

Organising an astronomy conference for partner schools - St John's School and Community College

Leading space education programme

Key actions

To engage and work with our partner secondary schools we decided to run an astronomy conference. Our partners were Marlborough College, St Marys School and John Bentley School. Our aim was to help and share ideas with other schools that were either thinking of teaching astronomy / astrophysics or were already teaching astronomy / astrophysics. The conference was held at St Johns school in July 2009.

We planned the conference during a series of meetings at St Johns with a representative of each school attending each meeting. St Johns school provided three teachers and a lady from marketing. The other schools were represented by one member of staff each. In total we had about four meetings with all schools attending and several others with the internal staff of St Johns.

We first decided upon the format of the day and then who to invite. The day was to start with a key note speaker to attract an audience followed by workshops of which the delegates had some choice. We were very lucky to get Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell as the key note speaker.

Our main concern was how many teachers would turn up. We decided to make a leaflet offering the free conference and giving the potential delegates a choice of which workshop they wanted to attend. The choices included a talk by the chief examiner of GCSE astronomy, two computer workshops including Galaxy zoo and a talk about IB astrophysics.

We sent leaflets to most state and private schools in the south west of England. We phoned around various contacts that teachers had and our marketing lady chased any leads that we got. We really had no idea how many people would turn up until a week before the conference.

On the day we had about 25 delegates. The partner schools provided seven members of staff to run the workshops and to show the delegates around. The introduction and key note speech was in the hall that we had use of for a day. We also provided a free lunch in the hall. We also had the use of three computer rooms to run the various and often on-line workshops. We had a comfort break half way through the day.

We provided an evaluation form to each delegate. The evaluation on the whole was very positive. The key note speech was the most popular event.

Numbers taking A level Physics are up. In 2009 5 students took A2 Physics and in 2010 10 students took A2 Physics. I expect 17 students will take A2 Physics in 2011.

Impact on lead and partners schools

The whole event was an excellent networking experience. Some of the delegates who were nervous about teaching astronomy before the conference expressed their new confidence at the end of the day. Many of the teachers learned about software such as galaxy zoo and of the nasa website that they could use with their students.

I believe that all of the teachers involved in the conference went back to their schools with something to share with their colleagues and students.

Impact on specialism

We made excellent contacts with two private schools in our local area. We have been contacted by a local astronomy group who wish to build an observatory in our school grounds. Space and astronomy were part of our very successful Engineering day in which many people from our local community attended.

Top tips

The main barrier to running a conference was the fear that nobody would come. Using contacts through our private school contacts helped keep the number of delegates high.

The future

The legacy is the spread of information and enthusiasm across 25 schools in the South West region. We shall continue to keep up the contacts that we have made and hope to bind it further with possible future events.

Contact at school

Luke Henderson

lhenderson@stjohns.wilts.sch.uk
