

Making a Contribution to Education – The Midcounties Co-operative Society

Maxine Sharman

The Midcounties Co-operative Society has a strong tradition of supporting communities and schools. This has been boosted by our colleague volunteering programme, in which 38% of our current workforce is actively participating. Much of what they do is focused on schools.

One particular example of work with a school and how we have encouraged co-operation has been our partnership with Sutherland Business and Enterprise College. It was the first Co-operative Trust School in our trading area, in 2008. We set clear partnership objectives, which for Midcounties included:

- Promoting the ethos of our business and of the wider co-operative movement.
- Providing a development opportunity for our colleague volunteers.
- Strengthening our position as an employer of choice.

The membership trust model we have helped to create there provides a co-operative framework, from early years to university, which involves parents, teachers and community organisations in the decision making processes. It has formed a blueprint to extend our work to support other co-operative trust schools in our trading area.

Our Community Team acts as brokers between schools and our wider business. We are not experts in education but we do understand co-operative solutions. We have actively encouraged the adoption of co-operative learning approaches and methods at Sutherland by engaging Co-operative Learning & Development Associates (CLADA) to work with us in the school. This has been a catalyst for a number of changes in teaching methods used and has been particularly driven by the school's senior leadership team.

Taking involvement further, over 50 colleague volunteers have been involved in student mentoring, employability projects and enterprise events adding up to 487 hours of support and creating invaluable personal development opportunities for the staff members. The Society also provided significant financial support sponsoring the school's bid for specialist status and through grants for enrichment activity - to date this amounts to £70,000. Whilst the financial support is important, the real strength of our partnership is the mutual benefit gained from the people-based resource we bring and the commitment to our values of democracy, openness, equality and social responsibility, which is what motivates us.

In conclusion, bringing a co-operative approach into the education sector is important to our Society. As a local employer we have an alternative perspective to offer. We hope that we can reach young people and introduce the concepts of co-operation – they are our employees of the future and this gives a head start.

The Author

Maxine Sharman is Head of Community Investment at The Midcounties Co-operative. She is an experienced community practitioner and has created a number of school partnerships for Midcounties. In 2010 their relationship with the Sutherland Business and Enterprise College in Telford achieved Business in the Community's National Example of Excellence for Education.

