

Just Think! A new direction for ASPE?

This spring, ASPE has been involved in piloting a new style of conference, working closely with a group of thirty schools in Stevenage, Hertfordshire. The schools had recently formalised their local partnership through the creation of the Stevenage Education Trust and were looking to create opportunities for shared reflection, study and professional development.

Robert Staples, headteacher at Fairlands Primary School in Stevenage, approached ASPE to discuss how the association might facilitate this work. The idea was relatively simple:

- On a shared INSET day, all thirty schools would come together at a conference venue to hold a study day, entitled '**Think!Stevenage**'.
- The large part of the event would comprise of a 'research fair' where each school would provide at least one 'stand' to share an aspect of school improvement work they had been undertaking.
- Other exhibitors could be considered, including partners from local authorities or higher education sharing findings from recent research.
- Structured opportunities would also be provided for focus groups to meet, such as key subject leaders, SENCOs or phase leaders.
- However, there would be a high focus on opportunities for informal networking, discussion and reflection, with an aim to build Stevenage as a learning community both on the day and beyond.
- In order to participate in the event, schools would agree to subscribe to ASPE for a period of two years, at the standard rate for institutions of £150. These subscription fees would be the only charge for schools to bring all their teachers to the event.
- ASPE would provide an initial sponsorship sum to secure the venue and guarantee the viability of the event; this would largely be recouped through the subscription fees paid by schools.

The simplicity and pragmatism of the concept appealed to ASPE: teachers collaborating to further their professional understanding; sharing what works and what doesn't; discussing, and thereby studying, the art of education. Indeed, the seeds of the association itself were germinated at a very similar event at Warwick University in November 1987. As one of our founders, Robin Alexander, recalled, '*ASPE started as informal conversation in unlikely places. Its translation into something more formal began when those concerned decided to test the water by inviting a number of people to a seminar... attended by people from different parts of the country and from various branches of primary education*'.

ASPE agreed to the proposal enthusiastically and, on 20th February 2012, over 250 delegates attended the first Think!Stevenage event at the Fielder Centre in Hertfordshire. The event proved to be a huge success. The quality of the school contributions was exceptional, with foci including: the development of communication friendly spaces in the learning environment; encouraging pupil involvement in the creative curriculum; marketing your school; and a wide range of others. Feedback from delegates was highly positive, with several stating it was the 'best INSET day they had ever had'. School leaders particularly appreciated the opportunities to meet their colleagues with similar responsibilities in other schools, sharing challenges and successes. Indeed, following the conference, some have set up leadership clusters that intend to meet on a regular basis in the future.

Perhaps the best outcome, however, was a genuinely uplifting and positive celebration of the art of teaching and the creativity of teachers. We are in very trying times. One only has to open the paper to hear the current 'constant castigation' of the profession, as the NAHT recently noted. In the face of this, it was particularly heartening to see teachers putting such ill-conceived rhetoric out of their minds, even for a short while, and focusing instead on what they are doing so well in their schools, day in, day out.

ASPE is looking to develop this successful model in other areas around the UK. If you are interested in holding a similar event in your local area, please contact Neil Burton, ASPE Chair, to discuss this further.