



CATERHAM SCHOOL

Caterham School - Nominated for Independent Schools Award 2013 Education Initiative of the Year

Learning to Learn at Caterham School

Independent schools are under huge pressure to produce exam results. Our greatest fear was that our students were leaving here with outstanding grades (we are firmly established in the top 50 independent schools in the country), but not the tools to flourish at university and beyond because they had just been well prepared for the demands of the examination system. We wanted to achieve the same grades, or better, but in a different way; by teaching students to be metacognitive and manage their own learning.

Thus the “Learning to Learn” initiative was born – a programme uniting students of all ages, teachers, and parents in one common aim to make our students true independent, self-sufficient learners. We wanted in particular to train and influence the parent body; children spend more time at home than in school, thus advice given in school can sometimes be undermined by the well-meaning parent e.g. the common fallacy that no child can learn whilst listening to music. The quality of teaching at Caterham is of a consistently high standard (we were the only independent school in the country to be in the top 40 for both Value-Added and raw results in 2011) and our classroom philosophy has long been to create an atmosphere of enquiry amongst our students. The Learning to Learn programme was therefore aimed at providing the pillars outside of the existing curriculum on which to build independent learning and thinking.

How the need was identified

The average school leaver will have between 10 and 14 different jobs by the age of 38. We are failing our students if they do not leave Caterham with a portfolio of transferable skills that will help them to excel at university and to cope with career changes. We recognised the need to teach topics such as thinking skills, effective learning, presentation skills, and even how to handle stress and anxiety explicitly. In particular we wanted to teach them to manage information.... much of what is learnt factually at school may be superseded or even irrelevant by the time a student enters the world of work.

The plan and implementation

We introduced “Learning to Learn” lessons to the timetable for First and Second Years. Students from the Third Year to the Upper Sixth attend in-house seminars on everything from multiple intelligences to how to simultaneously listen, take notes, and contribute to lessons. We turned our students into teachers themselves by introducing two 1 to 1 peer coaching programmes; Study Buddy (Sixth Form students with younger students) and Study Champion (peer mentoring in a specific subject).

We run parent training evenings covering topics such as “The Six Thinking Hats”, “Using Non Verbal Intelligence” and “Higher Order Thinking”.

Challenges experienced during execution

There is a huge range of needs in any one year group – some students are naturally far more metacognitive than others. The Pupil Focus Group was formed to overcome these challenges. They meet regularly with the Director of Learning & Teaching (DLT) to help redesign courses and launch new initiatives such as the popular lunchtime HOT Club (Higher Order Thinking) where bright students in Third and Fourth Years are pushed to think for themselves yet further. We are constantly evolving and enhancing the content of the initiatives, for example next year a 7th parental seminar will be introduced on “Managing exam stress”.

Results and Outcome

The success of the scheme lower down the school has ensured that students in the Fourth Year and above have such a solid foundation of skills that they can turn into teachers and mentors themselves. Study Buddy numbers have topped 450 this year, involving nearly 75% of the Sixth Form. Study Champion numbers have passed the 100 mark. Both schemes are entirely voluntary. Nearly 100 students have self referred themselves for a Study Surgery this year (1 to 1 coaching from the DLT or one of his assistants). Over 400 parents have to date attended the evening seminars.

Lessons Learned and Expected Effects

Caterham aims to provide an “Education for Life”. A small part of this is the foundation provided by outstanding examination results. However, it is far more important for them to develop a genuine passion for learning and be equipped with the tools to continue the learning journey throughout their adult life. By helping children “learn how to learn” they gain an understanding of how to think, research, evaluate and criticise – hopefully Caterhamians are now in an ever improving position to make the most of the endless opportunities they will find in their lives beyond school.

Conclusion

Caterham is much in demand as a centre of excellence for its innovative approach to creating independent and engaged learners. There are regular visitors from other schools and the DLT has to date delivered INSET to over 50 schools around the country. The initiative has played its part in an overall improvement from 77% A to B grades in 2006 to achieving 92% A*-B in 2010, 93% in 2011 and 93% in 2012. However the greatest outcome of the initiative is perhaps yet to come as generations of Caterhamians go through university and enter the world of work.

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