**Case Study 5: The view from the top**



Saahen has been headteacher at The Bridge School for three years. It is a successful school which has a good reputation in the local community. Students achieve well and enjoy their time at the school. Saahen is ambitious for the school and wants it to be recognised across the region as a centre of best practice. He is unapologetic for setting high expectations for students and staff, which has energised the school and resulted in improvements in exam results and an increasing number of students accessing higher education.

However, there are problems which Saahen has been unable to address. Whilst the school appears to be generally improving, some aspects of the school’s work are in decline. Saahen and his senior team have been talking to a wide range of people about their perspectives on the challenges the school faces and looking for evidence to support their emerging ideas about what is going on, and what they should do next.

**Work pressures**

Staff turnover has been quite high in recent years. The exit surveys carried out by the school indicate that some staff have found the pace of change unwelcome. Saahen has also received several requests by teachers to reduce their working hours recently. Saahen’s deputy, who has been at the school for some years, commented to him that many of the staff who have left were not very effective in their jobs and that the turnover of staff was welcome. However, she is also finding it increasingly difficult to construct a timetable due to the number of part-time teachers the school employs.

Talking to subject leaders, some told Saahen that they had found it difficult to ensure teachers embedded the teaching strategies that the school was advocating through professional development. The focus on improving exam results meant that many teachers felt under pressure to prioritise older year groups in preparing for examinations. Some teachers had started to offer additional lunchtime sessions for students not ‘on target’ in the last two years and this had increased workload.

**Student participation**

The school offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Parent surveys indicate that these are valued by parents and are a key factor in their decision to send their children to the school. However, participation in after-school activities, such as sport and drama, has fallen.

Senior leaders organised student focus groups to explore why students were participating less. The responses were mixed. Younger students were very excited by the range of activities on offer but could not always attend as their parents weren’t able to pick them up, particularly those who lived further away from the school. Some of the older students felt that the activities on offer did not appeal to them, whilst others said that they wanted to focus on preparing for their exams. Some of those students interested in sport complained about not getting picked for teams as a small group of high performers seemed to be chosen for every fixture so that the school did not get beaten.

**Widening gaps**

A theme that had come out of senior leaders’ research was the widening gap in outcomes between groups of students and between subjects. There had been no significant decline in exam outcomes for any particular group or subject, but the overall improvement in outcomes had been due to large improvements in a limited range of areas. The greatest improvements in achievement had been for high prior attainment students and for girls. The data also showed that there had been significant improvements in outcomes for maths, the humanities, and science, but no improvement at all for the arts.

Saahen spoke to the subject leaders for art, drama, and music. They told him that they had struggled to improve results as fewer students had been choosing their subjects and that often the highest attaining students would choose something ‘more academic’. They also felt that the school’s professional development programme for teachers had not been very relevant for the subjects they teach. To explore this further, students who had not chosen these subjects were asked to complete an anonymous survey. Many responses highlighted that the subjects had not been very enjoyable as students spent less time doing ‘practical’ activities than they wanted to. For example, in drama lesson students reported that they spent a lot of time analysing recordings of live theatre, but not enough time learning performance skills.

**New starters**

One of Saahen’s senior team felt it would be useful to get the perspective of new teachers to the school. Many of these are quite new to the profession. All the teachers spoken to were very happy at the school and felt that it was a good place to work. However, these teachers’ experiences had varied in other ways according to which department they had joined. A humanities teacher said that he had to spend a large amount of time developing resources for his lessons as there was no central resource bank for the department. He felt that the other teachers in the department, all of whom were very experienced, had developed their own approach to teaching and were not interested in sharing practice. A new teacher in the art department had found it much easier to integrate and work with colleagues who, she reported, were very collaborative and open to sharing ideas.

The least experienced teachers had all experienced problems with behaviour in their classes. Some had received support from their head of department or a more experienced colleague, whereas others had not. One of the teachers suggested that the school should have clearer systems for managing behaviour and that she had seen this work well in one of the schools where she trained.

**Bringing it all together**

Saahen and his team agreed to bring together their findings on the senior teams’ annual planning day. During the morning, the team distilled their observations into a list of dilemmas that they felt most needed their attention. The list was as follows:

1. How can the school raise standards of teaching without adding to the work pressures on teachers?
2. What can be done to increase participation of students in extra-curricular activities?
3. How can the school improve exam outcomes for target groups, such as low prior attainers and those with special educational needs?
4. What can be done to improve uptake and outcomes in the arts subjects?

There was some disagreement among the team as to how these questions were framed. One colleague felt that there was an ‘underlying problem’, which was the school’s over-emphasis on exam results. However, another colleague felt that the school ‘needed a shake-up’ as some staff had become complacent.

Saahen believed that it was very unlikely that there was one key problem but instead there were a range of interconnected problems which could be perceived in different ways. However, when he voiced this to his team, they appeared uncomfortable with the ambiguity and uncertainty of this point of view.

**Solutions**

In the afternoon of the planning day, Saahen asked his team to work in two groups to identify what their priorities should be over the coming year. The ideas generated by each group were as follows:

GROUP 1

* Focus on the mental health of staff and students, including reducing staff workload and increasing participation of students in extra-curricular activities
* Review the curriculum offer in the arts and increase uptake
* Raise achievement for target groups through a programme for professional development which supports teachers in meeting the needs of these students in the classroom.

GROUP 2

* Review and improve the school’s behaviour management approach
* Increased focus on professional development to ensure teachers adopt effective practices which raise standards of teaching for all students
* Improve support and training for new teachers.

**Questions**

Consider how the complexity of schools creates challenges for senior leaders in trying to establish priorities and improve their schools. These questions may help structure your thinking:

1. To what extent do you agree that the school is improving?
2. To what extent are senior leaders coming to terms with complexity?
3. Does the list of dilemmas produced by the senior team resonate with your assessment of the school’s problems?
4. Are the priorities suggested by each group equally valid and appropriate? If not, why not?
5. What might Saahen do to encourage his team to be more nuanced in their thinking about the school’s problems?

Once you have discussed the above, attempt to write down a brief answer to the following questions:

* **Why is school improvement so complex?**
* **What can we do as school leaders to respond more effectively to complexity?**