What is NAHT Aspire; how is it different to other school improvement programmes; and how is it evolving from its pilot phase?

Tim Nash reports

Aspire to excellence

AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN MAY, DELEGATES endorsed NAHT Aspire as the ‘blueprint for the future of school improvement’. The association’s pilot programme has now entered its second full academic year with 12 of the original group of schools having already achieved the project’s prime goal of a ‘good’ Ofsted inspection judgement, while the others await the imminent arrival of inspectors with increased confidence.

Aspire was conceived as a source of support and protection to address members’ concerns amid the perfect storm of raised floor targets, declining local authority support and the threat of forced academisation. The intention from the start was to move away from the dependency and imposed models that have characterised recent school improvement initiatives, to recognise and build on the expertise, capacity and good practice that exist in every school, regardless of their Ofsted standing.

This was effectively captured by NAHT general secretary Russell Hobby when he introduced the Aspire concept to members in 2012, as a key component of the association’s theme of taking ownership of professional standards: “The profession holds the answers and has the resources; it is trust, collaboration and inspiration that will trigger the innovation that we need.”

This ambition became a reality when the Aspire pilot programme was set in play in May 2013. Thirty schools, each judged as ‘satisfactory’ or ‘requires improvement’ by Ofsted, working in four regional networks, met in London to be introduced to each other as partners in this innovative venture, and to the Aspire approach, which offers:

- A joined-up and interconnected approach to improvement which recognises that great practice seldom thrives in isolation. The approach reflects research, evidence and best practice, encompassing all areas of improvement in a single model.
- Ambition, which addresses the immediate challenges presented by Ofsted, and provides a route to achieve each schools’ distinctive and ambitious goals.
- Sustainability and capacity through investment in the development in the whole school staff – particularly middle leaders – and building effective partnerships between schools.
- Consistency and quality that ensures each school benefits from similar experiences; a quality framework for development, backed up by proven school-improvement tools and resources.
- Deep personalisation to ensure that each schools’ distinctive characteristics and ambitions are embedded.
- An approach firmly based on the principle of ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing to’.
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There are three essential elements to Aspire. First is the quality framework for school development (QFSD), which provides the research-base on which the programme is built, supported by an array of school improvement tools and curriculum resources. Second, there is regular support from credible advisers with a deep understanding of the framework. Finally, there is a cyclical process that ensures that the elements of Aspire are introduced and embedded to reflect the requirements of each school.

Quality framework

The QFSD, reflecting a distillation of international research into learning and the characteristics of successful schools, is founded on the features of highly effective schools. These are organised into five interconnected strands that form the core of the Aspire programme. The five strands are:

- **Leadership**: this develops a clear vision, distributed leadership, effective team working, responsibilities and accountabilities and the leadership skills of every member of staff.
- **Learning environment**: this focuses on the systematic development of a strong set of shared values that underpin codes of conduct throughout the school that in turn drive improvement in behaviours for learning and stronger relationships between staff, pupils and the wider community.
- **Assessment for learning**: this ensures timely and effective use of assessment at every level within the school to drive improvement, focus intervention and develop day-to-day classroom practice.
**Pedagogy and curriculum**: a detailed and developmental framework helps to build a consistent school-wide language of teaching and learning through which issues of consistency and quality can be addressed and a stronger professional culture nurtured.

**Student and family support**: this helps schools to create contexts for learning in which the needs of every student can be addressed. By engaging parents more effectively in their children's learning, maximising the benefits from improved working with external agencies and refocusing internal support processes, schools are able to address and minimise the barriers standing in the way of pupils' learning.

### The adviser team

Each school in an Aspire network works with a team of two or three advisers with whom they build a long-term relationship. The team approach is particularly effective as it provides each school with a range of expertise and experience across the broad strands of the QFSD. The team also remains with the school throughout the three years of the programme, allowing long-term trusting relationships to evolve. Achievement advisers, as they are known, come from a range of backgrounds, including former head teachers, local authority advisers, educational psychologists and SEND specialists. Increasingly, achievement advisers are practising heads and deputies, often from teaching school alliances who see the Aspire programme as an effective vehicle for fulfilling school-to-school support commitments.

All achievement advisers undergo detailed training from EdisonLearning and are subject to rigorous quality assurance processes in line with NAHT's demands for programme-wide consistency and excellence, and an accreditation scheme is now in development for future Aspire advisers.

### The implementation process

In many ways, the way in which Aspire is implemented is the key factor that sets it apart from other school-improvement approaches. First, although there is a clear focus on achieving rapid improvement from the outset of the partnership to address pressing progress and attainment issues, the programme never takes its sights off the school's longer-term goals and the ambition to become an excellent and self-sustaining school.

An analysis of the school's strengths and development priorities conducted at the outset of the partnership with the school's leaders and governors (the 'collaborative quality analysis') provides the context and priorities to drive the improvement process, and this is continually revisited and reviewed to ensure progress towards these longer-term goals.

Second, the programme has been designed to be a collaborative exercise through which schools learn and improve together, and form partnering processes to sustain improvement beyond the three years of the formal Aspire initiative. The collaboration comprises both formal and informal elements, but at its heart sits a termly cycle of network days and development days.
Each school in an Aspire network is asked to name a key lead to take responsibility for one of the five QFSD strands. In some schools these are already established leaders while in other schools the opportunity is taken to provide a first leadership experience to a less experienced staff member. Clearly, the head teacher takes responsibility for the leadership strand and at the outset of each term, the heads and deputies from all the schools in the network meet for their network day at which the headlines of the programme for the coming term are previewed.

Network days for the other key leads follow, resulting in detailed plans for school-based action personalised to the priorities of each school. These plans progress with the support of the achievement advisers at in-school development days, which are interspersed throughout the term.

The net effect of this process is that key individuals within the schools, including the head teacher, have exposure to high-quality continuing professional development, aligned to the schools immediate improvement priorities (and with the option to link to external accreditation by the University of Essex).

This is then cascaded to the entire school – something that is immensely difficult to achieve through more traditional routes. It also means that the programme, although based on a shared and common framework and language, can become deeply personalised to individual school’s priorities.

Aspire in practice
As Sarah Holland, head teacher at Lovers’ Lane Primary School in Newark, told delegates at the Aspire workshop at NAHT’s Education Conference in York in October: “It has been the best thing that could have happened at Lovers’ Lane and we are really looking forward to that phone call now, just so that we can sing from the rooftops about the journey we’ve been on.”

Important as inspection outcomes are for the individual head teachers, their schools and for the Aspire programme as a whole, there are other ‘wins’ that are perhaps bigger and more significant. Julia Brown, head teacher at Greenhill Primary School in Sheffield captured this well when asked what she would say to other head teachers considering joining the Aspire movement. She said: “It is the best professional development any of us have ever had, providing solutions which are research based, realistic, practical and really work. It is also intellectually challenging which we are all enjoying. “It gives control over professional development back to individual teachers and gives them the skills and confidence to adapt their own practice.”

“Also, it is completely refreshing to work with people who value and respect you as a head teacher and don’t apply a deficit model when talking about improving your school. For first time in years I have felt supported. And at the other reason why we really like it is because it is all about the children.”

What the future holds
Following NAHT annual conference’s endorsement in May, the decision was taken to begin the process of extending the Aspire programme to new networks in new areas, and to consider how the Aspire approach might evolve to include secondary and special schools.

This has now led to the formation of a new Aspire network in West Sussex comprising schools in and around Crawley, and an exciting new development in which teaching school alliances have come together to consider how they might integrate the Aspire model and approach into their work.

The two most advanced examples are in the south west, where the Learning Institute, a teaching school group based at Callington Community College in Cornwall, will lead an Aspire network starting this month; and in Essex where 10 teaching schools are collaborating to form Aspire networks comprising schools from across the county.

Reflecting the NAHT’s absolute focus on quality and consistency, both these groups are committing significant time and resource to training and building their understanding of the Aspire approach, and will be subject to Aspire’s robust quality assurance process. But this model, in which schools truly have the answers and the resources to own the improvement agenda seems to be exactly what Aspire was originally designed to achieve.

If you would like to be involved in Aspire, you have some choices. One option is to talk to your neighbouring schools and either form a new network or join an existing group. If you would like to sample part of the Aspire experience, a few of the component elements of the programme, such as the quality framework for learning and teaching can be used independently to address specific issues such as performance management and appraisal. More information is available on the NAHT Aspire website. We look forward to hearing from you.

www.nahtaspire.co.uk

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