

# The City Classroom

## **Recovery Programme – Artist School Peer Mentoring Programme**

### **Review from Ash Field Academy**

Ash Field Academy is a 4-19 special school with residential provision. We cater for students with physical disabilities and a range of learning needs. We benefit from a highly motivated and well-trained staff team offering exceptional provision to our incredible students. Our motto is 'One Team' and we work together to be brave and fearless in our quest to remain outstanding.

I am a full time class teacher in one of our FE blue pathway classes, for students with profound and multiple learning disabilities. I also have had the privilege to lead arts and enrichment at Ash Field for two years. My role is diverse and includes organising events, resourcing arts and liaising with arts organisations as well as supporting teachers in their own endeavours in the arts.

The Covid pandemic has been incredibly difficult for many, but for students who have disabilities and are often clinically vulnerable it has been a stressful, isolating time. I initially looked to this project as a way of maintaining dialogue with artists and organisations through a time of stress and uncertainty. The idea of working with someone in the arts really interested me, as the arts sector has been so impacted through the pandemic. I also wanted to keep saying 'yes' to projects, even if they looked very different due to the pandemic. I have a team of specialist practitioners who I line manage as part of my role and it was incredibly useful to ring-fence time with them and discuss our vision for arts at Ash Field moving forward.

Louise Katerega (our peer support artist) and I conducted 10 hours over zoom, out of necessity as our school wasn't able to host people whilst we were at the height of the pandemic. We started with an idea that we would be using our 10 hours to plan for 10 years. In other words, to use the time to create a solid vision and cohesive plan to sculpt the arts and enrichment at Ash Field for years to come.

As part of this, early on in the process we met with the 4 specialist practitioners I line manage to ensure that we had a whole-team approach. It became very clear, through these discussions, that we needed to broaden the cultural experience of arts at Ash Field. We want the arts (including artists we employ and those we contact for events such as our annual Ash Fest Festival) to reflect the students we teach. We know this will make projects more engaging and relevant. We also know that students seeing people with similar disabilities to them, out there in the world and doing incredible things, will be both inspirational and aspirational.

After this initial discussion, Louise and I met again to tease out the main ideas and needs we had identified during the meeting with the team, and to plan for the next few sessions. We knew at this stage that we needed to include a meeting with the senior leadership team, which we did with lots of advance warning so we could ensure they had the time to meet with us!

Louise then spent some time researching arts organisations and artists that 'fit the bill' for us. She created a bespoke list of artists for me (about 30 artists and organisations were represented and this

will remain as an excellent resource for the future). I went away and looked at each artist and organisation with a view to finding a good fit, based on the parameters we'd come up with.

Our next session was a Zoom meeting with two of the artists concerned - Dave Young, a poet with the stage name 'The Shouting Mute' and choreographer Lisa Simpson. Both artists use communication devices and have physical disabilities. Both artists are seriously inspirational and after our first meeting, we have continued communication.

We then met with Jenny Bone (principal) and Jess Renner (Vice principal of teaching and learning) to discuss the aims and objectives of the project and introduce the idea of working with Lisa and Dave. This turned out to also be a pivotal moment in terms of the budget. From now on, a significant part of the arts budget will be ring-fenced to work with artists who specifically represent the students we teach. This has been agreed with SLT, and the reasoning shared.

Lisa and Dave will be working with two separate classes to create content for Ash Fest this year - This is a paid opportunity and only through start of what we know will be a long and artistically very rewarding partnership.

We had a final session with The City Classroom coordinator to conclude the project and discuss further support and opportunity.

Overall, I believe that the project gave me the time I needed to think strategically and plan for the future. Louise was a mine of information and her research and contacts have been invaluable. At first, planning for ten years felt a bit daunting but with the key stakeholders all in agreement and our values and ethos so clear, it was a pleasure to work with Louise.

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