

Hillhead High School – Senior Phase Pathways

Context of the school

Hillhead High School serves a diverse community in the west end of Glasgow. As a result of placing requests, many pupils come from all over Glasgow and beyond to the school. The current role is 1065, with 40% of pupils having English as an additional language and 35% of pupils living in SIMD 1 and 2.

The school has a 27 ½ period week with periods lasting for one hour, with a six minute registration period every morning. The purpose of 60-minute periods is to support learning and teaching in terms of promoting active learning. On Friday afternoons, all pupils take part in Minority Time Activity (MTA) which involves selecting from a range of approximately 60 activities with a focus on wider achievement, working with others and developing different skills, regardless of age and stage. This develops the skills of working with others.

Rationale

Our approach to developing more varied pathways in the senior phase was developed at the same time as our broad general education. Work began in 2008 with the appointment of a new headteacher and a review of pedagogy and existing practice. The skills, experience and expertise of the senior management team (SMT) were also important. One member of the team was working with the Cabinet Secretary on the design of CfE and another was working with Education Scotland supporting schools in the delivery of CfE. After extensive consultation with all stakeholders (parents, pupils and staff), the school day was changed to 27 ½ periods to allow for longer periods and deeper learning.

Pupils experience a full broad general education with minor personalisation and choice in S3. The S3/BGE curriculum finishes at the end of April and the senior phase begins in early May. During the senior phase, pupils bypass qualifications in S4, completing courses and sitting qualifications in S5. The key drivers for this model were as follows.

- To raise attainment for all pupils - to support more qualification passes and increase the quality of pass in S5 by allowing more time for deeper learning. Bypassing exams also reduces the internal assessment burden on pupils and teachers.
- To create space for wider achievement and skills development.
- To increase the positive destinations for pupils by encouraging more pupils to stay on longer at school.
- Most importantly, to improve the quality of learning and teaching.

Bypassing exams allows significantly more time for learning and teaching and also has a positive impact on reducing/ streamlining assessment and bureaucracy as pupils do not have to complete both N5 and Higher unit assessments and assignments.

Senior Phase Pathways

Although there is some personalisation and choice within the BGE curricular areas at the end of S2 (for example, pupils may choose to focus on biology rather than continue in a common science course), all pupils make their choices for the senior phase towards the end of S3. Pupils choose 6 courses to study in S4 and S5 as well as one compulsory wider achievement option for S4. All pupils must select English and mathematics and four other courses. There is a presumption that all pupils will stay on at least until the end of S5.

In S4, pupils study English and mathematics for four hours each week. Three hours each week are given to each of their other four course choices. Three hours are allocated to wider achievement, two hours to PE one hour to PSE and one hour to MTA.

Wider achievement in S4 allows pupils to develop a range of skills and the vision is that all of the options available are accredited, for example: CREST Science, National Progression Awards in photography and dance, and the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award. Initially we planned that wider achievement would also run in S5 but feedback from parents, pupils and teachers of the first two-year cohort led to this being adapted and instead pupils have four hours for all six courses in S5.

A central focus of our model was to improve the attainment and achievement of all pupils, but in particular for pupils from our most deprived backgrounds. A number of young people historically left school at the end of S4 with few qualifications. Encouraging pupils to stay on longer has contributed to our very strong record of positive destinations for pupils. Giving pupils more time to develop their skills over two year courses also leads to better results.

Provision was made from the outset for those pupils who wished to leave at the end of S4 with the option of a one-year employability pathway of N4 courses, wider achievement (including Princes Trust XL) and college. To date, however, this pathway has not been chosen at the start of S4 by any pupil and so all pupils have embarked upon two year courses at all levels. However, we have in place rigorous tracking and monitoring systems along with regular dialogue with pupils and parents in case a pupil does decide to leave before the end of S5. A very small number of pupils do leave before the end of S5 each year and in each of these cases our Principal Teacher of Skills for Learning, Life and Work works with the young person, their family and staff across the school to ensure that pupil completes as many National 4 courses as possible as well as any relevant National 5 units. Pupils are then supported into a positive destination such as college or training. Our current stay-on rate is 98% from S4 to S5 which is a significant increase on previous stay-on rates and has contributed to increasing sustained positive destinations for our learners, especially those in SIMD 1-3.

Over time, our N4 pathways have evolved and in some subjects pupils will now experience 'sideways progression' by completing two awards, for example, geography and travel & tourism.

In S6, pupils have the option to study 4 or 5 one-year courses which can include Advanced Highers, Highers, National 5, college courses and wider achievement opportunities. We are also planning to introduce Open University courses for session 2017-18.

Whole School Presentation Policy

Having embarked on a two-year pathway, pupils are presented for qualifications in Higher or National 5 courses – or complete National 4 or college courses - at the end of S5. For the small number of pupils who do decide to leave before the end of S5, support mechanisms are in place to ensure they achieve as many National 4 qualifications as possible and that they are supported into a positive destination. They are not in a position to be able to sit any National 5 or Higher qualifications as our two-year approach means courses will not be completed – though they may have completed units at these levels. This encourages almost all pupils to stay on to complete S5. A very small number of pupils have been dual presented in S5 over the past two years at request of parents. Close monitoring and tracking of pupil progress was crucial to adopting this approach.

Our whole-school presentation policy promotes equity and excellence. SQA results have improved at all SCQF levels. Since the introduction of the new senior phase pathways there has been sustained improvement in SQA results at 1,3,5 and 6 Highers and at Advanced Higher. Our Insight data, coupled with independent analysis carried out by Napier University, reveals that pupils from our most deprived backgrounds are doing well in terms of attainment of 1, 3 and 5 Highers.

Parental Engagement

The importance of full consultation and engagement with parents as part of the process cannot be underestimated. Work on our senior phase pathways began in 2008 with extensive consultation within the school community. Information evenings were held to explain our planned approach and the proposed model. The headteacher also offered weekly drop-in surgeries over a 5-year period for parents who wished to discuss the curriculum or raise any concerns. All of this work meant that we had the confidence of parents and staff when the first S4 cohort embarked upon the new senior phase pathways in August 2013. This was crucial during the first year of the new courses, particularly as many pupils embarked upon two-year Higher courses before the SQA had published all of the course assessments. Parents felt involved in the decision-making and informed about pathways. Over time, fewer parents have attended information evenings, perhaps due to their confidence in our approach, our strong results in SQA qualifications and the very high number of young people securing positive destinations on leaving school. However, continued dialogue about our approach and sharing of information at key transition points – for example the start of S1, minor personalisation and choice during S2 and senior phase choices during S3 – has led us to improve communication and provide more information on our school website (currently being redesigned).

We have a very strong and supportive Parent Council and we work closely with them to continue to communicate effectively with all parents.

Pupil Voice

Giving pupils a voice in the creation and evolution of the senior phase pathways has also been crucial to our success. As a direct result of pupil feedback, the following changes have been made to the senior phase.

- Wider achievement activities run in S4 but not in S5 – pupils wanted more time on their 6 core courses in S5.
- We have a diet of S4 school-based exams based on the content of the course already covered. Pupils did not want to wait until the prelim in November of S5 to experience sitting an exam in the exam hall and wanted a more challenging assessment than the unit assessments.
- Options for wider achievement change each year as a result of pupil choice and feedback.
- We have increased resources for teachers and pupils – for example textbooks.
- There is greater choice in S6.

Reliable and Rigorous School-wide Monitoring and Tracking Information

It was essential for us to have a rigorous monitoring and tracking system that allowed for effective tracking in the BGE. This ensured that pupils made informed choices throughout the BGE and also for their senior phase.

Significant work has taken place over the last four years to improve our approaches to monitoring and tracking. This is to ensure we provide pupils and parents with reliable advice on potential senior phase pathways. Our tracking in the BGE has been overhauled. Systems are in place to track pupils in S4 to S6 so that underachievement can be identified early. Moreover, the design of almost all courses means that, in most subjects, decisions about final presentation levels can be left until quite late. This allows pupils more time to develop skills and consolidate their learning. Over the past three years, teachers have become more confident in their judgements about senior phase pathways. Two years of SQA qualifications data, coupled with four years of tracking data, have allowed us to provide greater support and information to pupils, parents and staff.

Challenges and Solutions

In the first year of the introduction of two-year pathways, there were limited resources available for the Higher courses. This had an impact on staff confidence. Additional funding was directed at departments/faculties to support developments and considerable time was made available for departments to work together.

Choices in S6 were initially quite limited, especially during the first year of our new approach when the old and the new qualifications were both running. Pupils in S6 have 5 hours per subject and this does not fit in with S4 or S5, meaning that S6 pupils have to be timetabled separately for the most part. We are now working more closely with colleges and in 2017/18 with the Open University to offer more choices. This work will also help prepare pupils for university as the courses require more independent learning.

Pupils joining Hillhead High towards the end of S4 or the beginning of S5 from another school can find our approach does not articulate easily with their progress with one-year courses. We ensure that this is explained to prospective pupils and their parents, and we are sharing more information on our approach on our website.

A number of the National 4 courses do not last for two years and so we are beginning to introduce two one-year course combinations – for example N4 physics and practical electronics as one choice.

What we learned

Crucially, we learned the importance of communication at all stages so that all in the school community understand the rationale and the proposed benefits of the model. Moreover, the model continues to evolve as we respond to the needs of pupils, the changes to courses and the increase in partnerships with colleges and others. We work with a wide range of partners in order to be able to deliver our senior phase and our wider achievement programme.

Our pathways continue to evolve as a result of experience and in response to parental and pupil feedback, and to partnership with other agencies.

We are currently updating our website to include more information and make it more user-friendly.