



## Sky rocketing to success: Using WellComm and the YARC to boost learning skills

With a high proportion of special educational needs children, Rushall Primary School in Walsall believes that early identification of any barriers to learning and swift intervention is the best way to help all their pupils achieve success. They use WellComm and the York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension to plan appropriate support strategies where needed.

### A GL Assessment Case Study

With 246 children, Rushall Primary School might be an average sized primary school but its ethos of creating a culture of optimism, inclusion and ambition is exceptional. While it is a mainstream primary, around a third of pupils are identified as being disabled or having special educational needs (SEN), and it has an additionally resourced provision (ARP) for SEN, including speech and language difficulties. The school achieved an outstanding Ofsted rating at its last inspection, with the ARP described as ‘a model of exemplary practice’.

Beccie Hawes, head of service at Rushall’s Inclusion Advisory support team, is based at Rushall Primary School and looks after 200 schools across the region. “At Rushall, and in the schools that we support via our inclusion service, we welcome and work with children with mild to complex needs, and run two additionally resourced provision classes alongside the mainstream school. We individually match provision to each child and work very closely in partnership with the parents to ensure good progress.

“Our aim is to enable every child to experience success, and having robust and reliable assessments in place is essential. We have found GL Assessment acts like a critical friend to us in terms of our assessment practice, and makes suggestions that really move us forward.”

#### Starting with communication

One such assessment is *WellComm*, a speech and language toolkit for screening in

the early years. Suitable for children from six months to six years, the toolkit uses a traffic light system that highlights those who require extra support as well as more formal referrals.

At Rushall and in our service schools, screening takes place in September, once children are settled into their nursery class. “*WellComm* is fantastic in making sure no child’s needs are missed. The activities are so directed to their age group that we often find children completely engaged, even those who have been a little reticent in class. This means you sometimes get a few surprises, usually ‘ambers’ which means some intervention is required.”

Beccie also likes the fact the results are easy to share with parents. “It can be upsetting to discover your child needs additional help, but *WellComm* provides good evidence in a friendly, straightforward manner. It doesn’t bamboozle with technical jargon.”

#### The Big Book of Ideas

Part of the appeal of *WellComm* is that it comes with *The Big Book of Ideas*, providing staff with more than 150 intervention activities to meet any identified needs.

“We love the fact *WellComm* doesn’t stop at the assessment. The activities in *The Big Book of Ideas* mean we’re able to start making an impact with school-based interventions straightaway, such as attention and listening games.

“A teaching assistant might start by working with a Reception child on a one-to-one basis, then in a larger group, then in a whole class setting. They can also give ideas to parents on how to support the process at home. The games are fun and the suggested activities are inviting, so the children don’t see it as work at all. You soon see them start to flourish, and become much less frustrated as they make themselves understood.”

### Confident and skilled

As a consequence of using *WellComm*, Beccie says many of the staff in the schools that she supports feel more skilled. “Even non-specialists are comfortable and confident in using it. In time, they start to get professional hunches and then use *WellComm* to back them up. It can be hard to evidence progress so we re-assess after intervention blocks of between six and eight weeks. We also have our own mid-point check – if something isn’t working after three weeks, we know we need to try something different.”

“Within weeks, we were seeing progress.”

By highlighting strengths and weaknesses, the right children get referred for additional help. “Any referrals we make are detailed and good quality. We’re able to speak a common language when we liaise with speech and language therapists, which in turns speeds up how effectively we can help children.

“Around 30 schools in my remit now use *WellComm*. I began by introducing it to schools where I could see speech and language was poor, to the point where a lack of communication skills were even affecting the children’s play time. However, I’ve found that once schools see the benefits, they talk to each other and then call me to ask if they can use it too.”

### Learning to read

The support team also uses the *York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC)*, which allows teachers to focus on the key skills that underpin alphabetic literacy for pupils aged four to seven. Beccie likes the fact it can very quickly show them which



children don’t yet have the skills needed for reading.

“YARC helps us be proactive in accelerating reading ability rather than waiting until a real problem develops. About 40 schools currently use it with their middle to lower ability children, but ‘life without levels’ means I’m expecting to see that number grow. Teachers are always pushed for time and appreciate YARC’s support in analysing what is happening. It gives a practical slant by identifying which skills are missing, and helps a school translate what it needs to do to ensure good reading skills are instilled.

“For example, we had a child who was struggling with his reading. Our first step was to check quality first teaching was in place and ensure highly personalised lessons. This was spot on, so our next task was to become more forensic. Using YARC, we discovered that synthetic phonics – which teaches letter sounds, then builds up to blending sounds to make whole words – wasn’t working for him. So we offered him the opposite – analytical phonics, a ‘whole word’ and context approach.

“Within weeks, we were seeing progress. This discovery led to a bigger management decision so now smaller groups are offered analytical phonics as part of a menu of support. After all, it’s too late once a child has failed.”

### Being the best

The support team has moved from paper-based assessment to digital wherever possible. “We’ve found this much more efficient in helping us intervene quickly and it means we can meet any issues with our children head on. We are now looking into using the *New Group Reading Test (NGRT)*, *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4)* and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)* attitudinal survey. In fact, we’re really excited about doing this as it will give us a more holistic view of our children and encourage them to achieve the high expectations we have of them.”

#### Key benefits: WellComm and YARC

- Helps identify which skills are missing for reading and communication
- Ensures no child’s needs are missed by highlighting where extra support or intervention is required
- Helps teaching staff be proactive not remedial in their support strategies for addressing barriers
- Provides good evidence of ability in a straightforward manner, easily understood by both staff and parents.

June 2015

For further information, please contact Danielle Morgan:

**GL Assessment, 9th Floor, 389 Chiswick High Road, London W4 4AJ**  
**Tel: 0208 996 3632 Email: danielle.morgan@gl-assessment.co.uk**  
**www.gl-assessment.co.uk**

