

Project: School Quality and Teacher Education (SQTE)

Interview with Phil Akerman

Executive Headteacher of St Paul's Way Trust School, Tower Hamlets, London

St Paul's Way Trust School is an average-sized secondary comprehensive school with a very high proportion of disadvantaged pupils and of pupils whose first language is not English. It is situated in Tower Hamlet, City of London.

More than 80% of the pupils speak English as an additional language, more than 65% come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The school was a failing school 10 years ago. However, in spite of challenging circumstances, the school today achieves outstanding progress and superb outcomes for its pupils. They also achieve impressive university/career destinations.



The interview with Phil Akerman (right) was conducted on the 26th of February 2019 in London. by Roland Bernhard (left). It is an example of many interviews that are currently being conducted in the SQTE project.

The SQTE-project – conducted at the University of Oxford and the University of Salzburg examines how head teachers and teachers in highly effective and improving schools in England understand and develop school quality and how their experiences and knowledge can be made useful for quality development in schools and curriculum development for initial teacher education and continuous professional development.

Interview transcript

Interviewer: So, another time thanks very much for this possibility to interview you.

Mr. Akerman: No problem.

Interviewer: And to also audiotape you and the first question would be could you please describe what is your position and role in the school and what is your professional background?

Mr. Akerman: I joined St Paul's Way Trust School in 2012, prior to that I was assistant head teacher at a large school in East London called Robert Clack School and I moved to St Paul's Way

Trust School as a deputy head teacher with main responsibility for Teaching and Learning. And following that I was promoted to senior deputy head and then associate head and then acting head and then finally executive head and over that time period to now. So yes, that's my background, prior to that I studied chemistry at The University of Liverpool and Freiburg and I worked for a year after that in project coordination in Tottenham which is a part of North London where they were experiencing higher levels of youth crime and violent crime. I was involved with a number of projects that were seeking to tackle that before I began my teacher training.

Interviewer: Could you please describe why you think your school is an effective school?

Mr. Akerman: Lots of different reasons. Ultimately I think we've got a very, very strong vision and purpose that has been supported by a really forward thinking Trust. So what attracted me to the school in the first place was the fact that the school positioned itself really cleverly with a number of external partners and its

trust partners which included a number of really high quality universities in addition to businesses that were working together to enrich the education offered here at St Paul's Way Trust School. So it meant not only could you do what you normally do as an effective school in the classroom but you are able to lever therein lots of different opportunities for the young people through partnerships and programs that would very much help to raise aspirations for the young people. I found that a very attractive offer and very much wanted to be part of that. At the time we were, a 'requires improvement' school according to Ofsted's criteria and we needed to rapidly improve outcomes and also quality of Teaching and Learning but we were able to simultaneously look at all the programs that raised the aspirations that meant that the young people were likely to engage more readily in different programs.

Interviewer: So, the school improved in the last five years dramatically or let's say in the last ten years, how did you do that?

Mr. Akerman: Well, first of all I can't take credit for the initial work that was done at all. The school was seen to be failing and at that time an interim executive board was put in place to create a different governance arrangement for the school and they set up a new head teacher, Grahame Price. He was appointed and he quickly realised that relationships in the schools were dysfunctional and that was on a staff level, staff to students, students to students but also school to community and he very, very quickly focused on building relationships, making that really important in the sense of working cohesively together to have really high standards and aspirations for the young people and the community. The old building looked very much like a prison, had fences and barriers, it was a kind of segregation almost from the community. That building was demolished and this fantastic new space was designed and opened up - Grahame was very, very clear that he wanted this to be part of the community. So it's on the street, there are no fences here at the front, the school, has a very welcoming reception in the sense of connection to the community and this was very, very important.

Interviewer: So, you said building relationships: How did you do it, what were the actions you took to build relationships?

Mr Akerman: Grahame used to say that we are very much here for the young people and therefore the focus needs to be on that. As adults we have a choice about where we work, but the young people who are here do not have that choice and therefore, you know, we need to work together towards the same outcome which is to produce really high quality standards in the classroom. Lots of meetings with students, lots of meetings with families, challenging standards where learning

which was not where it should be, it's a combination really of the different strategies working in tandem. So, there was a very clear format that was brought in at the time about teaching and learning and it was a five part lesson. In one sense it's probably not the exact pedagogy that was important because you can get lots of variants of, you know, lesson templates and things like that, but it was about everyone signing up to the fact that this was going to be done consistently across the school. Prior to that there much variation in the way that teaching was done and so that was when the standard five part lesson was introduced and modelled by lead practitioners in the school.

So a number of, lead practitioners, in different subject areas, were appointed to model the expectations and standards. The teaching took place in open classrooms and colleagues were invited to observe these sessions; to support this, coaching work took place. Gradually the quality of their Teaching and Learning improved. There was a sense of professionalizing the teacher training that was given and also emphasis was placed on the importance of continued professional development and trying to find a new, systematic mentoring process for teachers rather than on an ad hoc basis. The CPD (continuing professional development) program is published and every Thursday, for all new teachers, includes a wide range of areas including, positive behaviour for learning/behaviour management and assessment feedback; sessions take place after school. Although these sessions were primarily for new teachers, other colleagues who needed to improve in specific areas were also directed to join the relevant sessions.

And of course in some areas it was about tackling standards. So, a restructure took place as well. Staff who could demonstrate positive impacts and the necessary skills were able to apply for posts and thereby lead the school forward in many different areas. You could say a number of different factors were working in tandem. So, there is a clarity on the teaching and learning expectations, and clear monitoring processes around that. Clear lesson observation cycles were introduced and carefully reviewed. I remember sitting after my first cycle in 2012, looking through every single lesson observation, looking for patterns. What were the common themes emerging from this and then how we were then going to move that forward through professional development sessions and coaching opportunities. It was a time of relentless focus on the details, ultimately many work scrutinizes took place at the time, reviewing teachers' books and recognising and giving positive feedback to colleagues when good practice was observed. Where we noticed areas of poor standard, it was about putting a plan of action in place, sitting down with the head of the subject area, making adjustments so that the young people would receive a structured program and accurate feedback. As you can imagine, it did mean putting in a lot of support proactively, and where that failed it did mean formalizing support plans for those teachers and setting really clear targets with timeframes, and follow-ups, within which improvements had to be demonstrated.

So there is a real sense of drive but drive for a good reason, it is providing quality for the young people. There is that side but at the same time, the pastoral systems were also being put in place to support the youngsters who were facing challenges so year team leaders - it was more often called heads of year - were put in place. In addition, student achievement coordinators, who were full time non-teaching members of staff were put in place as well who could take on much of the support work with youngsters. For instance, perhaps a student was coming in to school from quite a difficult situation at home therefore they might not quite be in the frame of mind to go into a lesson, they might need someone to talk to for a period of time to get them ready and then get them reconnected into the learning. So key roles like that were established. I'm jumping around a little bit.

Interviewer: That's, that's perfect.

Mr. Akerman: There was a series of core expectations that were published for our staff, which we called the 'non-negotiables' at the time and that goes back into the teaching work. For instance, teachers were expected to have a seating plan that was clearly mapped out, using student data, to groups of students who worked well together. Teachers use prior obtained data and thought carefully about the set-up of their classroom and using that data to plan the lessons effectively, again providing the right stretch and challenge for the youngsters and of course, emphasis on homework, checking that homework was being set and delivered. We involved the students in this process and introduced student 'take-over day' so the students, supported by their teachers, actually planned and delivered a lesson - it was about trying to raise the engagement of students in their learning and taking ownership of their learning. You know, that was key along with the establishment of a new student council that helped create the new uniform for the school, it was in a sense a 'buy in'. Many trips took place, not to theme parks and such like which I think had previously happened but a lot of curriculum trips, trips to the theatre, trips to museums, trips to businesses, trips to universities, very much saying to students that there is so much on your doorstep and we're going to help you access that. With the university trips we were saying, you know this could be you in a few years' time, so we are going to start you early on that path.

We have definitely pushed that, we are proud of the pathways that the young people follow, our 6th form is becoming increasingly successful and last year we had the highest performance of 6th forms in the local authority by some way. You know 96% of the students went to university, 60% of which were Russell Group universities and, it is the sense that, 'you know you can do it' and I think a lot of that is because throughout their time they go on these trips, opening their eyes to their options. For example, even in year nine when the young people choose their GCSE subjects, we actually hold that event for students and their families at Queen Mary University, which is our lead Trust partner. It is quite a logistical feat however we take the whole year group over, their families meet us over there and everyone is seated in the lecture theatres and watch presentations about the different subject areas. In addition someone from the university presents on what university life can be like; there is, of course, a very clear subliminal message there that is being sent as well as the overt message which is, actually this could be you, if you choose it, if you want it'. It is not necessarily appropriate for every child but what we knew was that there weren't enough young people from disadvantaged backgrounds choosing that road, so actually, to slightly overemphasize that and those pathways seemed highly appropriate because we knew an equality of opportunity for the young people should exist

There are senior leaders being absolutely focused on student achievement and regular student progress meetings where they are pouring through the data on each child, looking at how they are performing in their different subject areas. Where an underachievement is flagged up meetings with key staff from the subject leads to the heads of year are convened and a plan put in place for this group or young person. It may be a question of attendance, maybe they are not getting the support they need at home - do they have available resources? Sometimes it needs to be tailored to each child, sometimes a group of youngsters can be put together and you can do something targeted with that group specifically. But it is that sense of a relentless focus, if we feel an intervention is not working we move on to what we can do as a next step. It is that sense of expectation really. We know youngsters have problems but then I think in some schools they say 'oh it's because of this and that they are not achieving'. Well, what is the next step then, you do not just leave it.

Interviewer: And when you think about the last ten years: What would you say what was the most important thing that had the most important impact on the improvement of the school?

Mr. Akerman: It is a really, difficult question. I mean, from my leaning, my emphasis on teaching and learning I would say you have got to focus on the Teaching and Learning quality because that is where the children are spending the majority of their day, at school in classrooms with teachers. So, if you get that right, if the quality is there and the relationships are there, teachers have greater impact with their students. Now of course there are a lot of preconditions that you need to establish to make sure that young people are really receptive to learning and these whole school systems mop up issues and help youngsters who are facing barriers to learning. But if your provision is high quality, you get less behaviour issues and you could get less attendance issues. You know that the youngster who has low confidence, who has not got a history in their family of high expectation about education, whose parents may have had a poor experience, cannot come into a classroom which is disorganized, where the teacher doesn't have a sense of relationship and connection to them. There would be no sense of belief or confidence being injected into the young person. It is no wonder that they might actually decide, 'oh I don't have to go in today'.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned in terms of teaching the five part lesson could you describe that a little bit?

Mr. Akerman: Well, it is some time ago now and over time we've created more freedom so for example now we allow teachers to use the different templates that they would like but I think we called it - I'm not sure I got this right - review try, review model/ try model apply and review. I can look it up for you and just make sure we got words, but in essence that was about connecting to prior learning than it was about introducing a new idea, making sure it was really explicitly modelled by the teacher and then it was after you have modelled it then it was: okay have a go and that might be trying together initially so that the youngsters have confidence to engage and once they have kind of done and they have got a bit of confidence, you know, they can see that they are having some success, then it is about applying that in, you know, more independently and then the review process of the learning process, what have we learnt, how have we learnt it and there is a cognition around that. It was quite a heavy structure if you like, that we've got poor standards so actually dictating a consistent structure is quite helpful and for vulnerable youngsters who might walk into six different classrooms and experience six really varied ways of learning, it's actually quite reassuring for them, isn't it, if they are getting a consistent lesson structure, they will identify each part of the lesson. I think that brought a consistency and a shared language that people could use. What else? Teams were expected to meet regularly, to focus on Teaching and Learning within their faculties, they would look at different lessons and share their ideas and resources around the structure of lessons.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you have a strong focus on continual professional development. So, how do you train the teachers who are here in your school?

Mr. Akerman: Okay, we became a teaching school which partly came about because we were having success in working with university partners, training teachers and offering a high quality professional programme, good offers for NQTs (newly qualified teachers). We worked with a number of schools in the area actually to develop that program. So, how do we do it? We make sure that there is a comprehensive induction day for them before they join the school at which we go through school policies and procedures, getting them comfortable, get them meeting staff across the school, framing their expectations. We would, for example, share good examples of student books where there is good marking and feedback, so the new teachers are already getting a sense

of what standards are expected when they start at the school. They have an appointed subject mentor within the team but also an NQT coordinator across the school who establishes a weekly program for them; they have weekly sessions. This often involves pre-reading around particular educational issues. As they progress through the year they receive either individual/bespoke coaching if necessary, or if they are not making the progress that they need in certain areas we will put more tailored support in place for them. In the last term they will conduct a classroom based study, just a small scale piece of research where they identify a particular area of practice they want to develop and they do some research around that and then come up with a test, hypothesis which they will then try that out and share it with the wider school community through our teaching and learning briefings.

Interviewer: So, they are working on a topic and then share with the whole school what they were researching on?

Mr. Akerman: Exactly right. So, for example one of our teachers in the languages faculty last year was doing some work around how they could use poetry within model foreign language teaching and how they could use that as a vehicle for developing the student language. Another teacher was looking at knowledge organizers and how they could be used to support students. Sometimes we have had ones about light rewards and the different types of rewards that might motivate youngsters. But in essence, it is about trying to get teachers really thinking about that practice but doing it in a way where they can see a benefit for themselves. So, it is not abstract research about children over there, it is the children in my class.

Interviewer: What do you think teachers need to learn in the school to really contribute effectively to the quality of the school?

Mr. Akerman: Can you say that again?

Interviewer: What do you think that teachers need to learn in a school in continual professional development to contribute to the highest extent possible to the quality of the school?

Mr. Akerman: To make a contribution.

Interviewer: To make a real contribution to school quality.

Mr. Akerman: I think they need to be absolutely clear on what the school expectations are. To begin with they need help defining how that is to be made explicit because then you are pointing to where you need to be. If you do not start off with the high expectations then it's, well, anything can go and you will find your way might not be the best way. I think you also then need to ensure that there is, alongside those high expectations, really high levels of support. A supportive environment where, as a teacher you know if you are having a challenge you are not on your own, you can talk to people within your team and that it is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of being a reflective professional. So I would be expecting people to say I am really struggling with this class, these people have struggled so far but and something doesn't seem to be working so they can ask someone to come in and observe.

I can give you the example of this. One of the NQTs came to me, she was really struggling with her Year 12 chemistry lesson, I am a chemist and she was able to come to me, I think I was an Associate Headteacher at the time. She said 'you know they should be really motivated, you know they have chosen chemistry but they are not quite connecting', so I said I could come and observe the lesson if she liked. Now that could be quite threatening in some ways if you are a senior manager coming in, but she was very open and I was able to spot some things and offered to model some

practice and helped her make a medium term plan for that topic area. I returned and assisted again and saw her really move forward. So that is that, there should be a professional atmosphere where you can work together to improve outcomes. And I think that's important, a sense that they can contribute, therefore every Thursday we have a Teaching and Learning briefing, during which I could be sharing a piece of practice or it might be clarifying a particular part of our policies or it might be a teacher sharing some outcomes that they have had in a particular series of activities or a style of teaching that's really worked well. It is a platform and, we've had teachers from every level across the school present their ideas, from senior leaders to early stage teachers.

Interviewer: Could you describe that a little more?

Mr. Akerman: The teaching and learning briefing?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Akerman: It's just 15 minutes, it's a window in the morning where all the teachers come together and there is a program of different teaching focus really. We have done a series on assessment within the classroom, effective assessment methods - so we might have three kind of Thursday briefings, one about hinge questioning for example is a recent one, key moments in the lesson where you have some really well designed questions and really well designed assessment methods to judge, how many learners have really got it. You are not just talking about asking one question and one student but you are talking about questions that very quickly allow you to establish that 23 out of my 30 students seems to get this and seven who do not. Having that in mind you can then take a different route. So it might be that the 23 do more challenging work and you can have a quick tutorial over with those seven learners to help them move forward. A colleague shared some strategies that he was using around that and then, you know, there is, you continue on that assessment thing to help drive that. You have long been an effective form tutor, a whole series on that. We have had our deaf learners, (we have 24 students who are hearing impaired) to come along to the staff briefing to share the experience of what it's like being a deaf learner in a classroom, what they are really like and what's difficult for them and if a teacher is teaching in a particular way and how that can present problems for them. So this happens every week on a Thursday morning which brings an emphasis on the teaching and learning.

Interviewer: Very interesting. And what do you think does a teacher need to learn in initial teacher education to become a good teacher, a good teacher in the circumstances of this school.

Mr. Akerman: Of this school? One is strategies and a pedagogy for learning, another one is about effective communication on how you can lead learners through a series of stages of complex ideas that build their confidence. I think it's strategies to manage behaviour, strategies to manage their own emotions. When you are managing difficult young people, you are going to be challenged by youngsters in certain environments and they will test you and so a lot of it is about how you behave and how you respond and how you stay calm and of how to be explicitly in that moment. What else would I say, it is important to have a sense of different learning needs. So increasingly we have learners with complex needs coming into the organization, we've got 84 children just on this site who have education healthcare plans (EHCP) it can be quite difficult for a teacher who has been academically successful to put themselves in a different position. So, what if I can't actually decode language easily, decode words easily, how would I access the curriculum in this case? So, you know, giving them exposure to that earlier on is quite important. I think it's quite a difficult question actually because universities have been working at this for years.

Interviewer: Well, the study is also about making connections from the practice to teacher education. So, what do we need to learn in teacher education to be good teachers in the circumstances we have in the practice?

Mr. Akerman: I think it is that combination between high quality thinking, isn't it, but a lot of opportunity for doing, trying and being coached in it. I know for example as a trainee teacher being able to practice complex demonstrations for example, which can be really exciting. During my teacher training year it was key to me going into a classroom to excite young people to take science. If you do not get that opportunity there is no way you are going to do a complex demonstration in front of thirty cheeky youngsters if you are feeling nervous and you have not had that opportunity to practice. I think it has to be that combination of theoretical underpinning but lots of opportunity to try things out in low key, low stress environments so you can have the confidence to do that in more highly pressurized environments. I think that's important.

Interviewer: You mentioned behaviour management, how do you do that in this school?

Mr. Akerman: A really clear vision of the young people and when we engage with the youngsters we do not shout at them. Now there was shouting that historically had gone on, when the school was dysfunctional. Now what we do - we say first of all as an adult you have to model the type of behaviour that you expect from young people. They may have done something wrong but if you are going to get into their face and shout at them, then you are modelling the type of behaviour that you are saying you do not want from them so that's a complete no go. However, you can still challenge the young person by saying 'I have noticed that you are doing this, the vision of the school is about you getting ahead and being really successful so how is this behaviour going to help you achieve that?' It's giving them the opportunity to talk through and walk through a restorative conversation to the point where you turn it very quickly into a conversation about their learning and how what they are doing is disrupting their own learning, disrupting the learnings of others. Let's work together - it is not us and them, it is not teacher versus student, it is us working together, it is me and your parents all working together, so very quickly orientating the conversation from a negative into where are we going together. It is really important if everyone in the organization is doing that.

Interviewer: So, what will you do when students really behave badly?

Mr. Akerman: So, it's interesting because we are just reviewing this at the moment and because I think you constantly have to revisit this. First of all, I think visible consistencies, so for example, we want to see colleagues out on the threshold of the classroom every lesson change and we want teachers to be standing at the door to welcome the students, to meet and greet them into the classroom and get them settled quickly. It is about having clear routines but when they do misbehave, it is about saying, 'I have noticed this, I need you to do this', which gives them space to make the right choice. If that is continuing and you obviously warned them again, you might try a strategy of moving them, but again, it's this the most important thing is the relationships thing behind it. Now clearly if there was disruption going on that is then affecting the learning of others you need support systems in place and we have those in the form of each faculty having a space where a young person can go and take timeout. We then have a referral system which means that, where necessary, the year team can come in and support that child, to find out what's going on, is it something that is going on at home, is it that they just feel unable to achieve in that particular area. You can look at support programs for those young people and then try and reconnect them with the teacher but the relationship sits behind that.

Interviewer: So, what's important for you in the leadership of the school?

Mr. Akerman: In terms of learning, it is about being really clear that we have the highest expectations for our young people. It is all about the learners and us working together to find the best way so we are going to constantly reflect on the practice to try and achieve the best and we are going to constantly reinvent and find new creative solutions to problems. We are never going to sit back and just allow things to be a problem but we, using different levers and vehicles in the school, will say we can find a way for every young person. So, it is not acceptable to say, 'Oh he is not achieving because of this', it is to work together to find a solution. I think it is about being clear with that message, being consistent, with that message being clear, that we have to provide high quality teaching and learning every day. That we will monitor that and we will provide support to help if there are issues. We have skilful pastoral leaders who are going to support youngsters who are disadvantaged. And yes, emphasis on the pathways as well is really key, that sense of where young person is going and how do we orientate them onto that pathway. So, when you meet our current Director of Learning for the 6th form, she works very much in partnership with another colleague who is key in our careers provision. You will hear more about the offer for the young people in every year, the additional programs that will raise their expectations. The sense of pathway is key.

Interviewer: You mentioned to my first question or second question what you have done to improve in this last year to form a senior leadership team, a good senior leadership team. So, could you describe how the senior leadership team works in your school, what are their tasks and how do they operate?

Mr. Akerman: In many regards it is quite typical. You tend to have a senior leader who is in charge of pastoral behaviour and inclusion area and you have a senior leader who is in charge of teaching and learning. For us we also have Directors of Learning in charge of different key stages. So, Key Stage 3, is comprised of years 7, 8, 9 and Key Stage 4, years 10 and 11. We have a Director of learning for the 6th form. We also have a senior leader with responsibility for Additional Educational Needs (AEN) who would work with the AEN team as we have high numbers of students with learning needs. You see we have a clear accountability structure in place. We, as a leadership team, meet every morning.

Interviewer: This is an important aspect, this practical aspect, that you meet every morning/ and so how can we design good leadership teams?

Mr. Akerman: I am not saying this is the answer, I am just saying this is what we have done. So, we meet every morning at 8:30am to 8:45am. It is a good opportunity to touch base and go through your day so colleagues know where we are at and where there might be pressure points on that particular day. We also go through different things on different days so for example, currently on a Monday we go through our individual priority for that week. On a Tuesday we look at either attendance data or at data on behaviour. This is what we were looking at this morning, the breakdown of the behavioural issues by year group, different types of issues, whether these students had internal exclusion or not, differences by gender, where there is a pattern in ethnic groups, where the students have additional needs or not or whether they are pupil premium, and so on. Also if there have been any bullying incidents.

Interviewer: The last weeks?

Mr. Akerman: Exactly, so for the last week if there has been a bullying incident, has it been closed down? Has it been investigated? A sense of follow-up around that. We go through pending staffing issues on a Wednesday., On a Thursday we then look at site issues, so in a sense of I expect my team to be walking around the site picking up on any issues, if something is broken, if there is a

mark on the wall? You want that picked up because you want that dealt with quickly mirroring the sense of high expectations around your environment -it reinforces to the students what this is. We expect the best, we are providing the best for you. On a Friday we review all the trips that have happened that week, and we look at the trips that will be happening the following week. We share any good practice that we have seen across the school and any key messages and announcements. This is then fed into our weekly bulletin and our weekly Monday morning briefing for all staff during which we thank colleagues, for example, arranging different visits where they have gone over and, over and above, organized a theatre trip etc.

Interviewer: That is/ official procedure of thanking the teachers?

Mr. Akerman: Yes, every Monday morning, I will thank colleagues for trips and workshops or for particular events that have taken place and then I would give any key announcements for that coming week.

Interviewer: To all the staff?

Mr. Akerman: To all the staff, yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Akerman: So, that would be on a Monday. And then there is a longer meeting, we meet every Tuesday after school from 4:00 till 6:00 pm and this is a whole host of different things.

Interviewer: All the teachers meet?

Mr. Akerman: No, no the senior leadership team.

Interviewer: Senior leadership team?

Mr. Akerman: Yes. And we might have presentations from members of staff who want to introduce a new initiative or it might be that we are doing a particular focus so last night for example we looked at students' books together as a leadership team identifying where standards were high and where they weren't as high as expected. We are meeting again to design a plan about how we can improve, improve where we feel the standards are and where they should be.

Interviewer: So, how important do you think is parental involvement for the quality of the school?

Mr. Akerman: Really important. You have to be sending the same messages to the young people and you need to get the parents to buy in to that vision. With the most challenging students that requires a lot of time. You have to sit and listen to families and get them on board somehow.

Interviewer: So, in an Ofsted inspection review it is mentioned that you manage 90% of all the parents to come in and buy in on parent initiatives.

Mr. Akerman: You have to remember we have not been in Ofsted since March 2013, that process was quite new at that time. The surveys we carry out with parents regularly tell us that parents are very pleased with the education, the teaching. But we have identified that they are less happy about our communication, we had several responses from families who felt that communication would be an area that we need to agree on. So now we have, as a leadership team, to take that information and say: "Right okay this is the gap, what are we going to do about it?" Therefore we have now created a drop in session with a member of staff who parents can meet and lock down a particular issue that perhaps they felt hasn't been dealt with effectively. This is then escalated up to the leadership team for us to reflect on.

Interviewer: So, what possibilities do they have to buy in?

Mr. Akerman: We have coffee mornings that take place where parents can come in and meet, staff, each other as well as members of different community organisations. We have a member of staff in charge of organizing those but he will sometimes ask the year team leaders to come and present on a particular issue. Sometimes it might be something about e-safety, sometimes it might be about a new initiative as was the case recently where we banned the use of mobile phones during the school day for youngsters.

Interviewer: Okay, that is very interesting.

Mr. Akerman: We said that we no longer wanted them to be in the school. First of all, we approached the parents and said that we were considering asking youngsters not to have their phones out anymore during the school day. Typically, we had allowed them to have them out at break and lunch time but we are finding that too many of them were stuck on their phones, they were not interacting with each other as much as they could, we wanted them to take different opportunities, to talk and socialize. Also social media sometimes can have a negative influence on behaviour so it was something that we were keen to do. Colleagues were asked their thoughts, then we took the idea to the students and we met with the student council who responded: "Oh we don't like that idea very much". But then we explained the rationale behind it and through conversations some of them begin to understand why we were doing it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Akerman: And then there was a whole series of assemblies where we spoke to the students, and then in their form groups after which the letter went home., I think it was then a two-week period where, we were saying: "Right, you know, it's two weeks to go, it's one week to go and then it was, that's it".

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Akerman: So it is about change, managing that change appropriately and that was key to both families and students but what else do we do? Parent Evenings obviously - for all families. Sometimes we run focus group sessions for particular subject areas where a subject team might introduce some revision materials for them. Most recently we did something called 20 and 20, so if a student is building towards their exams we sit down with parents and gave them 20 tasks, quite punchy tasks so that they can support their children at home with preparation for their examinations. You know, some children will say, 'oh I have got to revise but I don't know how to do that'. If by showing the parents, these are 20 tasks that we would like you to ensure your children will do, it's very clear. There are also many meetings during the day inviting families in and talking about issues. I myself had a two-and-a-half-hour meeting on Friday with some parents; first of all the first hour was pretty much listening, if they are angry and upset and then they felt hurt and then we could move the conversation forward and say 'how are we going to solve that problem together?' But that takes time and a sense of empathy.

Interviewer: I realize we are a little out of time but we've, I don't know how your timeframe is, but if there is some place for one more question?

Mr. Akerman: I think it would be worth speaking to my colleagues and at the end I could perhaps get time. We could pause now and then I could see.

Interviewer: Yeah, perfect that would be so great.

Mr. Akerman: Later on before you go.

Interviewer: Okay, thanks very much.

Mr. Akerman: No problem.