



# 21+

ways to make  
an ordinary department  
exceptional

Achievement Show  
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Welcome to '21+ ways to make an ordinary department exceptional'. It is by no means intended as a one size fits all model for improvement – more a personal reflection and those from a number of staff who have had experience of leading a successful department. I have split the ideas into seven categories

- Learning and Teaching;
- Raising Achievement;
- The Head of Department Role;
- Examination Preparation;
- Staff Wellbeing;
- Rewards;
- Communication.

These are strategies that have been successful for us but I would like to stress that what works in one school isn't automatically transferable to another as schools are set in very different contexts and are at different stages of development.

I hope you are able to pick out some ideas which you will be able to implement in the short-term or in the future.

If you would like any further information on any of the ideas please contact me at any time by email – [m.belli@sjb.surrey.sch.uk](mailto:m.belli@sjb.surrey.sch.uk)

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## **Examination Preparation**

1. Don't run open revision classes because the wrong students come. Target which students are to attend. Write home and explain why it is essential to attend.
2. Have a wall of inspiration. Write to famous people and have signed photos wishing students luck in their examinations. In one school, even the Prime Minister (Tony Blair) replied.
3. Have a countdown to examination display so that students know how many days remain until their exam in the subject. This helps give focus.
4. Publish past-papers, mark schemes and examiners' reports on the departmental webpage or on the school intranet so that students can see just what makes the difference between an A\*/A/B and C/D.
5. Have a departmental revision evening that is open to all students a couple of days before the examination. Plan it so that each member of the department is present. Arrange for pizza and sweets at the end of the session (don't tell students it will be at the end). Target groups so that students on G grades are not paired with A\*/A grade students as this might cause demotivation and self-doubt.
6. Provide breakfast on exam days and ensure students have a bottle of water in the exam.
7. Encourage everyone in the department to talk to all the students as they walk into the exam – smile and wish them luck!
8. Be available before the start of each exam to give some final tips. This is perfectly acceptable so long as you have not looked at the paper and the exam officer knows. Remember everyone at school has the same goal in sight... i.e. students achieving the highest possible grades.
9. When students come out of exam paper 1 give them a letter with information on what they need to do for paper 2. If possible, provide question and model answers. Remind them they are nearly there!
10. Ensure sixth form students know exactly how many marks they are away from grades in their remaining modules to get A, B, C etc.
11. Never allow a student to re-sit a module without additional revision input. Have a system in place otherwise it will push stress elsewhere and the student won't achieve higher anyway!
12. Work out the value added for every student, every class and teacher within the subject and publish it to the staff. Focus on the positive and share best practice on how to raise achievement. Be brave. Staff will get used to it.
13. Work out where the department is losing value added – which class, teacher and students. Poor performance in one class will drag the whole department results down.
14. Ensure every teacher has an aspirational but realistic target grade for every child.
15. Make mock examinations as realistic as possible – students to sit in the same rooms, with the same rules and routines. Don't just give last years' paper. Try to work out routines for what is most likely to come up.
16. Provide mock exam results on a 'results day' in a brown envelope to raise their status. All students will be able to collect their results at the same time. This raises the status and importance of exams.
17. Ensure coursework is completed to the best standard long before the May deadline so it doesn't clash with focus on exams (which are normally worth a higher percentage). If staff and students have an earlier deadline they will be more likely to meet it.
18. Have some motivational music you use with your class as you send them out of key lessons

19. Ask students to read out their model answers. Pick a range of students and get other students to comment on how responses can be improved.
20. Use 'exam speak' in every lesson', 'To get an A you need to....' 'In the exam a question such as....'
21. Tell students at the start of the year that you've looked at their data and you know without a shadow of a doubt that they can all get As and A\*s. Even if you need to give a few extra marks in the first few tests it'll pay off in self-belief.
22. Praise, praise, praise and then praise again!

### **Learning and Teaching**

23. Ensure everyone in the department has all the schemes of work and resources at their fingertips in a format easy to understand. This way staff can spend their time enhancing and adapting resources rather than starting from a blank sheet.
24. Be clear about what outstanding learning looks like in your subject area. How do you know? What is the criterion?
25. Has everyone in the department seen outstanding teaching? If not then arrange for them to do so either in house or elsewhere.
26. Never try to re-invent the wheel. It is likely that another school local to you has already done it so seek them out and adapt their ideas to suit your department/school.
27. As Head of Department visit another school where there is an exceptional department of your subject. If you are unsure then ask your Headteacher or contact the Leading Edge for advice.
28. Learning and Teaching is the "drumbeat of every school's existence". As a department focus all energies on 'learning'. This is why we are here! Aim to develop a culture in the department where teachers' focus is 'What are the children going to learn?' as opposed to 'What am I going to teach?' Teaching should be about what the children will gain from the experience.
29. At the start of the academic year agree with the department what constitutes an 'outstanding' lesson. Provide examples that demonstrate these characteristics. Once an agreed approach to learning and teaching is established create a display which outlines these features and then have copies in every classroom to model practice and ensure that it is a constant reminder.
30. Ban phrases and activities that do not maximise learning... For example, 'satisfactory'; word searches, posters or anything that does not maximise the learning potential.
31. Meet regularly as a department to model highest quality learning and teaching. Constantly reinforce the importance and impact of these meetings. Make learning and teaching the priority.
32. The curriculum has to meet the needs of the students. If it doesn't it should to be changed. The curriculum is not about a scheme of work but about the quality of experiences children have in their lessons. Make this a focus and don't be afraid to take a risk. If it works and the children are successful then the Leadership Team will not complain.
33. Have a Learning and Teaching focus of the week for the department. This can be something that everyone can contribute to and share and experience in a positive way. Spend time with the department evaluating the impact of the focus.

34. Divide the curriculum into chunks and assign each member of the department an area to reduce staff lesson planning e.g. one teacher preparing all lessons for Year 7 and sharing them with the rest of the team. This means in principle a teacher plans fewer lessons and therefore produces higher quality resources. Ensure your most suitable teachers plan resources for the examined groups. This is the quality assurance as Head of Department.
35. Look at your meetings. Do they have an impact on the students? Is there always a Learning and Teaching slot? If not, why not? Meetings should model good learning. Are all meetings about CPD/Learning and Teaching or are they about stationery? Focus on sharing ideas at meetings as opposed to schemes of work. No child will ever remember a scheme of work but will remember an outstanding lesson! Get staff to focus on planning and preparing outstanding lessons to make the curriculum more real, especially in subjects that are more abstract.
36. Build in time for review and reflection on learning activities – lots of little reviews mean lots of little bits of manageable progress and don't seem too daunting.
37. Do 100% of students have the chance to pass the exams? If not, then investigate courses that enable them to do so. If you know students are going to fail something else needs to be done. If you know someone is not likely to be successful then discuss this with your line manager.
38. Let the students use iPods in certain lessons where appropriate. The reality is that they learn this way at home.
39. There are lots of websites that have pre-prepared resources ready to download e.g. [filmsforlearning.org](http://filmsforlearning.org).
40. Create a 'learning wall' in each classroom which can be used in lessons with post-it notes to show 'What I know already', 'What I need to find out about' and (at the end of the lesson) 'What I have learnt'.
41. Share ideas and strategies to employ different learning tasks e.g. VAK.
42. Have a square on the front of students' exercise books printed with a large VAK. Students write their learning preference so that it is easy for staff to see and tailor their teaching style to enhance the experience.
43. Have one-minute videos stored on the intranet for video openers for lessons to set the context of the topic and share best practice. Update these on a regular basis so that each member of staff has an opportunity to share an experience.
44. Have a 'see good practice week'. Pair-up staff to observe each other informally and to comment e.g. three things I like about the lesson/one idea I will use in my own lessons. Make it a positive experience with awards and prizes.
45. Make sure departmental areas are 'worth working in' and looking after. Ensure the department has exciting materials to make displays engaging and worthwhile. Change displays on an annual basis. Displays should promote learning i.e. engage with or model best practice.
46. Tell teachers to look from the back of their classroom because that is what the students see every day. Most teachers put displays etc behind students.
47. If you have a departmental area on the school website make sure it is up-to-date and models best practice for staff and students.
48. In departmental areas have inspirational quotes that can be used to motivate.
49. Display images of students 'having fun and working hard' in the subject.
50. Model exemplar work in the departmental areas. This is what an A\* looks like with annotations and advice on how to produce similar work.
51. Have welcoming signs to each classroom. For example, "You are entering a learning environment", "Learning Matters" and "It's cool to Achieve".

52. If the school does not have a marking policy ensure you have one for the department i.e. everyone does it the same way. Ensure the policy is manageable as no member of staff will thank you for introducing a policy that keeps them up all night marking!
53. Have images of former and current students in communal areas describing why they love the subject. Be selective of the students. Try to choose those with 'pulling power'.

### **Raising Achievement**

54. Don't flood staff with data. They don't look at it and so won't use the important stuff. Provide the grade the student should get and make everything else available online if staff want it.
55. Use strategies that communicate how students are performing. For example, 'Traffic Lights' to show where students are achieving above, on or below their target.
56. At departmental meetings show pictures of under-achieving students to remind the team then have a session with ideas to raise achievement/best practice. Review this at the following meeting.
57. Put revision materials on iPods, MP3 players etc so that students can access their revision at their convenience. If you use electronic resources e.g. PowerPoints etc then make these available online or on a CD.
58. Invest in digital voice recorders to allow staff to record 'top ten tips' from this lesson and upload to the school learning platform. Some of these recorders have a USB stick built in so no leads are required and the resulting podcast can be uploaded with no stress. Students can download and listen to this as needed. Every bit helps and students are more likely to use this than their exercise books.
59. Ensure that students can be successful in your subject area. Work closely with the Head of Year 9 to all students are placed on courses that enable them to succeed. You might need to fight your corner here! Remember 'success' is about potential! Do students have the potential to pass?
60. If you are thinking about changing a course/specification then contact a school that has successfully done so and visit them. It will save your hours upon hours of work e.g. Lots of schools are changing to OCR ICT at the moment. Keep on top of curricular issues. Leading Edge provides lots of advice with regard to this area. Don't be afraid to seek advice. The important thing to remember is to not follow a specification or board because the department has always done so.
61. Assuming you have a manageable number ensure that the best teachers are placed with the most challenging or key classes. It's no use having your best teacher with set 1 if the key group is set 5. It is about raising achievement across the whole department. As Head of Department you must model this by teaching the key groups yourself! Work with the person responsible for timetabling to ensure this is done before everything else. Focus on the key groups e.g. Year 11/Year 13/Year 12. Key Stage 3 is less crucial!
62. Take the weakest or most difficult individuals out of classes and place them with the best or most appropriate teachers so that the majority will succeed. This will also ensure students are best placed and given every chance to perform to the best of their ability.

63. Opt for larger classes in the higher ability sets so that the teachers with more challenging classes have smaller numbers. At St John the Baptist School we have a 185 PAN (7 form entry): 34, 34, 34, 28, 26, 19, and 10. Sets 6 is the key C/D borderline class. These have to be smaller so the teacher has the best chance of success!
64. Have levels of work on display with feedback on how to improve. Place these at the front of the class so students can see them during lessons.
65. Put posters around the school, in the toilets on the back of doors etc '10 Things I Must Do in x to get an A\*'. Ensure these are visible leading up to the exams.
66. Don't just focus on the C/D borderline. Don't forget the A\*/A and the G/U grades. Their needs have to be catered for possibly with additional/alternative work so that it is suitably challenging.
67. Schools are measured by results. In turn departments are measured in a similar way by the school. Consequently, the need is to train students to pass the exam not necessarily to cover the syllabus. Peer marking of examination questions, exemplar materials all ensure students know the standards they are aspiring to. Make this part of everyday exam group teaching.
68. If possible enter some students early in some subjects. For example, Maths and English in November. This enables them to focus on other examinations in the summer.
69. Eliminate the number of U grades by ensuring all coursework (where continued) meets the target grade. Track coursework/controlled assessments closely to ensure that the weakest students achieve the best possible. This is their platform for success and can be used to motivate the students.
70. Ensure all staff in the department know what outstanding looks like (A\* work, C work). If they don't send them to visit other schools where they do and get them to feedback to the rest of the department. This gives them the opportunity to lead and ensures staff don't think you're on their case, as Head of Department, all the time.
71. Encourage members of the department to become examiners. Try to get a GCSE and A level examiner in departments. Staff get paid and they have an understanding of the exam requirements. This can be fed back to the department. Don't have to do it every year! Exam results will improve!
72. Have a vision and a clear idea about what you expect the department to achieve at the end of the year. Ensure that the targets are aspirational but realistic. Scaffold the challenge so that you are not aiming 95% A\* - C if the department has never achieved over 54%. However, think of the flea in the jar analogy.
73. Compare monitoring, results, performance at mock examinations etc with the targets. Ensure that teachers are accountable for performance by entering dialogue about results. If targets are not met put in place strategies to support.
74. Keep reminding staff of the targets both verbally and in emails etc. Have a list of students who are at risk of not achieving a C grade. Keep talking to staff about them and offer help to raise expectations.
75. Remember "the greatest barrier to student achievement is teacher expectation". Students have to know their teacher believes they can achieve. As Head of Department you have to ensure this message is clearly spread.
76. Get the best teachers teaching the key examination groups without punishing staff for being 'outstanding'. As Head of Department you need to be part of this as there is an expectation of teaching ability as part of being Head of Department.

77. Have a key word wall in a visible place i.e. the front of the class so that students are constantly reminded and instinctively pick up the meanings. This will help the weakest students to improve their understanding.
78. If you have staff with KS responsibilities make sure they are teaching these areas e.g. KS3 co-ordinator should be teaching high level of KS3 etc.
79. Collect examples of success and share with staff, students and parents.
80. Ensure everyone knows the criteria and how to achieve it. Get students to look at exam past-papers with mark schemes so they know what to expect.
81. Internal exams can be a nightmare so reduce the stress on staff by writing the papers early and sharing them with the staff so that they can prepare students properly.
82. Send praise/concern letters linked to revision lessons – essentially fit to what the child needs e.g. ‘doing really well but to support and ensure that success...’

### **Head of Department Role**

83. It is very difficult to have an ‘exceptional’ department without a high quality Head of Department. It is possible but harder to achieve! To be an outstanding Head of Department you need to lead by example in all areas. This includes the work/life balance, motivation, enthusiasm, quality of teaching and results etc.
84. Do you (Head of Department) know what outstanding looks like? How do you know? Do you have a vision for where the department could/should be? Is the vision realistic? If the answer is ‘No’ or ‘I’m not sure’ then don’t panic. As a Head of Department it is your job to find answers not necessarily know them immediately. To improve the quality of your own leadership try to get a mentor or a coach. This does not necessarily have to be someone at your own school. You could try to ‘buddy’ up with other Heads of Department in the school to share ideas and strategies. You may pick up a few ideas and be able to apply them in your own department.
85. Has your vision been shared? To do this, spend time at the start of the year sharing your vision with the department.
86. Has the department bought in to the vision so that it is shared? How do you know?
87. Have long and short term goals for the department and have them displayed in the departmental office (if you have one) or give all teachers a copy. Remind staff of these when you meet and make it a point of reference.
88. Be visible to all. Make sure you get to lessons to find out what is going on. This is your quality assurance. A scheme of work is not! If you see something outstanding in someone’s lesson tell him/her by sending an email, a note or try to have a quick conversation.
89. Be fair at all times. There is nothing worse than a Head of Department who hand-picks the high ability sets for themselves so that their timetable is better.
90. Get the best out of your second in department by negotiating responsibilities and let them get on with it! Offer support but avoid ‘post delegation hovering’ as this will undermine and frustrate.
91. Look after your staff. You cannot do it all alone even if being Head of Department seems like this at times.
92. Know when to say ‘Thank you’ and when to admit ‘I made a mistake’. As a Head of Department you will have a high level of teaching commitment with the additional responsibility and accountability of the department you lead. You will make mistakes and you will need your team’s help. Acknowledge these things and people will respect you more!

93. Ensure Learning and Teaching is the focus of every meeting and make sure meetings last for no longer than one hour.
94. Plan your meetings – they are like a lesson but every participant is observing you. Feed staff at these meetings with water, juice, chocolates, cakes etc. Every little bit helps to motivate.
95. Keep admin to a minimum. If possible, try to avoid minutes and agendas. Get staff to write action points which require their attention. Follow up meetings with a reminder of what you expect staff to do by the next time you meet. Start the meeting with a review of these points. This will help reduce long departmental meetings. Staff will thank you if you can reduce the time they spend in meetings that don't impact on their performance in the classroom.
96. Know when to fight the department corner but to be an 'outstanding' Head of Department you need to think of the whole school as well. Don't be afraid to hassle the Headteacher for more capitation if you can justify it with improved resources. Seek funding elsewhere e.g. PTA.
97. Avoid wasting capitation on photocopying sheets that the students are more likely to dump at the end of the lesson. Students prefer a textbook so try to find one of these or create a booklet that you have made so that students are more likely to value.
98. As a Head of Department you are not expected to know all the answers but have to be able to find out the answers. Speak to your line manager and remember the golden rule... 'If unsure ask someone who will know'. The second part of this rule... 'Don't try to fudge answers to things you don't know'.
99. Don't rely on the Headteacher to recruit staff in your area. To get the best staff possible you need to be proactive. Establish links with local PGCE/GTP providers to grow your own teachers so that you can appoint these if posts become available. Also, by continually supporting training colleges you can let them know in advance if a job is becoming available so that they can recommend trainees to you.
100. Give yourself review time every week – 20 minutes to evaluate the week, set targets and recharge your vision.
101. Whenever faced with a decision ask yourself the only question that matters in school – 'Will it benefit the students?'
102. Develop a 100% mentality (everyone can achieve a C) – you've got to believe it first if you are to convince everyone else!
103. Enthuse about new opportunities – keep smiling and linking it to how it will support and be the best for the children. Show you enjoy the job – show fun.
104. As we all know, it will not always be fun so if you need to moan or rant don't do it to your department – find your line manager. Try to build a atmosphere in the department where staff only 'moan upwards'. Try to avoid situations where teachers are moaning about school or department initiatives amongst themselves. This hinders progress!
105. Don't put off a difficult conversation. This is part of the Head of Department's role. If you need to have a difficult conversation with a member of staff make sure you are well prepared. It is important to keep a person's dignity in tact. To get the best out of a potentially challenging meeting a) concentrate on facts; b) ask questions and listen to what is said; c) challenge behaviours/**never** criticise the person; d) explain why things matters i.e. the students; e) agree a way forward and f) end the meeting with a positive.

## **Rewards**

106. Think 4:1 ratio! Positive messages bring about positive outcomes. Try to focus on this at all times with both students and staff. Rewards as opposed to sanctions!
107. Put pictures of students of the week/month/term on notice boards in department areas.
108. Have attendance/homework/coursework league tables for classes in Year Groups. Reward groups.
109. Never blanket praise or sanction. If praising in public try to mention specifics rather than generic. You might get away with it once or twice but after a while it becomes seen as insincere. Also, try to make praise personal. Write a simple card to staff to say 'Thank you'.
110. Find incentives to engage boys in your subject area. For example, a football club hero. Quite often, if local, clubs will try to support as this raises their public profile. Could be as simple as a signed photo that could be used as a prize to reward outstanding work/effort.
111. Where possible enter competitions that allow students to win prizes.
112. Have a clear rewards system in place. Make this high profile and easy for staff to nominate so that it takes off.
113. Don't forget the 'grey' students i.e. not most able or most challenging. It is too easy to focus on most and least able so try to ensure that every child is rewarded or praised.
114. Communicate with home regularly praising students' work. Use phone calls, post cards, text, email or letters e.g. after reports, tests, monitoring etc.

## **Staff Wellbeing**

115. Ensure the department operates a high challenge/low stress philosophy. Reward the staff regularly and often. Simple things like cakes, meals out etc especially after coursework has been sent off or after the exam groups have left to say 'Well done'.
116. Take the stress away from your team by ensuring preparing outstanding lessons is the No1 priority.
117. Put a bar of chocolate in staff pigeon holes at the low points (mid half-term etc).
118. Model good practice in meetings. Spend the last few minutes of meetings reflecting on what could have been improved. If you think the meeting is going to be shorter then let staff go early. Don't meet for the sake of meeting.
119. To motivate others you first have to be motivated and enthusiastic. If you have set a vision make sure you yourself believe in it.
120. Invest time in people. Operate a genuine 'open door policy' that allows staff to speak to you, whether work related or personal. To get the best out of people you have to show you care for them. For example, write cards for birthdays.
121. Encourage dialogue and feedback from staff so that they see you as a 'problem solver' rather than 'problem setter'. A team functions more effectively if the members know they can say what they think and know they will be heard... and listened to!
122. The majority of teachers do the job because they want to make a difference. Otherwise they would do a different job. Seek ways to get the best out of people by 'tapping in' to their specialisms and interests. For example, their teaching preferences and experiences.
123. Provide opportunities for staff to develop. If there is a course that you should be on as Head of Department try to send someone else (where appropriate) and get them to feedback to the rest of the department

124. Encourage staff to know the importance of their role in the 'bigger picture' so that they become accountable.
125. Allow people to try new ideas. Sometimes they might need to fail but support them along the way without taking over. Target specific areas so that key classes, year groups are not at risk

### **Communication**

126. Be efficient with emails by introducing systems that filter out staff using the subject box: DELETE IF YOU DO NOT TEACH Y7.
127. Use positive language. Promote positive outcomes by communicating the positives. For example, students who attend 100% are x times more likely to achieve an A\* in any given subject.
128. Have a stock of departmental cards/postcards that can be used to send to parents congratulating their child's progress, effort, achievement. Do this on a regular basis (half-termly).
129. Phone home once a week/fortnight to congratulate student's on their achievements. Phone calls home are nearly always negative – this makes a welcome change!
130. Review and evaluate everything that you do – WWW (What went well); EBI (Even Better If).
131. Ask staff to give you feedback on how you can support them more/make their life easier.

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