

Employer Engagement at Manchester Academy.

Manchester Academy, sponsored by the United Learning Trust, has dual specialisms in Business and Enterprise and Creative Arts and is designated an International School. It has just under 1000 students, including some 80 in the sixth form. The school serves an ethnically diverse and often transient City community and many students come from overseas with very little experience of formal education. Over half have English as an additional language, and many have significant learning or emotional difficulties. At the last Ofsted inspection, in Spring 2009, the school was designated Outstanding.

Work with employers is central to the vision and practice at Manchester Academy. The Ofsted report of Spring 2009 says,

“An 'enterprise for employability' theme permeates the curriculum. Through its exceptionally strong partnerships with other organisations and businesses, students are prepared exceptionally well for further study and work beyond school.”

The sheer number of placements, partnerships and projects that involve businesses and other organizations in Manchester is impressive. Significant partners include law firm Pinsent Masons, the University of Manchester, the Royal Air Force, the NHS, local news website “Manchester Confidential”, Manchester City Council, Cobbetts, a national law firm.

Leading the programme is Director of Enterprise and Internationalism Jane Delfino. Her drive, initiative and inspiration is a key factor. In 2007 Jane was the first teacher to be honoured with the Queen’s Award for Enterprise Promotion. The citation says.

“Jane Delfino has done much more than her job demands and has been particularly dynamic and innovative in using enterprise education to improve the attitudes and prospects of young people in the deprived Moss Side area of Manchester.”

Genuine Partnership.

In all cases, the aim is to develop true, sustainable partnership. Examples include maths and science projects with the RAF, numeracy and literacy sessions led by partners and colleagues from Pinsent Masons, placements with the University of Manchester’s hospitality department and with Manchester City FC that have directly supported BTEC courses, student journalism with “Manchester Confidential”, mentoring programmes involving individual employees working with students, and a number of schemes for the development of presentation and interview skills.

Of all these, one partnership that’s particularly strong and displays all of the necessary success factors is that with the Manchester office of Pinsent Masons.

The Pinsent Masons Link.

Now into its third year, the partnership with legal firm Pinsent Masons includes literacy and numeracy programmes and a business mentoring programme. Pinsent Masons Partner Howard Gill says,

“On a weekly basis designated staff including senior partners and trainee lawyers deliver structured Literacy and Numeracy sessions to students.”

Jane Delfino adds,

“English is not the first language for many of our students. The Literacy scheme is particularly beneficial as it also develops the necessary language skills.”

The Year 10 Business mentoring programme runs for one academic year. Working together the Pinsent Masons and Academy team develop a detailed plan for the year.

Students work at the Pinsent Masons office as well as at the Academy. They develop CVs; interview skills; take part in Dragon's Den presentations and this year, will be running their own micro-businesses. Most challenging of all, the students are invited to formal business lunches.

The firm's dedication to the partnership is remarkable. About a fifth of the whole workforce of 180 take part, from all levels, all as volunteers.

Jane Delfino is full of praise for them.

"All 3 strands of the programme are planned meticulously and delivered professionally. The students benefit greatly from the input."

In 2009 the Pinsent Masons and Manchester Academy partnership was recognised with two Bank of America Merrill Lynch Education Awards -- a "Big Tick" award and an "Example of Excellence" which is supported by the DCSF.

Inclusion.

In order to ensure that all students are given employer engagement opportunities, the Academy runs the 'Fit 4 Business Vulnerable' programme. This programme provides for those Year 10 students who have special needs or are vulnerable in other ways. They experience business practice in a variety of sectors including, hospitality, retail, estates management and construction. The students have to keep a portfolio and deliver a formal presentation at the end of the week.

"Fit4Business Vulnerable" is a growing programme, which in 2009 – 2010 will involve a hundred students.

Why be involved?

Manchester Academy's business partners have a range of reasons for their involvement. They may be nurturing possible future employees, or as in the case of Pinsent Masons, there may be a policy of corporate responsibility to the community. Invariably, though, at the level of direct face-to-face contact, employees gain there's enormous satisfaction from the work.

Pinsent Masons Solicitor Nancy Hobbs, who helps to organize the mentoring programme articulates this very well.

"It's one of the most enjoyable aspects of my job. I'm passionate about education. I had a good education, and at Manchester Academy we meet people with a wealth of talent and intelligence coming up against invisible barriers, and I really like the fact we can equip them with a few of the soft skills, and open their minds a tiny bit to say, 'I can be a success', and think about higher education or a career. "

Impact.

Manchester Academy is a vastly improved, and improving, school. Ducie High, which the Academy replaced, was by any measure, failing. For ten years up to 2004, Ducie's Five A* to C score ran between 8 and 13 percent. Since then, the Academy's score has risen steadily to 63 percent (40 percent including maths and English.) Employer engagement has undoubtedly played its part in this, under inspirational leadership. Examination results, for example, are directly improved when BTEC students work in real environments such as the catering kitchens at the University of Manchester, or media students work with a film company.

Really, though, the impact is best measured by looking at the improved motivation of individual young people whose out-of-school environment can give them little incentive to work hard. The experience of being given attention and respect by adults who are clearly successful can be life changing for young people.

Nancy Hobbs mentions a particular student...

"The first time I met her in a mentoring session she had such an attitude! However, you could clearly see her potential and that given the opportunity she

would develop this. Gradually she changed the way she spoke to her peers and other mentors, and her confidence grew.”

“At the ‘Dragons’ Den’ presentation a student had his head down and didn’t seem to want to be there. By the end of the day he was fully engaged. It was great to see that change.”

Jane Delfino has many such stories – of another student for example, who at risk of dropping out, was switched on by his contact with serious adults.

“After he’d been on placement with the hospitality department at the University, an Academy Vice Principal who teaches him history made a written note that he’d never seen the student so animated and keen on his work. The boy had seen something that was within his reach.”

The student himself said, “You see these business people. They look smart, they think up ideas out of the blue, and you just want to be like them,” he said.

Cumulatively, these stories – and there are many -- speak of vastly improved life chances for young people who live in one of the most challenging areas of our country.

Manchester Academy. Employer Engagement. Key Points.

Sustainability.

Jane Delfino and colleagues work to build true lasting partnerships, being ready to drop unpromising leads and nurture serious partners.

Curriculum engagement.

At Manchester Academy, many partners directly engage with the curriculum – numeracy and literacy, BTEC courses.

Flexibility.

As partnerships develop, new ideas come along, and both sides have to be ready to explore them.

Soft skills.

Partners also engage with teamwork, interviewing, presentations and ‘pitches’, communication, appropriate interaction with adults. This is an enormously important part of their role.

Consistency.

Pinsent Masons organize their participants into teams so that there’s always cover if someone can’t come to the school. “A session is never cancelled.”

Ensuring a good experience for employer participants.

Whatever the corporate reason for a partner’s engagement, the key to sustainability and developing ideas lies in the satisfaction and enjoyment of the participants. The school clearly plays a key role in ensuring that the experience is as good and efficiently run as it can be.

Senior level engagement.

This works on both sides. Partnerships work best with active participation by people at decision making level – and, of course, with clear and practical support from the most senior leadership.

Impact.

Employer engagement is very clearly an important strand in general school improvement. It works at many levels, but is most visible in two ways –

- When there's direct involvement with a curriculum subject (for example a vocational placement that relates directly to a course-work module.)
- When the attitudes and aspirations of individual students are transformed by an engagement programme and their results consequently improve