

Notable progress in vocabulary, spelling and comprehension

WENNINGTON HALL SCHOOL, LANCASTER

Scale of the challenge

Set in 17 acres of parkland in the Lune Valley, near Lancaster, Wennington Hall School caters on a residential or day-care basis for the needs of 70 secondary-age boys who have academic, emotional and, or, behavioural difficulties – difficulties that at the time of referral make normal secondary provision unsuitable.

Pupil-teacher ratios are generous. Class sizes vary from four to eight and each class has a qualified teacher with special needs experience. Most also have a teaching assistant, staff who in addition run a One-to-One programme where pupils are given extra help with literacy and numeracy.

The challenge faced by the school stems not only from emotional problems – it is that some boys can be up to four years below the chronological learning age, and have missed so much school they have to be taken back to basics.

Implementation

How best to meet it? The school decided the best way was to extend its already full reading programme and thus open up a wider door to learning and, hopefully, a consequential improvement in behaviour.

The route it chose, in 2003, was to acquire Accelerated Reader, the ground-breaking software-based program developed by Renaissance Learning.

Between 32 and 36 pupils aged 11 and 12 have been using the system ever since, with its diagnostic Star Reading Test establishing what levels of books pupils should be reading.

Overseeing the whole process has been Elaine Prendergast, team leader supervising Wennington's eight teaching assistants – two of whom run the system full-time, with up to 25 hours a week devoted to it in the school's Reading Club.

She is also the librarian, and one of her first projects was to add to the two libraries that already existed, to create a new one exclusively for Accelerated Reader books and quizzes - now carrying 550 titles.

Results

Star Reading tests every June regularly show an improvement of 90 per cent in reading ability when compared with the previous year – an outcome Elaine describes as “fantastic”.

As well as the high number of hours using Accelerated Reader in class, many of the boys spend all their breaks – totalling over three hours a day – burying their heads in books, combing the library shelves, or on their computers.

Vocabulary, spelling and comprehension have all seen notable progress, as has the confidence that comes from encouraging boys to read aloud in class and take part in open discussion – which has had the knock-on effect of improving behaviour and self-belief.

In 2005 the Reading Club and the One-to-One programme won a Lancashire County Council Learning Excellence Award for good practise.

Elaine says: “What Accelerated Reader does is positively encourage enjoyment of reading. The combination of individual books, quizzes and points, supported by prizes and open recognition and praise, has led to an amazing advance in overall educational levels.

“At the same time standards of conduct have improved, with good time-keeping, attentiveness and a sense of responsibility all being engendered – in fact, since we introduced Accelerated Reader I cannot recollect a single instance of disruptive behaviour. If I had to use one word to describe the system, I would say – superb.”

What teachers say...

“The system actively encourages children to engage in the reading experience, and having them read to the class from a favourite piece, and take part in discussion, can be very stimulating.”

“As they learn to identify unusual words and understand the author, plot and character, you can see the boys growing in confidence and a new-found sense of what they can achieve.”

What pupils say...

"It helps you to learn to read and pronounce words, and you want to start new books and keep progressing. It's the best."

"It helps you to get an education – you need to read, and Reading Club helps you to read better."