

Title:

Learning Pace Pathways at Key Stage 4

Worth reading if you are interested in:

Curriculum design, use of data, pupil tracking, pupil voice, personalised pathways

School context

Lagan College¹ is Northern Ireland's first planned integrated school. It was founded in 1981 with twenty-eight pupils. Today there are over 1350 pupils. About 27 percent are entitled to free school meals. A bilateral admissions system operates with 65 percent (130 pupils) of the annual intake entering the College without any reference to their academic ability. The College selects 35 percent (70 pupils) based on their academic ability. Lagan College draws its pupils from around fifty primary schools and is consistently oversubscribed. The approval of a development proposal in 2017 led to an increase in enrolment in the sixth form. There are currently 278 pupils studying a variety of courses at post-16 level. The school community values its new school building, which opened in 2013. Lagan College is a dynamic member of a number of partnerships, including the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the East Belfast Area Learning Community. The school participates in shared education work with two neighbouring post-primary schools. The staff complement is the principal plus ninety-two teaching staff (eleven of these are part-time teachers) and ninety-five support staff.

Personnel:

Mrs A McNamee, Principal

Ms J Ackinson, Vice Principal (Teaching and Learning)

Mr M Montgomery (Head of Timetabling)

Background

The 200 Year 8 pupils are placed in one of eight *learning pace* classes, to suit their individual level of academic ability based on information obtained from previous schools and AQE and/or GL assessment outcomes, taken in Year 7. Links with contributory primary schools are well developed. The senior leadership team are aware of the need to smooth key transition phases to build on prior learning and construct a strong skills and capabilities foundation in preparation for Key Stage 4 studies. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reported in February 2019 that pupils across the key stages benefit from involvement in a rich and varied programme of additional opportunities to extend their learning. The pupils acknowledge the very good opportunities to develop their leadership skills and the extensive range of extracurricular and enrichment activities, which develop their personal and social skills². Lagan College sees its curriculum as much more than the sum of the subjects taught. It could be defined as: What is learned, how it is learned and why it is learned.

¹ <http://www.lagancollege.com/>

² <https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/post-primary-inspection-involving-action-short-strike-lagan-college-belfast>

The College has stated the guiding principles, purpose, aims and objects of its curriculum to staff, parents and pupils.³

What the school sets out to do and why

In 2016, Lagan College reviewed the breadth, depth, balance and flexibility of its curriculum to define how it met its pupils' needs across their ability and attainment ranges. Before then, the College had a serviceable, but somewhat contracted and traditional curriculum. As a starting point, the school planned to redesign its curriculum based on the educational principle that it would accommodate pupils' needs rather than fitting pupils into a defined and constraining curriculum corridor. Senior leaders researched various models and visited seven schools of similar size to see how they designed their curricula. They also investigated best practice that they could adapt and apply to the unique context of Lagan College.

A whole-school initiative paralleled this open approach to extend and deepen the use of pupil data with an emphasis on accurately determining each pupil's preferred learning style. Teachers and team leaders interrogate data gathered from CAT4, Progress Test in English (PTE), Progress Test in Mathematics (PTM), Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS)⁴ and four internal assessments per academic year, to build a composite picture of each young person's profile. They used external data, based on national and school benchmarks, with school-generated data to set individual pupil targets. The school can use these targets to advise pupils and parents on the most suitable pathway with confidence, as the data supports conversations with parents, informs and validates decision-making and is valuable when giving feedback.

What has been achieved so far?

The school used Survey Monkey to gather the views of pupils, parents and staff. It analysed the resulting information to provide indispensable intelligence, which informed a remodelling of the curriculum. Key Stage 3 pupils wanted more flexibility after Year 8 and felt that the Northern Ireland Curriculum was restricting their interests and abilities. They asked questions such as Why do I have to do Music or Technology in Year 10 as I knew from Year 9 that I would not be following those subjects at Key Stage 4? In response, while keeping to the Northern Ireland Curriculum, Lagan College has broadened its Key Stage 3 offering so that in Year 9 pupils in four of the eight learning pace classes can choose a second modern language while four classes choose from coding, citizenship or PE. In response to pupil requests, the school has made Business Studies available in Year 10 and this is very popular.

The school recognises that to provide bespoke guidance when selecting the most appropriate Key Stage 4 pathway, it is essential to invest in pastoral care, CEIAG and data collection. This investment allows the school to build a holistic picture of each young person's strengths, skill set and capabilities. Progression to post-16 courses and beyond is clearly signposted and pupils receive a range of guidance and information sessions in January and February of Year 10, including:

- Options Information Talks
- GCSE Focus Fortnight

³ <http://www.lagancollege.com/documents-reports/>

⁴ <https://www.gi-assessment.co.uk/assessments>

- Options Fair
- Taster lessons
- Parent–Teacher meeting and options information session
- One-to-one option interviews, with pupil and parent.

Now, all pupils must follow the core GCSE curriculum, which comprises:

- GCSE English or Essential Skills Communication;
- GCSE Mathematics or Essential Skills Numeracy;
- GCSE Religious Studies or OCN Religious Education;
- Learning for Life and Work (non-exam); and
- Games (non-exam).

Some pupils can also study GCSE English Literature and GCSE Further Mathematics or Statistics, or Prince’s Trust⁵ Personal Development and Employability (PDE) and OCN Level 2 Personal Success and Well-Being⁶ as part of their core GCSE programme. OCN Level 2 Personal Success and Well-Being was introduced in 2017 after the review of the curriculum was completed and has the advantage of providing a pupil pathway to Further Education Colleges and Training Organisations.

As well as these core or compulsory subjects, most pupils are required to opt for a further five subjects. Others will be asked to opt for a further four subjects, depending on the learning pathway the school has identified and agreed with parents and pupils. Based on three years of pastoral and academic data and information, the school, pupil and parent meet to identify and agree an optimum learning pathway with progression to the next stage of learning signposted.

In designing their curriculum to meet its pupils’ needs, Lagan College has built three learning pathways for GCSE level study.

Pupils who are strong in examinations and prefer that type of assessment can take Pathway L (Lagan). As well as a core curriculum of English, Mathematics, RE, English Literature and Further Mathematics or Statistics (for some pupils) there are five options from 24 subjects.

Pupils who are good at both examinations and ongoing assessment can take Pathway C (College). The core curriculum comprises English, Mathematics, Religious Education or OCN Religious Education. Pupils following this pathway chose five further subjects from a selection of 24.

Pupils who are strong at and prefer on-going or in-class assessment can take Pathway B (Belfast). As well as a core curriculum of English or Essential Skills in Communication, Mathematics or Essential Skills in Numeracy, GCSE Religious Education or OCN Religious Education, Prince’s Trust and OCN Personal Success and Well-Being, pupils can opt for four courses from a choice of eleven and an extensive Occupational Studies suite of six courses.

⁵ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/qualifications/qualifications-northern-ireland>

⁶ <https://www.ocni.org.uk/qualifications/ocn-ni-level-2-certificate-in-personal-success-and-well-being-60132619/>

In these paced learning pathways, pupils can mix and match GCSE qualifications, BTEC qualifications, OCN qualifications and Occupational Studies⁷. The College recommends the subjects or courses for pupils based on their potential and their chance of success at the end of Year 12.

Since the redesign of the curriculum in 2016 and the introduction of the Learning Pathways at Key Stage 4, the College has experienced a significant uplift in the proportion of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at Grades A*–C (or equivalent) from 68 percent in 2017, to 89 percent in 2018 and 92 percent in 2019.

What still needs to be done?

The College continues to build on using academic and pastoral data to understand each cohort of pupils, their aspirations, strengths and competencies. Minimum Expected Grades (MEGs) at Key Stage 4 and post-16 provide targets and signposts for pupils and parents towards anticipated outcomes. At Key Stage 3, senior teachers set Minimum Expected Scores (MES), introduced in 2018–19, for pupils. The College carries out access baseline tests in English and Mathematics for the new Year 8 pupils. It uses these, along with the Key Stage 2 levels achieved in primary school, which vary from school to school, to profile pupils' strengths and areas for improvement, to inform planning and to set targets for Key Stage 3.

The hallmark of the College's GCSE curriculum design is to meet pupils' needs and extend a flexibility that optimises their experiences to acquire and demonstrate skills required for post-16 routes. Seven different science qualifications, nine BTEC First and six Occupation Studies courses are offered. Work is ongoing to widen the post-16 curriculum, building on the Key Stage 4 pathway model and continuing to use data to build a complete picture of each unique young person's preferred learning style, career ambitions and abilities. This allows the College to place them in the optimum position to transition to the next stage of learning and work. A broad, balanced, adaptable and accommodating curriculum of A or AS levels, Applied A or AS levels, BTEC and CTEC Level 3 awards are in place alongside an extensive weekly enrichment programme that develops pupils' soft skills and personal capabilities. The school development plan includes the commitment to survey Key Stage 3 pupils and parents with a view to providing more choice for personalised learning and skills acquisition.

What can the project share with other schools and providers?

As a large school of 1350 pupils that caters for a wide range of abilities and aspirations, Lagan College has undergone researched, structured and planned processes of curriculum development and redesign since 2016. It has built on the views of pupils, parents, staff and governors. The mix of applied and general courses has been carefully crafted to fulfil the school's ethos to help each individual to reach their academic and personal potential by employing the College's paced learning pathways which have been refined and enhanced in the interest of pupils.

⁷ <http://www.lagancollege.com/presentations/>

Key Learning points

1. Senior leaders in Lagan College invested in research and study visits to improve and extend their knowledge and understanding of curriculum design. They researched best practice and robust curriculum features in similar sized schools. Although this took time, it paid long-term dividends and ultimately served the needs of learners well.
2. The school considers the curriculum process in terms of Dylan Wiliam's seven principles of curriculum design, namely that a curriculum should be measured against the features of balance, rigour, coherency, vertical integration, appropriateness, focus and relevance⁸.
3. In 2016–17, the College invited pupils in Years 11 and 13 and their parents or guardians to share their opinions about GCSE and A level equivalent courses the College offered. The data was evaluated and fed directly into curriculum and staff planning. The College also constituted a Student Curriculum Council to find out what pupils thought of learning improvement.
4. The information accumulated through the assessment processes in Lagan College is used to provide a better understanding of a pupil's potential. It also informs teaching and learning, pedagogy, individual education planning, the band or class placement process, reward and recognition and overall whole-school academic target setting⁹.
5. The College bands and places pupils in Years 8 and 9 in a suitable learning paced class by aptitude based on AQE and/or GL outcomes, internal assessments with a pupil's progress reviewed four times per year. Each pupil has equal access to the wide range of curriculum subjects on offer at Key Stage 3 and can work at a pace most suited to their individual needs and abilities. Opportunities are provided for pupils to work as part of a whole class, as a small group and as individuals. The College assigns pupils to specific learning paced classes for literary subjects and more broad groupings for vocational subjects. It also places pupils in learning paced band classes for Mathematics in Year 8. Accurate placement based on careful analysis of data with the flexibility of movement is essential for long-term success.
6. By promoting the pupils' voice, the College established the Student Curriculum Council in 2015–16. This council considers how further to improve and develop teaching and learning. The College encourages pupils to take on leadership. This is a key focus and has evolved into the Learners Discussion group with recent Language Leaders and pupils being trained as Student Mediators (OCN Level 2). The pupil voice is a powerful instrument for curriculum design leading to a broad and balanced offering for each individual young person.

⁸ Wiliam D. (2013) *Principled curriculum design – Redesigning Schooling* –3 Chapter 3 SSAT (The Schools Network)

⁹ <http://www.lagancollege.com/documents-reports/>