

CURRICULUM SUPPORT GROUPS

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WHAT ARE CURRICULUM SUPPORT GROUPS?

Curriculum Support Groups (CSGs) are interest groups drawn from staff in each of the 11 members of the Wessex Group¹. They are also open to any other Hampshire-based school or college that offers Level 3 teaching.

The number of groups varies slightly from year to year according to curriculum change and current

demand but it averages around 35. Most groups cater for specific curriculum subjects but some are intended for staff in non-curricular areas, for example learning resource management and work experience co-ordination.

Curriculum Support Groups 2010/11

Applied Health and Social Care

Applied Travel and Tourism

Archaeology

Art

Basic Skills / ESOL and Adult Education

Biology

Business Studies / Economics /

Accounting

Careers Advisory Managers*

Chemistry

Classics

Communication/Cultural Studies

Computing / ICT (GCE and Vocational)

Critical Thinking

Dance (GCE and Vocational)

Design / Technology

Drama / Performance

(GCE and Vocational)

Electronics

English

Extended Project / G&T Co-ordinators

Functional Skills

Geography / Environmental Studies

History

Law

LDD Co-ordinators*

Librarians and Learning Resource Managers

Mathematics (GCE and Vocational)

Media / Film Studies

Modern Languages

Music (Traditional and Technology)

Philosophy

Physical Education

Physics

Politics

Post-16 Tutorial Managers*

Psychology

Public Services

Religious Studies

Sociology

Work Placement Co-ordinators

*For statutory and strategic reasons these groups are managed and facilitated by Hampshire County Council staff, outside the Wessex Group

Of those groups currently operating, 33 are facilitated by a **Curriculum Network Development Manager** who is employed by the Wessex Group. The remaining groups are facilitated by the Wessex Group's **Partnership Manager** or by Hampshire County Council staff.

The Curriculum Network
Development Manager works for
the Wessex Group for three days a
week during term. The current post
holder is an experienced education
manager and researcher (not a
teacher) with extensive knowledge
of the education sector. She reports
to the Wessex Group's Partnership
Manager and both are supported
by a part time Administrative Officer.
The Administrative Officer acts as a
fixed point of contact for the two
peripatetic managers.

The roles and responsibilities of the Curriculum Network Development Manager and Administrative Officer are outlined in the section headed 'How do they operate?' on page 9.

WHAT DO CURRICULUM SUPPORT GROUPS DO?

Each group meets once a term for two to three hours to discuss areas of current concern. The focus of each meeting is support for classroom activity and members are encouraged to share problems, ideas and potential solutions. Managed carefully, these groups offer a more effective form of continuing professional development (CPD) than any off the peg training package because most of the discussion is of direct relevance to the daily working lives of group members.

A CSG year in profile

Although the agendas for CSG meetings are driven by members' interests, they tend to follow a similar pattern each year. The outline below is an indication of what might be on each term's agenda.

Autumn

Recruitment and intakes (and their impact on teaching) Induction Option choices

Spring

Coursework
Revision ideas
Events

Summer

Curriculum change Study days and events Option choices

Some items are common to all terms:

Examinations – how fair were the papers? How well do exam boards respond to our enquiries and keep us informed? What can we learn from group members who are also examiners or moderators?

Resources – sharing ideas, colleagues' recommendations (and what to avoid).

GCSEs and 11-16 work – the impact of change and of school curriculum decisions on our intakes. How will we cater for these changes in our teaching?

Financial and curriculum change – for example, sharing ideas on how to teach larger groups with limited resources.

Underpinning much of this discussion is the challenge of maintaining a balance between subject enthusiasm and integrity – what are the essential skills and attractions of Physics, Dance, Geography etc? – and ensuring that students obtain the best possible results.

Several groups choose to convert their summer meetings to study days, run in partnership with colleagues at local universities or in relevant professional occupations. For example, in 2009 the Archaeologists went to Silchester to look at the Reading University dig. In 2010 the Biologists worked with Portsmouth University on a variety of projects including discussion of

curriculum change and work on Marine Biology, using the university's boat. Other Science and Mathematics groups enjoy ongoing work with their opposite numbers at Southampton University. The Critical Thinking and English groups have regular student events at Winchester University. All of this work is planned in CSG meetings.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

There is a considerable body of research showing that teachers have more in common with those teaching the same subject in other institutions than they do with colleagues in other subjects in their own school or college. Even if group members have never met before – several colleges rotate meeting attendance through a department so there are always new faces in the room – they quickly find that they have shared interests and experiences.

There is, however, considerable diversity within many groups. Members work in very different settings and opening membership beyond the Wessex Group enables us to benefit from the input of colleagues working in Hampshire's comparatively rare 11-18 schools. They can offer direct feedback on current and prospective GCSE changes or on how initiatives such as the introduction of Functional Skills have changed the experience of our 16-year-old intakes.

Because the role of these groups is to support teaching, rather than monitor or evaluate teachers, members see the meetings as 'safe spaces' in which they can explore their failures as well as their successes. Records of each meeting focus on discussion content and often do not name individual contributors.

In short, Curriculum Support Groups offer numerous benefits.

- They are, for many members and especially for those who teach more esoteric subjects, the only regular forum for subject-based discussion with fellow professionals.
- They offer a reality check that enables teachers to find out if they are experiencing difficulties common to others or if they need to brush up a particular aspect of their own practice.
- They offer chances to make professional contacts and friendships, often leading to informal chats and visits outside meetings 'just to see how it's done elsewhere'.
- They give teachers a stronger voice in talking to external agencies – such as local universities and exam boards – about common problems.
- They are a focal point for external input, for example from universities and exam boards, offering the convenience of face-to-face contact with an organised, multi-institutional group.

Case study

Correspondence within the English group revealed that many members – all with the same examination board – experienced surprisingly poor outcomes in 2010 AS and A2 exam papers.

The Chair of the Wessex Group, the Curriculum Network Development Manager and a leading member of the group (head of English at a large Wessex Group college) met senior representatives of the board. This meeting produced the following outcomes:

- 1. The exam board welcomed the Head of English's suggestion that large cohorts should be assigned more than one marker per paper (as an added quality assurance check). It will also explore options to employ markers for smaller batches of papers.
- 2. The Wessex Group agreed to encourage teaching staff in English departments to become examiners (as an aid to staff development and to increase the pool of markers available to the exam board).
- 3. The board and English departments in the Wessex Group plan to collaborate in key areas such as the development of new qualifications.

WHY DO THEY WORK?

Curriculum Support Group meetings are successful because they are informal and the agenda are wholly driven by members' interests.

Membership is fluid and diverse consisting of the full range of staff from heads of large departments to newly qualified teachers and those who have begun to teach a subject for the first time. Some participating colleges are large and relatively affluent; others are small and cater for students in less privileged areas. Opening the meetings to further education colleges and schools, including a small number of attenders from private schools, enables all who come to draw on experience from a broad educational spectrum.

Meeting etiquette

There are guiding principles for the meetings which, though not written down, are understood by all members.

- The purpose of each meeting is to improve what we do for and with students
- Meeting content is focused on practice not strategy (CSGs are not pressure groups or fora for discussing or challenging management decisions)
- Voluntarism is everything being 'told' to attend is an antidote to participation
- Activity matters; status doesn't everyone has something to offer
- Everyone who comes must be willing to share – ideas, problems and expertise
- We respect students
- Meeting records are written in a way that highlights key points but does not embarrass or expose members – discussion of a teaching problem may be recorded but not the identity of the person seeking advice on it
- Members trust the CSG Manager to follow up significant issues or to report them to college managements with the aim of addressing key concerns.

WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

The value of contact across institutions is widely acknowledged. The recent history of education policy in the UK has seen many national and local initiatives featuring practitioner collaboration and bodies such as the National College for School Leadership have run and monitored a number of projects which encouraged teachers to explore professional practice with colleagues from other schools.

What is the most effective CPD?

In 2005 the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation published a study of effective CPD. The author's survey revealed that '...nearly all teachers described how they valued being able to meet, and network with colleagues from different schools' but this activity needed active promotion and facilitation as '... they were often too busy to organise this for themselves'. The report described subject-based CPD as 'one of the most highly regarded forms of professional development, as it allowed teachers to engage in reflective practice, and to discuss teaching with their subject peers, giving them considerable mental stimulation'.

Sandra Leaton Gray – April 2005 An Enquiry Into Continuing Professional Development for Teachers, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk/ accessed 6.1.11

WHAT WOULD IMPROVE CSGS?

In an ideal world every participating college and school would ensure that staff have time that is ring-fenced for meeting attendance. In practice this does not happen and attendance can be affected by conflicting demands and unexpected occurrences – such as a sudden snowfall. However, several groups have mentioned the value they attach to the opportunities provide by meetings. They would like openings to develop the professional relationships they make face to face and to continue discussion throughout the year, opening up new topics as they arise. The internet offers just such an opportunity but would require more resource than is currently available in order to meet all the demands voiced by different groups.

HOW DO THEY OPERATE?

The work of CSGs is funded by the Wessex Group whose contributions are supplemented by subscriptions from other Hampshire-based schools and colleges with a Level 3 offer. These subscribers buy into Curriculum Support Groups on a sliding scale according to the number they wish to join. In 2010/11 the full subscription for these colleges was £3,300. This gave entitlement to join all of the groups operated by the Wessex Group plus any associated events, such as summer study days. Each participating institution can send as many members as it wishes to an individual meetina.

The overall progress and content of CSG work is regularly reviewed by Wessex Group Vice-Principals who offer practical support where necessary, for example in determining the number and focus of available groups and encouraging college staff to attend. The Vice-Principals also offer guidance and direction about the presentation and discussion of key issues in individual groups.

Thereafter the work of each group is managed through two key roles.

The Curriculum Network Development Manager:

- agrees a date and location for each meeting at least a term in advance, identifying a host from within each group who will book rooms and organise refreshments plus any special requirements (such as IT access)
- prepares an outline agenda normally four or five items – which is adjusted by group members at the beginning of each meeting
- chairs and records each meeting (unless the group opts to have one of its own members as chair), forwarding minutes for circulation within 5-10 working days, wherever possible
- tracks or undertakes any follow-up actions
- uses her own professional experience and expertise to suggest input and activities for each group

- cross-references discussions in different groups to identify common problems and highlight solutions that could work in different greas
- keeps college managements informed of current areas of general concern and reports to them at termly meetings of Curriculum Vice-Principals and via a written annual report
- uses group discussion to gather feedback on the performance of agencies working with different groups (such as exam boards), identifying areas of concern.

The Administrative Officer:

- maintains and updates circulation lists for each group, based on advice received from member schools and colleges
- handles bulk mailings, such as minutes, to each group
- sends reminders for each meeting, with time, date and location, approximately 14 days in advance
- checks room bookings and ensures that hosts in each college know what they need to do
- sends out annual subscription invitations and monitors take-up and payment by non Wessex Group schools and colleges
- manages day-to-day finances for this work.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE A START?

The key components of effective group working are:

- management commitment to the process and trust in the integrity of group facilitators
- clearly understood and agreed guiding principles (see Meeting etiquette, page 8)
- facilitation not dictation the facilitator (in most groups this is the Curriculum Network
 Development Manager) does not need a teaching background but should be familiar with the UK education scene and key issues. Subject to the guiding principles outlined above, he or she must be willing to follow the group's agenda rather than trying to impose his or her own
- strong administrative support –
 the support role acts as an
 anchor for the manager/
 facilitator whose work means he
 or she constantly moves between
 colleges. Finances also need
 careful monitoring.

WHAT DO THEY COST?

The major cost for this work is the salary commitment. At present the Wessex Group's Curriculum Network Development Manager is employed on rolling two year contracts for the equivalent of three days a week during term. The Administrative Officer is a full time employee of one of the Wessex Group colleges who is seconded part-time to CSG support.

Estimated salary costs (including overheads) £33,000.

Running costs include travel expenses, subsistence, mobile phone and IT support and occasional meeting room hire. Most meetings are located in colleges with the host college supplying refreshments for no additional charge. Occasionally it is necessary to use an external venue eg at times of peak college occupation. The Curriculum Network Development Manager is a home-based worker and has no dedicated college office space.

Estimated additional costs £3,000.

Subscriptions

Full membership

ie access to all groups facilitated by the Wessex Group £3,300

Part membership

£200 entry fee PLUS £1,000 for 12 groups or less = £1,200 £750 for 8 groups or less = £950 £500 for 4 groups or less = £700 £200 for 1 group = £400

WHAT DO PARTICIPANTS SAY?

"As the only
person teaching my
subject in college I felt so
isolated I would have left my
job without the contacts I
made in the CSG."
Subject teacher

"These are really useful meetings."
Subject teacher

"It is

reassuring to see that others are facing the same issues in certain subjects."

College Vice-Principal

"These groups
are unique in the access
they offer to dialogue with
sixth form practitioners."
University outreach
officer

"All the useful things we've done (in Mathematics) across the partnership have come out of this group."

Head of Mathematics,
Wessex Group

college

"Thank you for a successful meeting today, I found it very supportive and useful."



This booklet has been written by Barbara Spender

www.wessexsfc.ac.uk

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