

# London Schools Gold Club 2013/14

Woolwich Polytechnic School for Boys

‘Raising attainment and progress in a no excuses culture’

**MAYOR OF LONDON**

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## Introduction

This Account describes how determined, committed high quality staff have brought about substantial improvements in pupil performance through their pioneering work on developing Raising Achievement for Pupils (RAP) meetings. It explores how Woolwich Polytechnic's RAP meetings have become a powerful vehicle for challenging staff perceptions of pupils, directing their energies towards discussing solutions rather than dwelling on problems, whilst at the same time providing teachers with purposeful professional development with immediate classroom application. It illustrates the benefits of developing a laser sharp focus on individual pupils and establishing a culture in which rely more on personal interactions than paper. The account draws from a discussion with Tim Plumb, co-headteacher and their seminar 'Raising attainment and progress in a no excuses culture' in the Gold Club spring term 2013 programme.

## Brief summary

Woolwich Polytechnic has seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of its pupils achieving 5+ A\*-C GCSEs (English & Maths). These impressive achievements are the product of Woolwich's no excuses culture central to which are its **RAP meetings**. These tightly managed, high profile and high priority meetings take place from 8:30 – 9:00 each morning. Each meeting focuses on specific children at risk of underachieving. In attendance are representatives from all key subject areas, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Raising Standards Leader (RSL). The school's data manager provides the meetings with key progress data, whilst subject representatives provide comments on individual pupils in advance of the meetings.

An essential feature of the meetings is that they are **solutions focused**. There is a strong emphasis on identifying strategies that are proving effective in engaging individual pupils and then **transferring this knowledge** across subject areas and pastoral staff. Once strategies are agreed they must be implemented immediately and they are rigorously monitored.

Key outcomes:

- Pupil performance increased by up to 20% over three years.
- A culture that successfully fuses a high level of collegiality and with rigorous accountability.
- Much improved professional dialogue between staff about the needs of individual pupils.
- Powerful professional development for its staff.

## School context – Woolwich Polytechnic School for Boys

School Characteristics			
URN:	141163	Phase:	Secondary
Borough	Greenwich	NOR:	1349
Type of establishment:	Academy Converter	Age Range:	11-19
Religious character:	n/a	Gender:	Boys

Performance Data	
2013 % Pupils in low prior attainment band	28%
2013 % Pupil Premium (PP)	81%
2013 % PP achieving 5+ACEM inc equiv	68%
2013 % PP achieving 5+ACEM excluding equivs	60%
2013 % Pupils achieving Ebacc	37%
Ofsted Rating	1

### **Background: The impetus for the introduction of the RAP meetings**

In 2008 Woolwich Polytechnic School's pupils achieved 29% A\*-C (English & Maths) grades and were designated a National Challenge school. This shock to the system galvanised the leadership team to say that:

**'we are never going to be in this position again'**

and they resolved to seek out improvement strategies that would have an 'immediate and significant impact on pupil outcomes'.

Achieving effective, sustained improvement in pupil performance requires considerable effort and is demanding upon staff. The SLT recognised that they had (and still have!) an outstanding staff but perhaps the school was not using their time and skills effectively. A paradigm shift was needed and it took the form of the school's approach to meetings. The SLT concluded that meetings devoted to discussing broad strategies had much less practical impact in classrooms than meetings that focused upon individual pupils and their specific learning needs. The outcome was the introduction of RAP meetings.

In developing its RAP system the school drew upon its own resources, 'we didn't have time to go out and see what other people were doing', instead what it did do was to 'change the way we looked at the problem'.

Co-headteacher Tim Plumb points out that this step change in the school's performance has been achieved, critically, with largely the **same staff team** and with a constant pupil population.

### RAP meetings

RAP meetings take place weekly for each year group. All the meetings follow the same structure and are guided by the same principles. The key features are:

- Meetings are held from 8:00 – 8:30 every morning.
- In attendance are representatives from all key subjects, pastoral manager, the Inclusion Manager and the SLT; typically at least 10 staff will be present.
- Names of pupils to be discussed are identified in advance; typically 15 pupils will be considered.
- Departments and pastoral heads provide comments on the pupils in advance of the meeting.
- The Data Manager provides relevant data on the pupils: this is used to identify key questions about individual pupils.
- Teachers focus on exchanging solutions not problems.
- Strategies for individual students are agreed and the process of implementation starts that day. Individual pupils are seen by staff immediately after the meeting.

Discussing 15 pupils in 30 minutes is challenging but is achieved through focused chairing and a disciplined approach, developed over several years, by everyone present. Should it be necessary the meeting will reconvene at the end of the school day but this is relatively rare.

The table below provides an illustration of the information provided for RAP meetings. The ‘data question’ column briefly summarises the concerns whilst the ‘comments’ column is completed by relevant departments.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
1	Class	Surname	Forename	Data Question	Oct Prediction	English			Teacher	GCSE Result Aug 13	Oct Prediction	Maths			Teacher	Comment
2						Poly Target	EOY 9 Level	KS2 Level				Poly Target	EOY 9 Level	KS2 Level		
3	11W2			This student is a White British high prior attainer in English and will need a minimum of a B to make expected progress. What are the barriers to progress and how can they be overcome?	D1	B	6c	5c	NR	D	C3	A	5b	4a	LW	xxxx is strong verbally and has good controlled assessments, however he struggles with exams. He feels the pressure is too great and will often rush his answers and lose marks he is capable of getting with more care. Exam practise and targeted feedback from past papers are essential.
4	11T1			XXXX is down for 3 BTEC subjects but only 2 will count for the school. He is on the borderline for English and Maths - can he take GCSE Science instead of the BTEC?	D2	B	5b	4c	RA	F	D2	C	4b	3a	JP	XXXX will need a lot of support to attempt Core and Additional Science. He struggles to retain correct vocabulary and the definition of unfamiliar terms because of his EAL needs. If he agrees to attend Saturday school and is paired with a suitable peer mentor this may be achievable.
5	11T1			XXXX is very close in his core subjects. Why are his Geography and French so much lower? What needs to be done to secure him the Ebacc?	C3	C	5c		TL	D	C3	C	5c		MO	XXXX struggles with some topics - his PLC shows he must focus on physical geography in particular. I have set up a small group of students struggling with this area to attend after school twice a week for extra support, and XXXX will be invited to attend.

The solutions-focused culture of meetings provides a fertile context for the generation of creative solutions to problems, sometimes from unexpected sources. A good example of this is a child with erratic attendance who, on closer investigation, was only coming into school on the days he had geography. Clearly he enjoyed geography and had a very good relationship with his geography teacher. Solution: the geography teacher to adopt a mentoring role with the boy and to get him into school on the other days of the week.

Woolwich don't claim that RAP meetings provide instant solutions to all problems. Tim observes that the same problem could be discussed many times with new strategies being formulated, tried and failing. However, the doggedness of the RAP process provides the opportunity for someone to look at the problem afresh from a different perspective and to 'challenge misconceptions' about a student.

Pupils are told that they have been discussed at a RAP meeting, they are shown the data that has led to concerns being raised and they are told what was said about them. Sometimes the conversation with the pupil reveals further information which may result in a change of strategy or a reference back to a subsequent meeting. On occasions students have been invited to attend a RAP meeting and this has sometimes proved 'exceptionally powerful' particularly with sixth form students. This practice is something Tim would like to explore further along with the possibility of inviting parents to be present should a problem prove particularly intransigent.

### **Managing the RAP programme**

The RAP programme has a high profile. A deputy head, the RSL, oversees the RAP process and attends all RAP meetings. She in turn is supported by RSL for KS3, KS4, and KS5. Each department has a key person in each year group who has responsibility for getting information from teachers and providing key data to the meetings. This tight responsibility structure has a high level of accountability embedded within it and ensures that meeting time is not wasted because individuals are poorly prepared or key data is missing.

The RSL is responsible for making sure that agreed actions happen it is difficult for things to slip through the net because everything happens that day. Things don't get lost through long chains of accountability, the people in those meetings take the actions. The frequency of the RAP meetings means that monitoring is constant. If a pupil's name is still on the list 2/3 weeks later the approach taken is to go back and re-address the issue: 'Did we ask the right questions?' and to keep looking with the conviction that 'someone will have a solution'.

Meetings also throw up broader generic issues: Has data been moderated? How is information provided to meetings best organised? and so on.

Whilst there is a strong focus on getting the right information to meetings, Woolwich has avoided producing an overly bureaucratic process with lots of tick lists and recording of actions on pupil files. The focus is on action through conversation with the child and/or the adoption of a new teaching approach by a teacher. This approach reflects the school's action-oriented approach:

‘We are always thinking about short term impact to make lasting impact’

A crucial part of Woolwich’s monitoring is the external scrutiny from visitors who sit on their RAP meetings in order to learn about but also feedback on what they have seen. This feedback is used to refine their system further. Woolwich’s model has evolved over a period of 8 years and continues to do so. This is a restless school.

### **Powerful professionals creating powerful solutions**

What strategies did the school use to motivate and engage staff in the RAP programme? Staff are regarded as Woolwich’s greatest asset and the SLT had great faith that they would respond positively to the initiative because of their innate professionalism and concern for young people. Staff were, and are, eager to come to meetings to talk about children and to share their professional knowledge and understanding of ‘what works’. They want to come to meetings which always discuss matters that directly concern and interest them, whereas some other meetings frankly might feel a little divorced from their needs or even boring.

There is a wealth of research evidence that some of the most effective Continuous Professional Development (CPD) often takes place in-house when staff come together to discuss ‘their children’ and strategies for engaging them in learning and this is certainly the case at Woolwich. The pacey RAP meetings mean that staff learn very quickly from their colleagues.

‘The RAP meetings are the best CPD we have ever given to staff’

A typical example is the student whose weak literacy skills meant that with particular examination questions he wasn’t able to demonstrate his knowledge and understanding of history. This was a block and the history teacher didn’t know how to overcome it. When he raised this at a RAP meeting immediately his English teacher responded ‘I know exactly the things you are talking about. We had exactly the same problem and these are the things that will work for you’.

‘This is powerful real time learning for teachers. It’s a collegiate approach and teachers leave with something they can apply in their classrooms immediately. I can’t think of a better use of anyone’s time’.

### **Advice to other schools**

The co-head offers this advice to other schools considering introducing RAP meetings:

- Develop a culture of ‘positive dissatisfaction’. Never think you have cracked it.
- Engage the whole staff from the start. Staff will respond positively to initiatives which value their professionalism and collegiality.
- Review your current meetings. Are they making an immediate direct impact on pupils in classrooms?
- Get the right students on the agenda – make sure the data is accurate.
- Have the right staff around the table – make sure you have people that know the students and can take the necessary actions; it took some time to get this right at Woolwich.

- Keep the conversations focused on solutions for that student. Don't spent too much time describing the problem at meetings: You can achieve this by making sure that the problem-description comes before the meeting. Keep asking 'what can we do'?
- Focus on personal responsibility for action rather than paper trails.

### **What next?**

- Use this Account of Practice and the video below to stimulate discussion at a staff meeting or at a staff training event.
- Visit Woolwich Polytechnic and sit in on a RAP meeting. Contact Anna Hoang, Headteachers' PA – [ahoang@woolwichpoly.co.uk](mailto:ahoang@woolwichpoly.co.uk).

### **Further information**

An excellent video describing the RAP process is available on Woolwich Polytechnic's YouTube account.

This case study has been produced as a resource for the wider dissemination of exceptional practice of Woolwich Polytechnic Boys Schools, a member of the 2013 London Schools Gold Club. The material has been developed based on the school's seminar workshop on 'Raising attainment and progress in a no excuses culture'.

Full information on the London Schools Gold Club and details of fully funded, CPD opportunities for London schools in the 2014-15 school-to-school support programme led by 2014 Gold Club schools will be published during October 2014 at: [www.londonschoolsgoldclub.org.uk](http://www.londonschoolsgoldclub.org.uk)

