

CASE STUDY

Reach South Academy Trust

Context

My name is Mike Peters and I'm the Chair of Education, Standards and Performance committee at Reach2 Academy Trust, a multi-academy trust based in the South West.

Our Trust is made up of 15 to 20 schools. Staffing and governance are mainly white British. Even though the diversity in our schools is increasing, over 70% of our youngsters are white British, and 90% of the staff are white British.

Historically, I would say there was possibly a lack of commitment around the work on race because perhaps some didn't see it as an issue. Maybe some thought that why does it need addressing when you have such small numbers of BAME students and staff?

As a result, I think many in our school communities lacked the confidence to talk about race. Very few have ever had to nail their colours to the mast or explore their unconscious biases.

The turning point

For us as an Academy Trust, the big turning point (like many) was the death of George Floyd. Whilst there were many key flashpoints, this was the one that really stood out. After that, a number of our Trustees realised things needed to change.

After a lot of discussion on what we could do, we agreed as a MAT that we didn't just want a quick fix or a "flash in the pan" approach - we wanted deep cultural change.

After all, we recognised that one of the most important functions of education is to raise young people to be part of a global community and that involves helping pupils build an understanding and respect for those from different walks of life, religions and races.

I knew achieving this would be challenging, as I've been working in education for 40+ years and in that time, I've seen a lot of things change (or try to be changed). Some things don't move forward and some even move backwards and one of the big things that has yet to really happen in the sector is meaningful change around race.

Planning for Change

But I knew that if anyone could help us, it would be Integrity Coaching. I've known Viv Grant for over 20 years, and she has a very strong track record working with school leadership teams and helping them to understand how to facilitate change. And so I knew Integrity Coaching would bring both capacity and expertise to the table, which would help us bring about the sort of deep transformation we were hoping to achieve.

To help spread the cost, we decided to approach it by getting all of our schools involved but doing it over a period of time in small groups of schools.

Fast forward and we're now into the third year and have undertaken the programme with about half of our schools to date.

The work has involved some deep work, coaching, reflective inquiry, getting leadership teams to work together on understanding themselves and understanding the issues around race.

Recognising the Complexities Involved

It has been hard sometimes to stay the course as schools are busy places. You're constantly involved in everything from safeguarding and curriculum development to improving the quality of T&L. Whilst all the time, you have OFSTED looming in the background.

All these pressures would make it easy to put this work on the back burner, but as a MAT, we made it clear that race equality is just what we do; it is something everyone is part of and not something you opt out of. It's safe to say that commitment to the work has paid off considerably.

Most schools that have been through the programme have come out saying this is some of the best professional development they've ever had.

There's now far more thought around the impact of their work with students from across a range of different communities, whether they're from the Middle East, Africa or Eastern Europe.

Schools are now thinking deeply about the learning experiences for all their pupils and how they can adapt their teaching to best support pupils of different backgrounds.

It's also empowered our schools to take ownership of the race equality agenda. Previously the onus of driving through change would have fallen on people like me, but the programme has really inspired others to take the lead in their own schools.

Maybe in the past, it would've felt like it was just me flag-waving, but now we have a number of people committed to taking it forward and ensuring that it's embedded in our schools.

Our Headteachers are now asking, 'What can I do to make a difference? How am I going to measure it? How can I make sure the effects are long-term?'

Influencing wider change

The programme is also making a big difference on a wider Trust level. We are beginning to look more seriously at the pupil indicators of achievement, exclusions and attendance. These are measurable areas of progress that we are seeing improvement with regard to DEI and can help inform policy and practice.

We're also thinking about what our staffing looks like and increasing the numbers of staff from more diverse backgrounds. What we want to do now is not just recruit new staff from minority communities but also help those at the MAT grow and flourish here. We are now providing more coaching and more support to those individuals, so we can really make it clear that we want them and we want them to rise through the organisation."

Finally, there's also been a realisation of the need to be able to continue this work together as a MAT. Our schools that have completed the programme now regularly come together to share their planning, share their thinking, what they're doing, frustrations and successes. In doing so, this has not just brought our schools closer but helped us work more collaboratively as a MAT.

For me, all of this is fantastic! I know that not only has the programme led to wider cultural change and already had a measurable impact as hoped, but best of all - we now have people driving behind it, so this work will carry on even after I've gone.