



# Making A levels work across all abilities

## St Louise's Comprehensive College



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## Context

St Louise's Comprehensive College is a large all ability, catholic, single sex school, which is based on the Falls Road, right in the heart of West Belfast. While the school is a single sex girl's school from Year 8 to Year 12, (indeed we once had the distinction of being labelled the largest single sex school in Europe), we operate a coeducational sixth form of just less than 600 students, of which approximately 100 are boys.

In 2006 the school was awarded specialist status for performing arts with three key specialisms Dance, Drama and Media.

The school's catholic, comprehensive ethos means that we are not a selective school, and celebrate our inclusive ethos. Our high aspirations for all our young people carries into the sixth form. As a result we also do not apply any specific academic entry requirements to our sixth form. Entry requirements, where they do apply, are set on a subject by subject basis, and are set, not to deny opportunity, but to guide students into the appropriate course of study.

## Starting the Alps Journey

We were first introduced to Alps in 2008, when we formed part of an Education Authority funded focus-group looking at the use of target setting and value added measures.

As a senior management team, we were immediately drawn to the Alps framework for two key reasons. Firstly, we could see that, as an indicator, the Alps framework was a much more rigorous way of measuring performance based on the progress students make rather than their raw results. We could immediately see the value in using Alps data to make comparisons between schools and indeed between subjects within schools.

Secondly, and much more importantly, we felt that Alps was so much more than a performance measurement tool. We could see its potential as a school improvement tool and felt that there was a clear and significant synergy between the Alps philosophy and our own catholic, comprehensive ethos.

## Analysing our first Alps report

Our first Alps report confirmed what we had always instinctively believed. That despite the fact that by traditional threshold performance measures the school was performing rather modestly, (only 28% of our students achieved 3A-C grades in 2008), by value added measures the school was performing relatively well (we received an Alps value added score of 2, in 2008 putting us in the top 10%).

## Case study

### St Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast

While this was pleasing news, closer scrutiny of the Alps report highlighted a number of issues that we needed to address.

- While overall value added performance was strong, we had significant within school variation – six subjects had a score of 2 while six were in the blue zone with a score of 7-9.
- On the basis of grades per subject we did a very good job with those students with a GCSE mean score of less than 5.5 (interestingly these students made up over half of our cohort) but a much less impressive job with those students in the higher GCSE bands of 6.1 plus
- On a grades per student basis our performance was much less impressive. Essentially we had too many students studying only two A levels and too few studying four. In 2008 almost half of our cohort sat only two A levels.

### How is Alps used in St Louise's?

We use the Alps framework in two main ways: Firstly, with the students, and secondly with subject teachers and departmental leaders.

### How is Alps used with students?

Alps is used in three key stages with students:

#### Stage 1: Subject interviews – August

All students entering sixth form have a one to one "subject choices meeting" with Assistant Principal for sixth form. Parents are invited to attend this meeting, though their attendance is not compulsory. The Alps average GCSE score and indeed the individual subject grades are used to inform this conversation. Open and honest advice is given to students with regard to their subject choices with evidence from the Alps national benchmarks and our own internal Alps reports being used to guide students into the course that best suits their interests, aspirations and abilities.

#### Stage 2: Induction – September

The philosophy behind Alps and the methodology of our tracking system is explained to all students as part of the sixth form induction process. We use the A level Alps target grade from the beginning of Year 13, to reduce confusion and to raise aspirations from the beginning. The Alps target grade is referred to as a Minimum Expected Grade. At St Louise's we call this the Minimum Acceptable Grade and students are made aware that we expect all of their work to meet or exceed this Minimum Acceptable Grade.

#### Stage 3: Tracking performance against MAG

For assessment purposes the school year is broken in to two distinct periods which we refer to as assessment cycles. Assessment Cycle 1 runs from September to December and Assessment Cycle 2 runs from January to April. Within each Assessment Cycle there are 2 review points, mid cycle and end of cycle. Students and their parents receive progress updates two times a year -an end of cycle 1 report in January and a second one at the end of cycle 2 in April.

Fig 1: Sample end of cycle 1 report

Subject	Av GCSE Score	MAG	A1	A2	0.95	Cycle 1 Progress Grade
Politics	6.33	B	A	A	5	A
History	6.33	B	C	C	0.95	C
Economics	6.33	B	C	D	5	D

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If we look at the end of cycle 1 progress update (on previous page) we can see that students (and their parents) will receive an update which contains their Alps Minimum Acceptable Grade, the results of two rigorous assessments (normally exam questions sat under exam conditions) and an end of cycle progress grade. This end of cycle progress grade is the subject teacher's best judgement, as to the grade the student is most likely to receive in their actual exams, assuming all other things remain unchanged.

This end of cycle progress grade is tracked against the Minimum Acceptable Grade and is traffic lighted. Green if the student is on or above target, amber if the grade is one grade below the Minimum Acceptable Grade and red if the grade is more than one grade below the Minimum Acceptable Grade. We have debated changing our colour coding system to match the red, black and blue of Alps but the traffic light system is so embedded in KS3 and KS4 that we felt it was better to keep it for the sake of consistency.

All students' highlighted red in a particular subject enter a review process with their subject teacher and Head of Department and an action plan is drawn up for improvement. Students with more than one red subject enter a review process with the appropriate year group leader. A copy of each progress update is also given to the relevant Form Tutor so that appropriate pastoral support is offered alongside the academic support.

## How is Alps used with teachers and school leaders?

### Reviewing performance

The previous years' AS and A2 Alps reports are scrutinised each September by departmental teams. All issues arising from these discussions are noted and learning points are drawn up for further improvement. Discussions around the Alps report form a significant part of the meeting between the school principal and the HODs and subject leaders. In recent years we have begun to make greater use of the monitoring reports where we run Alps reports based on the end of cycle progress grade. This not only allows us to see what our actual Alps report would look like if those grades materialised but also allows us to conduct "what if" analyses to see the impact on departmental and whole school scores if just a few students improved their grade.

### Sharing good practice

Alps reports are used to identify strengths and areas for improvement both at a departmental level and a whole school level. Where particular strengths are identified, opportunities are given for good practice to be shared and disseminated through whole school staff development, trusted colleague networking and the development of subject area focus groups

### Changing school culture and the perceptions held about the difficulty of A levels

As stated earlier, one of the things that attracted us to Alps in the beginning was its simplicity and effectiveness as a rigorous yet fair performance evaluation tool. However, the most effective feature of Alps is the ethos that underpins it. Alps gave us the evidence to back up our view that while A levels are difficult, studying them is not an option that should only be available to students with a string of A and B grades in their GCSEs. The data available in the Alps reports prove that where students are supported effectively and taught by enthusiastic teachers with high expectations even those with modest GCSE profiles can achieve success.

The most notable change in our own school culture has been in regard to the number of A levels taken by students. In 2008, almost half of our A level cohort sat only two A levels as there was a widely held belief that, for some, studying three A levels was too difficult. With the assistance of Alps data and Alps research documents we were able to convince students, parents and indeed teachers that a student dropping down from three A levels to two A levels was not likely to improve performance in the two remaining subjects. As a result, all students in 2017 studied at least three A levels.



## What impact has Alps had on the school?

### Significant improvement in threshold performance measures

The first and most obvious impact has been on the school's threshold performance against the key Education Authority indicators. At 3A\*-C the school has gone from 28% in 2008 to 83% in 2017.

### Improvement in value added performance across the range of subjects

The first Alps report in 2008 highlighted that while overall value added performance for the school was impressive, we had significant within school variation. In 2008 six subjects had a score of 2 while six were in the blue zone with a score of 7-9. By 2017 this within school variation was significantly reduced. In 2017, 10 subjects received an Alps score of 2 and only one subject received an Alps score in the blue zone.

### Improved value added across the ability range

The 2008 Alps report highlighted the fact that, on the basis of grades per subject, we added a lot of value with those students with a GCSE mean score of less than 5.5 but did a much less impressive job with those students in the higher GCSE mean score bands. As a result, we began to focus more of our energy on these students and as a result their performance has improved each year since 2008. Fig 2 below shows the UCAS points per subject analysis from the 2015 Alps report. We can see from this that in 2015 we achieved an Alps score of between 1 and 3 for all of the ten GCSE mean score bands that we had students in.

Fig 2: UCAS points per subject 2012-2015

GCSE score	QCA score	UCAS pts target	2011/12 <sup>†</sup>			2012/13 <sup>†</sup>			2013/14 <sup>†</sup>					
			Student numbers	UCAS pts scored	Alps grade	Student numbers	UCAS pts scored	Alps grade	Student numbers	UCAS pts scored	Alps grade			
7.5-8.0	55.0-58.0	125.17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
7.0-< 7.5	52.0-<55.0	112.47	2	106.67	6	2	88.57	9	2	90.00	8	5	114.67	3
6.7-< 7.0	50.2-< 52.0	104.58	6	97.78	6	5	101.43	5	3	98.00	5	11	105.45	3
6.4-< 6.7	48.4-< 50.2	97.73	6	110.59	2	10	101.33	3	15	102.73	2	9	98.46	3
6.1-< 6.4	46.6-< 48.4	92.50	8	100.00	2	14	95.61	3	16	96.96	3	24	95.00	3
5.8-< 6.1	44.8-< 46.6	86.79	12	85.81	4	8	91.00	3	19	90.71	3	27	96.10	2
5.5-< 5.8	43.0-< 44.8	82.61	21	88.52	2	26	85.07	3	20	88.52	2	25	89.86	2
5.2-< 5.5	41.2-< 43.0	78.33	16	81.54	3	15	85.71	2	19	83.60	2	22	88.28	2
4.7-< 5.2	38.2-< 41.2	74.17	14	71.35	3	36	81.26	2	22	78.89	3	23	83.75	2
4.0-< 4.7	34.0-< 38.2	70.00	8	77.78	2	18	79.09	2	10	80.80	2	4	82.22	2
0.0-< 4.0	10.0-< 34.0	68.89	-	-	-	1	60.00	4	4	82.00	2	2	108.00	1

## Number of students reaching university

While the percentage of students achieving three or more grades at A-C is great for school performance tables, it is far more important for the actual students themselves and their hopes of securing a university place. In an era when securing

a university place in Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly difficult, 2017 saw us achieve the highest ever percentage of students entering university, with over 90% of the students who applied to university securing a place.

We are at the end of the telephone Monday to Friday 9am-5pm – **01484 887600** or you can email us at: **info@alps.education**

Please visit our website for more information: **www.alps.education**



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