

Social enterprise as a vehicle for raising students' achievement: Plymstock School

URN: 136568
Region: South West
Remit: Schools

Provider background

Plymstock School is a larger than average secondary school on the edge of the City of Plymouth. Most pupils come from a White British background and few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through School Action is low. The proportion of students who are eligible for the pupil premium is below average.

Brief description

This Ofsted good practice example shows how a headteacher's challenge to a group of students to raise the profile and desirability of studying languages in the school led to the creation of an award-winning social enterprise that benefits local businesses and helps raise students' achievement. The example shows how school-business links can have mutual benefits. The original group of 10 students called themselves 'My Way'. This has become an umbrella term for a series of subject-related enterprises.

Headteacher David Farmer says:

'Enterprise around their interests and aptitudes has been at the heart of the work Our Way has undertaken. However, the overriding passion of these talented young students has been using their enterprise as a real context to communicate their vision using a modern foreign language.'

This collaboration and innovation has been facilitated by staff from Plymstock School and partners RIO.¹ In essence, their shared passions have enabled students to have unique opportunities beyond their school hours and what the curriculum can provide. We wanted to enable the next generation of our country to have a platform to develop their skills as entrepreneurs and we will watch these young people's futures with interest.'

This example challenges Ofsted's view that positive impact of enterprise activity on students' academic performance is largely anecdotal and that there is little concrete academic proof of cause and effect. Our Way's communications manager and spokesperson, Magdalena Dabska, says that there are many examples in her school where involvement in social enterprise has raised students' results by several grades.

The good practice in detail

In 2012, the headteacher challenged a group of Year 10 students to raise the profile and desirability of studying languages in the school and to generate investment, while engaging with businesses in the local community. The headteacher explained that, 'Through this engagement more opportunities for a closer link with the business world and improved employability was achieved'. In January 2013, with the guidance of RIO, the group formed a social enterprise with the aim of working with companies in the South West that fit some clear principles. The principles were that 'each company must: be based in the South West and be completely traceable; have products or services that are unique, quirky and fresh, of high quality and ethical with a vintage renewal flavour.' (Joey Dyer, (student) Business Development and Account Manager)

The early months of 2013 were spent building a portfolio of businesses, which the students were keen to work with. The students carried out their own research and identified companies that they wanted to work with that met their chosen criteria of being local, ethically sound, lacking a wide customer base (therefore, keen to expand this) and interesting.

The students made their choice and initiated contact themselves. They got to know the companies they were going to work with so that they could plan how they could work with them. The students explained what they could offer, while introducing the chosen businesses to the French market and the prospect of exporting by helping them increase their profile in the UK and abroad. The ability to support through their MFL skills learnt in school was a key part of their contribution. The students were working with small companies with a very local profile. Although the key activity was

¹ RIO – the Real Ideas Organisation – is a social enterprise that applies ethical business thinking in schools, education and learning to regeneration and creative commercial ventures.

exporting to France, a by-product of this was the raising of the profiles in the UK and abroad, primarily through the use of social media.

The students' market research included visiting the Royal Cornwall Show, where they met the BBC team, which featured interviews with the Our Way team and their French language teacher who was supporting them. This media exposure on local radio and BBC Spotlight TV news helped increase their profile and that of the companies. Interest from both Plymouth City Council and Cornwall County Council came at an early stage too. The students were invited to talk to local councillors and MPs about their idea and were supported by the European Cooperation Officer based in Cornwall. Civil servants from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) visited the school and were impressed by what the group was doing.

By July 2013, the group was ready for a business trip to France. Several meetings were arranged in the Breton regional capital, Brest. The meetings were not simply to share the Our Way vision, but to establish strong business partnerships that would enable the enterprise to promote the products and services of its partners.

Lauren, project manager for Our Way, said:

'To have the opportunity to make a real difference, to use the language that we learned in our classroom in a real situation and to be able to help real businesses in the South West was amazing! I didn't think it possible that we could schedule meetings with so many important people; it is something I will never forget. To be able to communicate in their language made me really proud.'

On their return to the UK, the students had many more interviews, had coverage in the International Trade Digest, the Insider Magazine, Chambers Links and local newspapers and were on the local radio twice. Many of the interviews were in response to a strong social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. RIO's network of media contacts raised the level of interest, while involvement with Plymouth City Council, twinned with Brest, also generated local media interest. Lesley Batchelor, Director General of the Institute of Export, said,

'The creativity and business savvy of the students has set me wondering how powerful it would be if small companies across the UK sought out opportunities in towns across the world that are twinned with the places they live in.'

Based on the success of the original modern languages Our Way concept, other subject leaders decided to launch something similar related to their own curriculum. As a result, the original Our Way has rebranded as Our Way International – languages and entrepreneurship. It has been joined by:

- Our Way Art – art and culture
- Our Way Tech – technology and media

- Our Way Discovery – history and local culture.

'Our Way' impact case studies

At the school, students and staff spoke passionately about the success of the project in motivating students.

Student 1 (Year 13)

Student 1 joined the original Our Way International group when she was a Year 10 student. Although bright and academically able, she had no intention of continuing in education beyond Year 11 and was keen to enter the world of work. Through her engagement in the project, particularly her experience in France, she changed her life plans significantly. The project was instrumental in raising her aspirations and re-engaging her enthusiasm for study. It opened her eyes to new possibilities and really built up her confidence and self-belief. As a consequence, following an outstanding performance at GCSE, she joined the school's sixth form to study A levels and is applying to universities to study medicine. Without her engagement in this project, she would have left education at 16 and may never have considered fulfilling her true potential.

Student 2 (Year 9)

Student 2 is eligible for the pupil premium and was a relatively low attainer at Key Stage 2. When she joined Plymstock School, she was shy and lacked confidence in her own ability. Although her behaviour was excellent, her engagement in class, particularly in discussions, was limited. In Year 8, she joined the Our Way Art group and she has flourished. Her confidence has grown substantially and she has presented to the public at high profile events – all this from a student who would rarely talk in class.

This has had a direct impact on her performance in the classroom: she is now on or above target in every single subject, when previously she was below target in nearly half of her subjects. Before her engagement in Our Way, her attendance was averaging 87%; today she averages over 95%.

Benefits to business

Sarah Jones of Bloomberry Juice said:

'We have been so impressed with the professionalism and enthusiasm of Our Way students. Their drive has meant so much to us here at Bloomberry Juice. We are a very small company with limited resources on time and finance, so taking Bloomberry to national events is something we dream of!'

Benefits to the school

Headteacher David Farmer reports:

'Interestingly, we have relaxed our policy so that students have more choice at Year 9 and do not have to take a language. Results from the options process this year demonstrate that almost all students have chosen to take a language. Our Way International has had an impact in making students more aware of the value of taking a language at GCSE. The British Academy Schools Language Award they have recently won also demonstrates the impact that they have.'

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