placed into special measures lacked clarity and accountability. A restructure in place for September 2017 ensured that we had the senior team to drive the improvement agenda. The academy and SLT were remodelled, based on a schools-within-schools model. Leadership posts were filled by way

of a rigorous internal interview process involving the ITB, the trust CEO and me. This created a more streamlined senior team and facilitated a greater focus on progress and the quality of teaching. The post of vice principal was not filled during the interview process. Given the need to have an outstanding senior leader in this key position, the trust seconded their school improvement lead to be VP. The structure, along with procedural changes, resulted in greater accountability for student outcomes at all levels within the academy.

Students were given the choice of the new house names (each house linked to a school of learning)... They chose Edison (Thomas), King (Martin Luther), Rowling (JK) and Moore (Bobby)

4. Cultural change: With the support of the Trust and ITB, I determined that resetting the academy's culture was critical to the improvement agenda. The culture shift was to be engineered through significantly raising expectations. So, I communicated regularly to all stakeholders throughout the summer term that the school was going to be different in September; that we were pushing the reset button. The new staffing structure was crucial, as it signalled a significant change in the way that the school operated and was organised.

Students were reorganised into the new houses, with corresponding changes to their uniform, which meant they knew the school would be tangibly different in the new academic year. Students were given choices about these changes, such as the house names and how forms were organised to give them ownership of what would be different. Each house was linked to a school of learning and students were asked to identify inspirational people who reflected our academy vision and values linked to the subjects in each school of learning. They chose Edison (Thomas) for the School of Mathematics and Technology, King (Martin Luther) for the School of Social Sciences, Rowling (JK) for the School of Communication and Moore (Bobby) for the School of Science and Sport.

5. Immediate actions to secure improvement: although I used this early period to set in place the structures for transformational change, I could not wait until September 2017 to implement improvement strategies. The POAP actions were initiated immediately after HMI approval in February 2017. We set about urgently fixing the weaknesses identified by Ofsted and the trust through our own robust evaluation, but especially in building teaching capability and capacity. Expectations in the classroom were ramped up. There was more rigorous and regular monitoring of the quality of teaching, not only so that staff could receive regular feedback but also so that I could identify where the weaker teaching was occurring. Some staff left the academy as a result of these higher expectations.

Stage 2: raising the bar of expectations (September-December 2017)

With the new structures in place, new staff in leadership positions and a more capable workforce from September 2017 we launched our 'raising the bar' campaign. Staff and students were told that the plan was to be judged Good by Ofsted within a year. The higher expectations that had been set as part of the POAP were re-emphasised and permeated the work of the academy, particularly in terms of classroom practice, pupil outcomes, the quality of work in books, behaviour, uniform and attendance. This was a vital message in changing the culture at Bower Park: the higher expectations were reinforced by leaders through the academy's monitoring and evaluation schedule and meetings and assemblies, to secure buy-in and greater consistency in practice. A new behaviour for learning policy was introduced to support our raised expectations, and enable teachers to teach and students to learn.

There was an unswerving focus on 'quality first' teaching. This was the single most important factor that would contribute to a successful Ofsted. We set ourselves a target that 100% of teaching would be at least good by year end. The message that every student is entitled to receive good or outstanding teaching in every lesson was communicated to all stakeholders regularly, creating higher expectations among students and parents as well as teachers. Three key elements contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching:

1. High quality CPD: if we were to transform teaching, we needed to devote enough time to staff CPD. We held weekly workshops using the TEEP framework, with a clear focus on the areas that we identified would lead to good or better teaching – questioning, challenge and visible thinking. For the latter, teachers needed to find activities that visibly demonstrated that students were being made to think, reason, justify and explain. If this was happening consistently in every lesson, it was bound to have an impact on their learning and progress. We used our lead practitioners to lead sessions and created opportunities for best practice to be celebrated and shared in order to create a buzz around improving pedagogy. The trust provided excellent support from its teaching and learning leader to develop the pedagogy of targeted teachers to secure ‘good’ or make the jump to outstanding.

2. Effective recruitment: we recruited a significant number of teachers from good and outstanding schools to fill posts left vacant by colleagues who determined the journey was not for them. These recruits were able to model the quality of teaching and the high expectations needed to transform pedagogy. The clarity of the academy’s vision and ambition to succeed really aided the recruitment process – new staff were excited to be part of the journey and believed that it was achievable. They were also attracted by the trust’s breadth of opportunity through the teaching school.

It takes powerful vision and ambition to persuade teachers from good and outstanding schools to join one in special measures

“I chose to come to Bower Park Academy for my NQT year as I wanted to be part of a school that would provide me with lots of opportunity to improve my teaching practice. At first I was apprehensive about what to expect, but from the start support and training has always been available. As a result, my teaching has improved a lot and I can see the clear impact this has had on my students’ life chances. I am proud to work at BPA as we continue our journey.”
Laura Bailey, NQT science teacher

3. Rigorous monitoring and feedback: we introduced a pacier, more robust system of monitoring by senior and middle leaders, comprising learning walks, lesson observations, work scrutiny and reviews of student data. These four areas were used to make overall judgements about the quality of teaching over time for each teacher and each department. We changed the focus of classroom-based monitoring so that we were looking through the eyes of the learner. If teachers did not demonstrate our priorities of questioning, visible thinking and challenge they could not achieve a ‘good’ judgement. This meant that teachers really understood what would make a difference and quickly adjusted their pedagogy accordingly. This proved highly effective; by the time of Ofsted’s March 2018 inspection, virtually all teaching was judged to be good or better.

A common feature of schools judged to be RI by Ofsted is a lack of consistency, so we worked tirelessly to ensure consistency in all aspects of life at the academy.

“In order to rebuild staff confidence in the classroom, we had to create a common language for teaching and learning. We drove accountability alongside an abundance of praise, and rapid progress soon followed. Consistency and high morale is key.”
Johanna Yates, vice principal

The rigorous monitoring of classroom practice helped engender greater consistency and ensure the nine non-negotiables that were expected to be evident in every lesson (see figure) were quickly embedded. Line management meetings followed an agenda that focused primarily on outcomes and the quality of teaching, which linked to the monitoring and evaluation schedule. Themes and expectations were reinforced to the wider teaching community through the weekly TEEP workshops.

Senior leaders were also very visible in and around the academy, not just in and out of lessons but at break times and at the start and end of each day. This led to a highly consistent application of policy across many areas.

Another key area of work in this period was to ensure that our SEF was an accurate reflection of



where we were on our journey to good. It was vital for the credibility of leadership in the academy that there was an accurate SEF on each visit that HMI made. The SEF was quality assured by the trust CEO as well as the ITB. We used our monitoring and evaluation data against the criteria in the Inspection Handbook to assess our progress towards good. We also used the Ofsted phraseology in the SEF and in the evidence that supported it. We ensured that the SEF was an honest reflection of where we were at that time – this was important to show HMI that we really understood our school. It meant that when we were ready to show we were good, we really were! We knew that students' books would play a vital role in the inspection process. They provide inspectors with a clear record of learning and progress over time. From day one of the academic year we talked to students in assemblies and lessons about the importance of their exercise books. We made clear our expectations about how they presented their work. We developed a highly effective marking and feedback policy. Each term, staff were given time to create marking checklists so students had success criteria ahead of learning time. The checklists also helped to demonstrate progress over time in books. We used half-termly workshops for all teachers, led by the vice principal, to ensure high levels of consistency in marking. Plus, as part of our monitoring schedule, staff were given regular feedback on their marking and the quality of work in books. Consequently, when inspected in March 2018, our books provided effective evidence of consistently good progress over time.

Stage three: 10 weeks to good (January to March 2018)

The academy received its second section 8 monitoring visit in December 2017. The feedback made clear that rapid progress was being made and that the academy was in reach of a 'good' judgement. So we launched a campaign called *Ten weeks to Good* with staff and students. It set out a short term, highly focused action plan based on the December inspectors' feedback. The purpose of the plan was to really embed the good practice that had been developed over the previous year, so there would be a high level of consistency across the academy. We also used the feedback received to address any areas for improvement that would stop us being judged good.

Listening to inspectors discussing the lessons they had observed during the December monitoring visit made it clear that the quality of questioning was of high importance. We made this a focus in our weekly CPD workshops, to ensure that questioning skills to provide challenge and advance learning were consistently embedded in every teacher's practice.

BOWER PARK ACADEMY – CLASSROOM NON-NEGOTIABLES

In order to secure greater consistency in classroom practice across the academy, the following non-negotiables have been agreed:

1. At the start of every lesson, a staff member will be at their door managing transition, meeting and greeting students to ensure a quick entry and rapid engagement. Students will be dismissed in an orderly fashion at the end of the lesson.
2. There will be 5 minutes reading at the start of every lesson. Registers will be taken promptly during this time.
3. Every lesson will have a lesson objective and 2 or 3 learning outcomes that are shared with the students.
4. There will be a seating plan for all classes – identifying ability levels and key groups, especially most able and disadvantaged students. Teachers will know who these students are and plan to engage and challenge them accordingly.
5. The academy's expectations regarding presentation of work will be followed. There will be high expectations concerning presentation, quality and quantity of work.
6. Books will show evidence of regular good quality subject specific marking/feedback and student responding in purple pen.
7. In academic subjects, journals and equipment will be out on desks.
8. A range of TEEP activities will be evident including targeted questioning using Blooms/Anderson's hierarchy, especially with regard to the most able.
9. No students will be sent out of the lesson unless it is urgent. When this is necessary, they will be given a note.

Another area that the inspectors were clearly looking for in lessons was evidence that students were being made to think and reason. So we launched our ‘think it up’ campaign, whereby teachers were encouraged to plan activities that made students think. Staff shared their successes and this best practice was celebrated at every opportunity with both teachers and students.

During the December visit, inspectors had informed us that not all students were able to articulate their learning and progress, so we worked hard to equip them with the vocabulary required to discuss their learning. Every student received a small card detailing five key questions that they should be able to answer about their learning. Pupils were regularly asked these questions by SLT when on learning walks – so they became practised in answering them.

The final piece of feedback that we wanted to act on from December was attendance. In December our overall attendance was in line with national averages. However, persistent absence for disadvantaged students was an issue. Each house’s director of learning was tasked with engaging particular borderline students – and their parents – to improve attendance. We wanted to target the students where we could make gains in attendance over the ten week period. Hence, they targeted the disadvantaged students whose attendance was hovering between 88% and 92%. By focusing in on these students, using rewards and competition to help them improve, we were able to move their attendance above the 90% threshold for persistent absence.

5 QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. *What are you learning?*
2. *How are you doing?*
3. *How do you know?*
4. *How can you improve?*
5. *Where do you go for help?*

The trust was very effective at monitoring our progress but I also wanted external verification. We also wanted to know any further areas for improvement, so I engaged a senior consultant from Essex Education Services to test our self-evaluation and identify further areas for improvement. She interviewed middle and senior

leaders and conducted learning walks to validate the ‘good’ judgements being made in our SEF; this greatly boosted the self-belief within the wider leadership team. Her review of progress data would help to ensure the information presented to Ofsted was concise and clearly showed progress in all year groups and across key cohorts. Her input helped to ensure a laser sharp focus was maintained on improving the few weaknesses still evident.

Students were asked to nominate staff members who had made a difference to their learning, and the staff members’ awards were presented in assembly

The ‘10 weeks to good’ campaign also prepared our school community for the next inspection. Without doubt, the staff were the key to the academy’s improvement and we were very conscious to maintain high staff morale. Staff achievements were very publicly recognised; staff frequently presented and shared best practice with other teachers through ‘risk it for a biscuit’. Effectively, staff were encouraged to take risks with their teaching to ensure that students were being challenged. If they did, they received a packet of biscuits – a small prize, but it proved hugely successful.

A ‘did you know?’ campaign encouraged each department to identify student achievements, which were then plastered on the walls of the academy in a celebration of success. Students were asked to nominate staff members who had made a difference to their learning, and these awards were presented in assembly. This positive and encouraging approach had an immense impact on generating excellent staff morale that continued to underpin the drive to be better.

Parents...

We wanted to maintain and galvanise the support parents had shown for the academy’s recent improvement. Parents are a key constituent of a school community and through open dialogue can be great supporters. We engaged with parents on setting the vision and continually kept them informed about the improvement journey through regular newsletters and an open parents forum.

Both the trust chair and I would conduct ‘open mic sessions’ with parents. Leading up to the final inspection, parents were encouraged to complete the Ofsted parent view survey, and, because of the continual dialogue, the academy felt confident that positive feedback would be forthcoming.

... and students

Obviously, an inspection cannot succeed if the students are not on board. We were very clear with students that they had a part to play in our 10-week journey to ‘good’. We constantly communicated our high expectations about behaviour, learning, and uniform. We held learning assemblies reminding students of their responsibility in terms of effort, responding to feedback and taking pride in presentation. Every assembly included opportunities to recognise and reward students for their successes.

I held student lunches that enabled them to have direct input into the academy plans. This gave me an opportunity to find out what they liked about Bower Park and any areas they wanted to improve. We also wanted students to respect the environment. Hence, we gave the school council £1000 per term from our maintenance budget to buy equipment for the school. However, any vandalism or damages came out of that money. As a result, vandalism became non-existent and students received benches for the playground and new lockers. Consequently, we built a stronger sense of community and belonging in the student body.

The final element of our preparation for the next inspection was to ensure that the paperwork we presented to Ofsted was appropriate and effective. We knew from previous monitoring visits that inspectors do not have time to read through reams of evidence. Hence, the senior team analysed the ‘sources of evidence’ section in the Ofsted handbook, and during senior leadership meetings we identified appropriate evidence on one page for each of the four Ofsted areas. In particular, we made sure that we had very clear evidence to show that students were making good progress in all year groups. This process enabled the leadership team to reinforce the common view that we were good and to quickly provide, when asked, supporting evidence for the judgements made in the SEF. Leaders were familiar with and spoke the language of ‘good’ which was congruent with the underlying evidence.

Conclusion

The journey from special measures to good has been both challenging and exciting.

“It has been a challenging bus journey full of ups and downs, but it was all worth it. It is amazing to finally be a good school. The sky is the limit for Bower Park now.”
Bola Mosuro, head of RE

A key feature of the success was setting the ambition to achieve ‘good’ within 18 months and then to plan accordingly. The crucial elements in the process were:

- Developing a clear and ambitious vision that the whole community could buy into – and then setting challenging goals on the pathway to the shared destination.
- Changing the culture in the academy by raising the bar of expectations throughout the community.
- Restructuring the school to ensure function and accountability were crystal clear and then appointing the right people to the right roles.
- Having an unswerving focus on improving teaching and learning – only through high quality teaching could the academy secure better outcomes for students.
- Being focused and rigorous about developing teaching practice and appointing only high-quality staff; at the end of the day it’s all about the talent that is placed in front of the students!
- Engaging the students so they knew and understood what good and outstanding teaching looked like – and that it was their right to receive it.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have helped the academy move forward so rapidly; without their support this marvellous achievement would not have been possible. In no particular order these include: our students and their parents, all the staff at the academy, the leadership team, governors, the CEO of the trust, the ELAT Improvement Team and the trust board. We also need to thank the Regional Schools Commissioner, Tim Coulson, who provided the catalyst for Bower Park to join ELAT. Without this move, the rapid journey to good would not have been possible.

Find out more about TEEP: ssatuk.co.uk/teep