



LAWRENCE SHERIFF SCHOOL
A National Teaching School
RUGBY

VERTICAL TUTORING

What's long, strong and surprisingly popular? The answer, you may be surprised to hear, is a vertical tutor group. Having both worked as heads of year we had thought of ourselves as strong advocates of the horizontal, year based pastoral system that still prevails in most schools in this country. However, we now look back on our move to a vertical system- within which tutor groups are equally comprised of students drawn from all year groups within the school- as one of the strongest school improvement measures that we have introduced to the school.

Why set out on this process of turning upside down the conventional pastoral structure in schools? The answer is personalisation. For some time we had dipped our toe in the water of allowing students to take qualifications when they were ready rather than when they had reached a particular age. Hence a group in Year 11 had taken an AS in Politics and an even smaller group had completed a GCSE in Latin during Year 9. We now felt ready to take the next step of the process.

However, visits to other schools that had gone further down the personalisation road suggested that we were still missing something. How could we move away from a curriculum based around age if this was the principle underlying our entire pastoral system? Surely students would only become more open to new ways of studying if they experienced them on a daily basis through their tutor groups.

Whilst personalisation was the 'carrot' that drew us into vertical tutoring, we soon found that it was not the only benefit. Schools that operated the system pointed out that it provided an opportunity to replicate within school the principle of the extended family. Whilst changing social structures meant that many students were unable to experience this outside school, within school they would be able to experience the benefits of older student being supported by younger students. Many of us have created opportunities for younger students to be mentored by older ones. However, when this contact is experienced on a daily basis, the mentoring becomes much more profound and ultimately becomes embedded within the whole structure of school life.

Having decided to go ahead we debated long and hard about who to involve. Whilst we had always felt that vertical tutoring would only be a real success if the whole school were included, others felt that year 7 should be exempt for one year to allow them to settle in. The sixth form pastoral team were not convinced that year 12 and 13 should be included, one of the rights of passage into year 12 was to be treated differently from the younger members of the school. After seeking advice from other schools further down the line than us we did decide to go the whole hog and include all year groups.

So that was it then. We decided to move to vertical tutoring and everything worked brilliantly. Well, not quite. The reaction to this idea from the different constituencies within the school was, to say the least, mixed. Teachers seemed to regard the idea as yet another unnecessary set of changes. The suspicious reaction from staff appeared to suggest that we were disappearing from yet more Christmas card lists. However, we noticed a steady stream of staff who would quietly approach us when no-one else was about to say that they had experienced vertical tutoring and thought that it was a good idea.

However, staff reaction was positively euphoric compared to that of students. Our pupils had grown used to the existing pastoral structure and certainly did not wish to change. We were both hauled before the student council and asked why we were implementing the new system in defiance of their wishes. Relationships became so strained that we even considered, all be it briefly, discontinuing with student council at all. Perhaps the lowest point, however, came during the final of the school debating competition. Andrew Kent, then in Year 7, stood up to speak on the motion 'This House Believes in Vertical Tutoring'. To loud cheers from students and staff he proceeded to denounce 'the new ideas that have been imposed on us by Dr Kent'. Clearly there was work to do at school and at home in order to win over hearts and minds to the new idea.

How did we overcome this negative reaction? Our experience was that vertical tutoring is much better understood when it is experienced rather than discussed as an abstract idea. Hence we decided to give teachers and students a few months to get used to the idea and then ask them whether they would like to switch back to the 'old' system. Hence in January 07 (having begun the system in September 06) senior leaders visited every tutor group and asked the students if they would like to go back to the horizontal system. To our intense relief, almost no students wanted to return to horizontal groups. Amongst the reasons that they cited for preferring the new system were:

- More friends in other year groups
- A reduction in bullying
- A greater sense of house identity
- The opportunity for younger students to be helped by older students (for example, when choosing options)

Interestingly, those most strongly in favour of the system were students in Year 7 who just assumed that this was the way that the school had always been organised. However, students in Years 10 and 11 were almost as positive, since they saw vertical tutoring as a way to escape the stifling year based friendship groups that they had become increasingly bored with. The only real resistance came from members of Year 13 who felt that they were too far advanced in the school to adapt to a new system. The shift in student attitude had been so complete that student council were quite shocked that we were even considering a

review and yet they had been the ones who had campaigned so strongly for such a review just a few months before.

The effect of this process upon parents has been interesting to observe. Student opposition in the summer meant that many parents were suspicious or hostile to the new structure. Human nature being what it is, we found that the boys were much slower to tell their parents that they had changed their minds and that they actually liked the new system. Hence one parent told us in very forceful tones during a parents evening that she didn't care what we said, she knew that her son was completely against vertical tutoring. To her great credit, she rang back a few days later to say that she had spoken to her son and he now thought the new system was 'quite good' (a phrase which equates to ecstatic praise when used by a teenage boy). The experience of the Kent family was no different. Having been denounced by Andrew in the final of the school debating competition in July, time did produce a change in his attitude. As the Kent family was having its evening meal one January evening, Andrew now in Year 8 announced that he and his new friends in Years 7,9 and 10 'couldn't understand what all the fuss had been about vertical tutoring'. Ah, the fickleness of public opinion.

Vertical tutoring is still very new to the school and as a result we are still learning. We continue to refine our assembly structure in order to maximise the time that students spend with their tutors. Having initially retained year group assemblies we find that we are now increasingly moving away from them towards mixed age, house based assemblies. Our houses (or as some schools call them 'families') lacked coordination in the early days and we have just appointed four head of houses to improve communication and to further develop the distinctive ethos of each house grouping. There is also further work to do in the sixth form and year two of the project will concentrate upon integrating them even more fully within the vertical structure.

However, the benefits of the new system are already evident. Students were right to point towards a reduction in bullying. Year 7 students highlight examples of sixth formers in their tutor groups stepping in to 'look after them' if they feel they are being treated unfairly by another student. There is also no need to organise a peer mentoring programme, since the benefits of such a structure are delivered in a much more profound way through the vertical groups. Behaviour has clearly improved around the school. We now have far fewer fixed term exclusions and we have also noticed a reduction in the number of petty incidents at lunchtime and break. We feel that vertical tutoring has already moved us in the direction of the extended, cross age family ethos that we wish to develop within the school.

Vertical tutoring is not always an easy road to travel down. However, our experience is that it does provide a richer experience for students whilst preparing the ground for the sort of cross age working that is implicit within personalisation.