

It's a blustery autumn day at Castle Hill Infant and Junior Schools in Ipswich, but the welcome is warm. It's what they do - for visitors and pupils alike. Headteacher Gemma Andrews explains: "We shake the children's hands every morning to welcome them to the classroom." It's a simple, formal handshake, she says, that speaks of ambition and aspiration. "We want them to be able to go to a job interview one day, look someone in the eye and shake their hand with confidence."

It's one of the many measures the head has put in place since taking over the two schools two years ago. But in common with some of the other changes, parents weren't immediately on board. "They didn't understand why we were doing it and thought it was weird." However, attitudes began to change once the effect started to become apparent. Gemma recalls: "A parent of ours had her children invited to a family day event at the private school where she works, and she said, 'Do you know what, Mrs Andrews, my children shook the headteacher's hand and introduced themselves', and she then got it. And once you make that breakthrough, it starts to permeate and people understand."

There's a clear lesson there that exemplifies Gemma's time in charge: stick at it. The head is quick to admit it hasn't been easy, and the challenges have been steep, but the fruits of the schools' recent labours are now very much in evidence.

TWO INTO ONE

Yes, it's Castle Hill Infant and Junior Schools (plural), but that doesn't tell the full story. While they are two separate schools on paper, Castle Hill operates as one school - although not for the purposes of Ofsted. The infants is rated as good following an inspection earlier in the year, while the juniors requires improvement, awaiting reinspection, "for which we'd hope to get good," says Gemma.

The head explains there was a historical discrepancy between the schools: "The infant school hadn't been inspected for a while after it got outstanding status in 2006. But the junior school was sitting in the deep, dark pits of special measures." But there was a communication problem, too. "Just three years ago the two schools didn't talk to each other. They weren't even friendly."

It was a very odd situation, Gemma admits, with "a big blame game going on". However, this dated all the way back to when the schools were constructed in the fifties. "I read back through an old diary they used to keep and from what the headteacher had written, you could see the cracks had started to appear back then. You could see the two schools were going to be very separate, albeit they share a boiler and the grounds."



"Anything in the classroom used as a shaming tool was taken down"

Throughout Ofsted's existence, the junior school has hovered around grades three to four constantly, says Gemma. The original arrangement was that she would work alongside the interim head for half a term, but he decided he couldn't continue and left. Also, in her first year proper, Bright Tribe was hit by scandal over its finances and subsequently closed. The school was re-brokered to a different academy, ASSET Education, last year.

"So I might not be a good advert for anyone thinking, 'Headship looks good!'" jokes Gemma.

Soon, however, the schools were working in tandem, both physically and in spirit. "I came in and building work was happening, so there is now a corridor that joins the two schools together, and we've juggled things so there isn't an infant school and junior school building wise."

So they left and the schools didn't really have a head. An interim head travelled down from Liverpool for a little while, and then I arrived, in 2017."

The early days of Gemma's tenure didn't go as planned. The original arrangement was that she would work alongside the interim head for half a term, but he decided he couldn't continue and left. Also, in her first year proper, Bright Tribe was hit by scandal over its finances and subsequently closed. The school was re-brokered to a different academy, ASSET Education, last year.

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5 IDEAS TO MAGPIE FROM Castle Hill

- Bring children on board by asking their opinion. "We've got a form that says 'When things go wrong', so that they can write down their thoughts and we can use that as a basis for our restorative conversations," says Gemma.
- Encourage collaboration among pupils logistically. Gemma says: "We put year groups together rather than having them spread out, so they could work as a team and children could move between the classrooms."
- Reprimand in private and praise in public. "Our job is to teach these children, not shame them," says Gemma. "It's about engaging in a restorative conversation."
- Recognise the difference between sympathy and empathy. Jennifer says: "We need to understand that feeling sorry for the children is not going to help them move forward. It's about saying we understand what they're going through and we're going to give them support to be successful."
- Build changes on solid foundations and consider the character of the school. Castle Hill leaders used their experience, research and knowledge of the school's culture to decide on the way forward.



Pupil Voice



Alfie

I like maths. We have 'dos', where you have to write down the question and answer it with the method you've been learning. 'Think' is where they ask you harder questions, and then 'solve' is up another level.



Blal

I enjoy doing English because we do a cold write and a hot write. First you do the cold write and then you improve on that, and once you get on to your hot write, you do a story or a diary.



Ivo

The last couple of years in this school have been amazing. It's got much better because of the headteacher and now everyone's working together. We've got better stuff to do now and we're loving our lessons.



Ima

I sometimes struggle with learning but I feel supported. I'm a house captain. I wanted to do something in my last year to make the school a better place. I was very nervous for my interview. I was shaking.

2 NEW BROOM

The schools were obviously lacking in direction, but they were very open to new ideas