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National College
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Schools and academies

Research Associate Full report

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Resource

Sustainable strategies for school improvement: lessons learnt through National Challenge

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Abstract

National Challenge raised the bar with regard to school performance, setting a baseline of expectation that, by 2011, all schools would achieve at least 30 per cent of students gaining 5 A*-C grades including English and maths (National College 2010). Over 600 schools were initially identified in June 2008 and a range of support strategies and funding was put in place (DCSF 2008a). Over the first year a number of schools succeeded in making significant progress, with many moving beyond the baseline measure.

This study, at the end of the first full year of National Challenge, aimed to identify, within a small sample of schools that have successfully raised attainment during this period:

- what common factors were present in them on embarking on National Challenge and
- what key leadership strategies have been used in raising attainment

A review of literature and interviews with leaders within these schools clarify which issues and approaches had greatest impact and could be considered as sustainable for longer-term improvement.

Introduction

The National Challenge programme was designed to support secondary schools that fell below the floor targets or benchmark set by the former Labour government in 2008.

Its goal was that, by 2011, 30 per cent of students in every secondary school would achieve 5 GCSEs at grade A*-C, including English and maths. Each National Challenge school would be supported by a National Challenge adviser (NCA).

Support for these schools was drawn from a range of agencies and providers including the National College, National Strategies and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Other support came directly from local authorities and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT).

The National College (2010) provided support in four strands:

- national leaders of education (NLEs) and national support schools (NSSs)
- local leaders of education (LLEs)
- coaching
- developing senior leadership teams (leadership development programme)

The other agencies provided consultancy and training support, access to targeted training in maths, access to Master's in Teaching and Learning courses for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and local training and support needs.

On 8 June 2008, the school at which I am deputy headteacher was identified as a National Challenge school as, for the first time in the school's history, it fell below the benchmark due to issues in English and maths. More specifically, the issue was in ensuring that students gained A*-C grades in both maths and English. Other schools within this study were identified because they too fell below the new benchmark, but the reasons for this varied from school to school. Schools were identified by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) solely on the basis of whether they fell below 30 per cent of students achieving 5 A*-C grades including English and maths. All other performance measures and inspection results were excluded.

In parts of the national press, National Challenge was presented as a list of 'failing schools'. The Daily Telegraph, for example had the headline 'Education hit squads to target failing schools' (Paton 2008). For the schools involved in this study, this meant similar local press coverage on the same theme. Contrary to this negative stance, however, was the National Challenge's evident intention to be supportive and positive with its strategies aimed at offering schools the opportunity to develop leadership and learn from, and share ideas with, other schools. This is reflected in the official press release from the DCSF and letters to identified schools:

National Challenge – to transform schools, raise results in English and maths, and tackle underachievement by young people.

DCSF 2008b: 1

The 600+ schools identified as National Challenge varied in location and type and would be employing a number of different strategies to address similar issues (Sinclair & Clarke 2008).

How and why schools become National Challenge, ways in which a school can improve and how to manage that in a sustainable fashion were all elements of the process that could be shared with existing and aspirant school leaders and potentially contribute to systemic improvement. If a new head understands what risk factors exist that may suppress achievement in their school, having a clear understanding of what strategies have been proven successful in addressing them could be very powerful. The intention of this study, therefore, was to explore the above-mentioned elements within a small group of schools to offer readers learning from their individual and collective experience.

Having identified the key aims of the study it was then possible to identify a number of key research questions:

- Why did National Challenge come about?
- What common issues are present in schools identified as National Challenge?
- What specific issues in leadership are common to these schools?
- What is the range of strategies being employed within the National Challenge project?
- Which strategies are proving successful and sustainable, given that funding is time limited?

Literature review

[The Children's Plan](#) (DCSF 2007), set out by the former Labour government, can clearly be identified as the initial genesis for the National Challenge project:

"We have already set a goal that within five years no secondary school should have fewer than 30 per cent of pupils gaining 5 higher level GCSEs."

DCSF 2007: 10

This statement is set within the context of reducing the number of 'failing schools' and 'schools that are coasting'; however, it does not explain the 30 per cent baseline figure. It was perhaps unsurprising, given the context that the press reaction was to focus on 'failing schools'. The term was used by some former officials in briefings and in Parliament at the time (Hansard 2008), which may have contributed to the press focus on failure, which then overshadowed the launch and drew attention away from the supportive tone of the official releases. Some senior educationalists suggested that this should have been foreseen by the DCSF (Brighouse 2008) as it echoed the experience of the London Challenge.

The London Challenge was set up in 2002 to address under-performance in the capital's schools, and acted as a pilot model on which City Challenge and National Challenge were based. Relative funding and strategies were not directly comparable but the different challenges have many things in common. City Challenge was set up alongside the National Challenge but focused on school performance in the Black Country and Greater Manchester. The London Challenge originally set a 25 per cent benchmark for five A*-C grades including English and maths, but this appears to have been revised in 2005 to the 30 per cent figure (Ofsted 2006: 4) included in [The Children's Plan](#) (DCSF 2007).

The letter sent out to National Challenge schools and local authorities outlines the reasons for the project being launched: 'All children deserve a great education and the support they need to get good qualifications and succeed in life', as well as explaining that this means 30 per cent at five A*-C including English and maths. The former Labour government also identified a secondary reason by stating that having low achieving schools was impacting on fair admissions. Every school, therefore, needed to be seen to be a good school (Paton 2008), to give parents the perception of fair choice.

Establishing why schools fall into the National Challenge is straightforward as it reflects their not having met the minimum standard previously defined by the DCSF (2008a). Identifying why they haven't met the standard is more complex. The information regarding the aims of the project clearly recognises that many schools are identified due to difficult circumstances. There is a clear challenge to the view that some schools cannot improve because of those circumstances.

"Of course National Challenge schools face real challenges but no child and no school is on a pre-determined path to low results. There are many schools in communities of high unemployment and low aspirations where children achieve excellent GCSE results. For each National Challenge school, another school facing similar problems has already turned itself around."

DCSF 2008b: 1

There are a number of examples in the literature where a headteacher of a challenging school has been recognised as outstanding, employed as an adviser to other schools by Ofsted or the former DCSF and, despite this, their own school is still identified as National Challenge (Judd 2008). This is because the identification was done on a raw results baseline rather than on 'value added' or Ofsted judgements.

As Professor Alma Harris stated in her inaugural professorial lecture for the Institute of Education:

"The National Challenge represents the latest attempt to prise improvement out of a group of schools where socio-economic disadvantage is the main common denominator. Ofsted reports and value-added figures underscore the extent of the effort and progress being made by many of these schools every day."

Harris 2009: 1

If socio-economic disadvantage is the common denominator, then using education to address it would seem appropriate as higher qualifications link directly to financial prosperity in later life, according to the DCSF (2008a). In some of these areas, having English as a second language plays a role (Judd 2008). It has also been stated that in such areas a lack of community aspiration and a parental body willing to challenge and hold a school to account are contributory factors (Barton 2008).

Brighouse (2008) reflects on this being the pattern in the London Challenge: with only 'one or two exceptions' the schools identified served the least advantaged pupils, but he also identifies that for these schools:

"They had great difficulty recruiting and retaining good staff...!"

Brighouse 2008: 1

Another significant observation on why schools may find themselves in National Challenge was highlighted in reflections from the former DCSF. They questioned whether school governors had been sufficiently challenging leadership teams but did acknowledge the governing bodies themselves may be short of support and training (Marley 2009).

When considering what the literature tells us about strategies to achieve success, one school principal argues that there is a general assumption that government knows best, and yet the one size fits all approach is inappropriate and 'does not take account of individual circumstances' (Slade 2008: 1). This is a view echoed by Brighouse (2008: 1) who says that this was addressed in the London Challenge so that schools became 'the recipients of a range of bespoke support and resources tailored to their differing contexts'. He goes further to suggest that the National Challenge has the 'same ingredients' (Slade 2008: 1) for localising the approaches.

The actual strategies that have been employed include the investment of £40 million per annum by the former government. London headteachers identified the following as some of the key reasons for rapid improvement (Ofsted 2006):

- High levels of resourcing
- A raising of community and parent aspirations
- London climate – an energy for school improvement
- Improved quality of staff:
 - better remuneration
 - better young teachers/NQTs
 - quality improved at middle management level
- Strong development culture for teaching and learning
- Leadership training
- Good quality comparative 'family of schools' data informing discussion and sharing of practice

— Strategies:

- consultant headteachers
- Teach First
- extended schools
- chartered London teacher scheme
- key worker housing
- London Leadership Centre
- challenge and support for local authorities
- grants direct to schools

The Labour government themselves had also identified conversion of schools into National Challenge trusts and academies as a way of targeting schools that were unable to meet the baseline target (Kirkup 2008). These strategies had been used as part of London Challenge.

Ofsted (2006) judged that London schools have 'improved dramatically' and that there was 'much to celebrate'. This rate of improvement has continued from 2006 with London recognised in the news:

"London is the highest performing region in England at GCSE level... "

Sellgren 2010: 1

The final question is one of sustainability. Given that many of the strategies and approaches employed and highlighted by headteachers require higher levels of resourcing, there is an immediate concern over how sustainable they can be. This is an issue that was recognised by Ofsted in the 2006 report.

"The successes to date demand that careful consideration is given to the risks when London Challenge ends in 2008."

Ofsted 2006: 3

Methodology

A number of possible approaches to the research were considered before a final methodology was chosen. Literature review was a necessity; however, on its own it offered insufficient access to data to answer the research questions. Questionnaires were discounted on the grounds of cost and the inability to 'drill down' into responses. Case studies were also considered, but it is possible that some school leaders are cynical about examples where the school context is clearly different to their own. There was also concern that some data sources may be reluctant to participate if they were not able to maintain anonymity. As a result the study was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews targeting key stakeholders in the National Challenge. These included a senior official at the former DCSF, a senior secondary strategy official and the headteachers/principals of three National Challenge schools. These interviewees were selected to provide an oversight of both the policy and implementation of National Challenge.

Support was given by the former DCSF in selecting suitable schools for the interviews. These were selected on the basis that they had to have demonstrated significant improvement in the first year, that they had used different forms of support and represented very different contexts. All three schools had achieved in excess of a 12 per cent improvement in the baseline measure in the 2009 exam results.

The schools included a semi-rural 11–16 mixed comprehensive and two city-based 11–18 comprehensives. All three fell into the category of serving socially deprived communities but varied in terms of prior attainment on intake and levels of funding and support.

Interviews started initially with the secondary strategy consultant in the summer of 2009, but all the others took place after the exam results were available between September 2009 and January 2010.

The main limitations of this approach are the small number of schools that it is possible to gather data from, and the possibility of not covering as wide a range of contexts and strategies as possible.

Findings

Why did National Challenge come about?

At some point in the past the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)/DCSF identified a target that 30 per cent of students should attain 5 A*-C at GCSE including English and maths. This target was clearly in place in 2007 as it formed part of [The Children's Plan](#) (DSCF 2007) although it is also shown to have been revised upwards in 2005 from 25-30 per cent (Ofsted 2006: 4). It was commented on in the report by Ofsted into the first six years of the London Challenge:

The Key to Success schools include those in London which are:

- below the floor target of 30 per cent 5 A*-C
- causing concern in terms of overall performance.

Ofsted 2006: 9

The DCSF identify it as an evolution of existing policies on standards related to floor targets. It has not been possible to identify when the floor target was first identified or where it originated. However, the heads of the schools in this study were unaware of the target at the time that the National Challenge was launched in 2008. The floor target they were working toward was to raise the number of learners achieving five A*-C across all GCSE or equivalent qualifications.

The reasons for the floor target are more straightforward, although those behind the 30 per cent figure are difficult to identify. Heads associations referred to the figure as 'arbitrary' (Paton 2008).

It is clear that the intention for 30 per cent of learners to achieve the floor target is linked to future employability and economic well-being – one of the cornerstones of the Every Child Matters agenda pursued by the former government (Directgov 2008: 1). It argued that the better educated/qualified a child is, the greater their chance of future employment and prosperity. It also follows that increased numbers of learners attaining this floor target would also be able to progress on to higher education, thus addressing another of the incumbent party's stated aspirations.

The heads interviewed were fully supportive of the aim of the National Challenge to improve life chances, particularly as they all serve socially deprived areas with relatively small numbers in the community progressing into higher education. The main issue they had was with the contrast between the aims/ethos of the project and the way it was launched and the press coverage. The fact that they were labelled as 'failing' by some national and local papers seemed to them fundamentally unfair as in all cases the schools were improving against the previous floor targets – one head described this as "soul destroying", another that they felt they were put "on the naughty step". In all cases the heads felt that their standing in the community, the perception of the school and the number of applications for places were all negatively impacted by this.

A secondary reason for the Challenge was identified by senior officials at the former DCSF. There was a drive for free and open choice in school admissions and this was resulting in some parents wanting to get their children into the best schools. Some authorities were resorting to lotteries to allocate places fairly, as they saw it. In order to address this growing issue, the former DCSF identified that all schools needed to be identified as good, therefore the figure acts as a proxy for good schools.

What common issues are present in schools identified as National Challenge?

When considering National Challenge as a whole, it is clear that one of the most significant common factors is socio-economic disadvantage within the school's local community – this was certainly the case in the schools interviewed with each school scoring high on social deprivation indexes (relative to their wider locality); it is also referred to by the Children's Services Network (Rogers 2008) and Civitas (Quentin 2008). In many cases this links to high levels of disaffection, low aspirations, English as an additional language, poor community cohesion and parental engagement. There also tends to be a stronger link with poor attendance and persistent absenteeism. The forms of deprivation vary, and rural schools as well as town and city schools were identified. It is not so simple, however, to claim that socio-economic disadvantage is the only factor. There are examples of schools identified as National Challenge within areas where socio-economic deprivation is not significantly evident and where other factors must therefore be significant.

A secondary factor is the impact of the wider community context. In the schools interviewed they all existed within a landscape of falling demographics with competing schools, even though all were involved in partnerships. In all cases they were competing with selective schools and were finding it difficult to attract more aspirational families. The result for the schools was a profile of low prior attainment although this was far more pronounced in the city-based schools.

Within the existing parent base at all the schools it was reported that there was a real challenge in engaging the parents effectively, with poor attitudes to attendance and learning often being endemic within families and low numbers of family members having previously succeeded in further and higher education.

For some, a culture of low expectation of the learners had developed over time. Tim Brighouse (2008: 1) identified 'what more can you expect from these children?' as the 'self-fulfilling mantra of failing schools in difficult circumstances' from the London Challenge. This was reinforced through the study; however, in all three schools those interviewed identified that this was a culture that the school leadership was challenging.

Within the focus of school leadership a number of issues were identified by the former DCSF as common to National Challenge schools, with a key issue being one of an historic lack of effective accountability. They stated that some authorities knew that school or department leaders had been ineffective over a significant period of time and had failed to hold them to account. They also expressed concern that school governors were failing to hold senior teams to account effectively. The interview process supported the former DCSF's assertion as there were examples of key members of staff at senior level who, according to those interviewed, had been under-performing.

In two of the schools the leadership had only been in place for a relatively short period of time and the performance of the heads of department for English and maths, and in one case a senior leader, had already been identified and action taken with new appointments, but the impact of those appointments had not been felt at the time National Challenge was announced.

In all cases there was a real issue with recruitment of high quality staff in the core areas. This was particularly pronounced in the leadership of those key teams although successful appointments had been made. There was also a fear that retaining the good staff, or managing succession, would be a significant problem. This experience is echoed in the findings from the London Challenge and in the feedback from the former DCSF who identified a particular issue in appointing effective leaders and teachers in maths. English was far less of an issue nationally, although there were pockets where it was a problem.

What specific issues in leadership were identified in the study schools?

All the schools visited were operating in challenging contexts. As previously stated, they all served socio-economically disadvantaged areas, with decreasing numbers of available applicants (relative to the wider authority context), and were in direct competition with other schools that had managed greater success, historically. All of them had intakes that were below or significantly below the local and national average for prior attainment and served communities where aspiration and school engagement were low.

A key issue for leadership that arises from this is around change, not just changing the school ethos and aspiration, but also the wider community's. Improving parental perceptions of education and deconstructing the lack of trust, whilst promoting the school positively to improve student numbers, all offer, it could be argued, significant challenge to even experienced senior leadership teams. In two of the schools visited the teams were not long established.

In one school the lack of an existing distributed approach to leadership was identified when a new headteacher took up post. This presented challenges associated with changing the leadership culture and practices so that leaders in key areas took greater responsibility for their leadership of these. The comments from the DCSF regarding the lack of effective accountability, discussed earlier, suggest that this was also not helped by local authorities knowing where weak leadership was in place and not holding it to account – referred to in the interview as 'Is the right head in post?'

As outlined above, improving the culture of the school offered a significant challenge in each school. Raising expectations and staff and students' belief in their ability to achieve was critical. This ties in with the need for clear and effective processes for accountability and monitoring of progress. In the schools that were studied, existing systems for data, monitoring and accountability were lacking focus and clarity and this concurs with the wider picture, presented in the interview with the DCSF, which suggests that accountability was not a strength of the system. Whether the weakness in accountability is down to issues with senior leadership, fears over successfully recruiting high quality staff or lack of capacity varies from case to case, but the schools in the research all employed broadly similar approaches to address it.

One head referred to 'a lack of a sense of urgency' regarding improving results and a general lack of ownership of the issue beyond the core areas. This then became part of the 'cultural' reform that needed to take place. One head stated that a large part of their improvement was down to this "change of ethos to a 'can do' attitude and a 'don't give up' attitude". Another referred to the psychological message of staff being prepared to put themselves out to help everyone achieve, raising aspiration and confidence.

School funding was raised as a significant issue in one school and may be a wider issue nationally. Although National Challenge had provided some extra funding, the landscape of local education funding was highly negative, with deficit budgets being commonplace. In light of that, running smaller teaching and intervention groups, attracting quality teaching staff and undertaking the sort of development work to improve teaching and learning that successful schools do, proved extremely difficult.

Use of data was also a notable issue. Most schools are data rich but in the case of two of the three schools visited, they stated that they had identified that their data was not fit for purpose. This also concurred with feedback from the DCSF relating to the wider context of schools nationally. However, this could be for different reasons. In one school it was owing to ineffective analysis and sharing of data captured by the leader with responsibility for this with the result being that it had little impact on student performance. In another, the data was captured and reviewed effectively as the cohorts progressed, but was so inaccurate that it could not be used effectively to establish progress and projected targets. In both cases significant action to improve the efficacy of data and analysis proved essential.

The final key issue is a difficult one generally, let alone in a challenging school – success in recruiting high quality staff.. Recruiting high quality leaders in English and maths is even more difficult. Beyond that, one school identified issues relating to retention when another local school offered a lucrative and attractive incentive for them to move. In the context of National Challenge these specific leadership roles take on an almost disproportionate importance to the school with, it could be argued, school leaders' futures depending on the outcomes those in this role achieve. In all the schools studied this had been an issue that was addressed positively and, apparently successfully, as reflected by the improvement in results in the first year.

What is the range of strategies being employed within the National Challenge project?

The range of strategies being employed varied from school to school as one would expect; however, the interviews identified some key common strategies that the school leaders felt were positively impacting.

Use of National Challenge advisers (NCA)

The use of NCAs was clearly identified by all schools as a primary support mechanism, although the methods of working and perceived value tend to vary. The national strategy adviser and the DCSF executive were quick to identify this as one strategy that was being reported to them as having high impact and value. It was reported that some schools had offered to forego extra funding if they could simply retain the services of the NCA. In all of the interviews the advisers were felt to have offered positive impact in general terms, with the degree of impact varying from 'useful' to 'fantastic'.

The level of impact seemed to correlate with the head's perception of the leadership style the NCA employed as each school seemed to have very different experiences.

The common reflection was that where an NCA acted in a 'coaching' style and engaged positively in the process, this had the greatest positive impact on morale and outcomes. Where a more directive style was employed (which leaders accepted is occasionally necessary), the outcomes and direct impact on leadership teams were less positive.

Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) Management Groups and use of data

The second key strategy identified was the introduction of a RAP Management Group. This took slightly different forms in each of the three schools visited, but all the heads felt it had a significant and direct impact on outcomes. In each school the head chaired the group in the first year. Governors and senior leaders, including the heads of English, maths and Year 11, were key members. The meetings were held frequently and also held members directly accountable. Actions were agreed, resources identified and time limits set – and monitoring was done in a persistent manner.

In one school, the designation of a senior leader to act as a central point of contact and monitoring for the data tracking and the creation of a sub-group to look at student level issues and potential negative impacts was also considered to have had a significantly positive impact. In all schools far more detailed and accurate data tracking was developed to monitor student progress at cohort and individual level. Tenacity in regularly gathering and effectively communicating the data with staff was crucial. Data was 'fit for purpose' and led to better quality 'learning conversations' with students. Use of 'RAISE' boards identifying the target (C/D borderline) students was crucial, with photos being used to show a visual 'battleground'. A high level of focus on the crossover students – those who were predicted to attain a C in one of English and maths, but not the other – was maintained. Stressing that the whole curriculum was involved and not just maths and English – achieving 'buy in' from other teams – was also important.

The RAP that the Management Group developed and monitored had offered a far greater level of transparency, clarity and direction to the process and was far more specific than the standard school development plan, leaders felt. The DCSF reflected (on a national basis) that the standard of RAPs being initially submitted was disappointing with clear accountability, time limits and focused targets not being evident. In the successful schools visited this had not been the case, although the effectiveness of their respective local authorities in managing the initial process was questioned more than once.

Associated with the capture and use of data was the setting of 'aspirational' learning targets for students. Aiming high and encouraging ambition was considered a low cost, high impact strategy – although one school was keen to stress that performance management was not linked to the aspirational targets, thus freeing staff to engage without fear. This was also related to a cultural change focused on 'can do' and 'achieve'. Working with students to target the higher grades on coursework supported and developed their academic confidence, resulting in increased results – a positive cycle.

Core subject prioritisation and leadership

The next key strategy was the prioritisation of the core subjects. The standard of leadership and teaching and learning in these core teams was a fundamental instrument in gaining rapid improvement. In each school the need to do this had been identified prior to National Challenge and in one school new teams and leaders had already been appointed and were starting to make an impact. Two of the schools used significant proportions of the National Challenge funding to help recruit or retain high quality heads of department and to 'overstaff' teams to allow for smaller teaching groups and greater intervention activity. In each case the leadership roles became, effectively, whole-school leadership posts and were therefore remunerated. This raises a question of sustainability to be addressed later.

Challenging unsatisfactory teaching

Challenging unsatisfactory practice in the teaching of these areas was also key, with support being accessed from local authority consultants or local advanced skills teachers (ASTs). Capability processes were employed in some schools to hold under-performing staff to account and to build in support. Use of consultants varied from direct intervention strategies, for example, advising on, or themselves teaching/tutoring (small group teaching, whole class support) to inspection/consultation. Ease of access to these resources varied with extra costs having to be met. Friction with the wider area needs beyond the National Challenge schools was also mentioned by interviewees, with consultants having to reorganise the work that they were undertaking in other schools within the authority to meet National Challenge school needs.

Challenging poor attendance and raising aspirations

Challenging the attitude and attendance of the pupils in each of these three schools was also fundamentally important. Two of the schools used fast track prosecution or attendance orders to target persistent absentees, although the effectiveness of this in the exam year was notably less than in Key Stage 3.

Selling the importance of education/attendance and changing the local culture was something that each school had started addressing through a focus on standards and also structural change. Each school was in the process of becoming a trust or academy and was looking to develop better community cohesion and greater levels of aspiration through the partnerships that these organisations were able to engage. In one case the effectiveness of a new local partner from higher education was considered a significantly positive development. Providing chances for students to visit further/higher education centres to engage with the possibility of aiming high post-16 was also considered to potentially have a significant impact on a student's aspirations for the future. One school reflected that some students find it hard to appreciate these chances, as their own families are unable to provide experiences and informed opinions to draw on.

Use of intervention groups

A more 'practical' strategy that had been employed was one of intervention. The nature of intervention varied but removing target groups from some non-exam or option subjects for intensive support in English and/or maths was common. The nature of the interventions varied, with each school trying a range of strategies. One-to-one tuition was piloted in one school and was considered very successful. Each school ran 'study plus' type groups as well as after-school or breakfast clubs. Extra Easter schools and pre-exam briefings and learning opportunities were employed as were award schemes targeted at positively rewarding (vouchers, points) those who made the effort to attend such sessions. As before, sustainability of all of these strategies was questioned and will be discussed later.

Curriculum review

Reconstructing the curriculum was also employed in these schools. Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum, appropriate to the needs of the learners, with chances for vocational and practical learning opportunities, was common to each school. Some of this was delivered 'in house' (for example, BTEC programmes, enterprise, sport) whilst others were delivered in partnership with further education organisations. Engaging the learners in what they considered to be an interesting and relevant programme of study aided attendance and behaviour. Successful outcomes in these courses supported the five+ GCSEs at A*-C grade element of the performance measures.

Finally, another strategy that was considered to have paid dividends was an increased focus on the provision and placement of other learning opportunities in the curriculum. Each school offered a range of activities, clubs and experiences. Maintaining an explicit focus on protecting dates in the calendar and preventing activities from distracting staff and students from the core purpose of raising attainment was successful, if unpopular in some cases, for example, forcing changes to Duke of Edinburgh expeditions or school performances so that they didn't take students out of lessons prior to exams.

Which strategies are proving successful and sustainable given that funding is time limited?

The first thing to note here is that schools had widely differing amounts of funding. However, in each case the heads were fully aware that the funding was time limited and designed to 'ramp down', that is, decrease over the project term.

The DCSF representative did suggest that, although targeted strategies such as National Challenge do provide focus for improvement, they can also produce a 'short-term' mentality with the focus purely being on the immediate Year 1 outcomes and not sustainable improvement. This was mentioned by all parties as a flaw in the first phase and was criticised heavily by the headteachers. The secondary strategy adviser was clear that this had been addressed in the second phase.

There was a recognised risk in all three schools that some of the strategies employed successfully would be unsustainable due to the extra funding that had been required to enable them. So, there was also the risk that some strategies would be 'shelved' once the money ran out. The outcomes, however, appeared to be completely different.

Perhaps most significant from the discussion with heads was that they didn't take the view that money spent on ensuring quality/quantity of staffing was unsustainable. There was no consideration given to undoing these developments once the money ran out. Instead, heads were gearing up to make decisions about cutting other areas of curriculum or provision to ensure that these spending outcomes could be sustained. In other words, rather than being considered unsustainable, these strategies were considered to have forced a new set of priorities. In addition, the acceptance of these new priorities was not a pragmatic response to government performance measures, but accepted as a foundation stone of enabling future prosperity of their students.

Reflecting on this retrospectively suggests that the research question is not appropriate. It is less a question of whether the improvement strategies are sustainable as, in these headteachers' views, any strategy that has been successful will be sustained. More questionable is what other aspects of school life will be seen as 'sustainable' once the priorities change.

Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this project was to identify successful and sustainable strategies for school improvement that had been identified through the first year of the National Challenge. In order to do this, the background to the project needed to be understood and the reasons why schools found themselves performing below the benchmark identified. Then, its purpose was to clearly pinpoint which strategies that had contributed to significant improvement were employed by these schools and to consider their sustainability.

Although some of the issues that have been identified are complex and need to be addressed by communities as a whole, not just schools, there are clear indicators that success can be attained even in challenging circumstances. This report has identified the following key points for school leaders and policy makers from its findings.

For school leaders

Based on this study, there are a number of general factors common to schools below the 30 per cent benchmark and which need to be addressed in partnership with the local community and other agencies:

- socio-economic deprivation
- students with low prior attainment on entry
- functioning in selective/competitive environments with other schools
- low community aspiration and engagement with education or employment
- high proportion of persistent absenteeism related to the above

Use of structural change can help to address these issues by regenerating community interest in the school and by developing new partnerships with useful and interested parties such as universities, colleges and other education bodies, for example, The Co-operative Trust. Structural change might be managed through, for example, becoming an academy or through the establishment of a trust.

There were eight factors common to the schools in this study that contributed to their being placed in the National Challenge. These have generated the eight imperative statements below that establish the key approaches they used to improve. School leaders who can identify with one or more of these in their own schools might actively address these, using successful strategies found within this study.

Embed a culture of high aspiration for staff and students

- Belief, optimism and energy are all needed to turn this around as well as wholehearted support from staff. A clear, positive, shared and well-communicated vision from the school leadership is critical, as is a willingness to take advice, reflect on lessons learnt and quickly moving to address any threats to improvement.

Distribute leadership

- Fear of failure may result in a senior team retaining all responsibility for school improvement but this will potentially deskill or disenfranchise middle leaders and reduce capacity for sustainable improvement. Distributed leadership addresses this and also aids clear accountability structures.

Hold under-performing colleagues to account

- Although some fear that taking on this challenge may result in problems with staffing, failure to do so is almost guaranteed to limit progress.

Create improvement processes that ensure focus and clarity

- Introducing a RAP that clearly lays out measurable, trackable and timed objectives with staff accountable clearly mapped can have an enormous impact. Having a single point of contact for monitoring, for example, Assistant Head – School Performance, also helps keep things clear.

Use data systems that are clear, updated and accurate

- Accurate performance data is key to tracking student progress and, thereby, identifying key target groups and intervention required. A simple, regularly updated and accurate tracking system is critical. Although the simplicity and regularity can be built in by the person(s) managing that system, ensuring accuracy of assessment/predictions may require support from consultants and exam boards combined with rigorous internal moderation.

Create core teams that are clear on high standards and effective teaching and learning and whose leadership is strong

- Prioritising this area for overstaffing and use of attractive recruitment or retention packages for good staff/leaders is worthwhile even if extra funding is not available.

Improve attendance and attitudes to school

- A tenacious attitude to tackling this is required using a range of strategies up to and including legal action. On a cohort-wide basis, successfully turning a relatively small number of key students around in terms of attendance could lift the baseline figure by several per cent.
- Ensuring a wide and appropriate curriculum offer to ensure the five+ A*-C including English and maths GCSEs and offering access to Level 2 vocational courses can help some students re-engage with learning and meet the baseline.

Positively and proactively intervene to support those falling below their potential

- Although the risk is that this becomes a C/D borderline focus, it can also include any student outside of the key group.
- Intervention strategies include one-to-one tuition, mentoring, Study Plus classes (withdrawal from other non-exam or option groups), holiday schools, after-school and breakfast clubs, reward schemes, exam masterclasses with other schools, aspiration visits to further and higher education institutions and use of online learning.
- Deliberate management of the school calendar to avoid any activities occurring at key exam times acting as a distraction or resulting in missed lessons.

Sustainability

When considering the issue of sustainability of the strategies that were employed in the study schools, the following conclusions were made:

- Some of the strategies that have immediate and significant impact are those that require no extra funding. They are more related to developing the culture and ethos of the school or ensuring that the management systems being used are efficient and fit for purpose. In these cases it is possible to redevelop existing systems, meetings and plans rather than add in a new layer. In this way they automatically become sustainable.
- Where a strategy has an associated cost, such as running intervention groups, using consultancy, providing extra staffing or recruiting/retaining good leaders, then there is obviously a question about sustainability. In these circumstances school leaders can review existing priorities. Something may become unsustainable once the money runs out, but it doesn't have to be the strategies which are ensuring improvement. Looking at other areas of the curriculum, increasing class sizes in foundation subjects/key stages or reducing other operating costs can all compensate for the increased spending on achieving the benchmark. As one head put it, "I can't afford not to sustain it..."

For policy makers

Implications for policy makers based on the study's findings are:

- Make benchmark targets transparent with a clear explanation for their setting in order to engage school leaders positively.
- Understand that there will always be a bottom end to the bell curve of performance but that many schools at the bottom end are doing a very good job adding value to their students' attainment.
- Ensure lessons from schools' experiences of facing potentially damaging press attention are fed into future strategy development and its publication.
- High quality peer coaching from skilled consultants (NCAs) is valued highly as a strategy.
- Extra funding is welcome to help address issues in quality/quantity of staffing in core areas.

During the course of this study there was a change of government, and it is worth highlighting what was said in relation to National Challenge by Michael Gove, now Secretary of State for Education, at the Local Government Association's conference (DfE 2010a):

"The London Challenge and the Black Country Challenge drove improvement in education but some I know felt they were perhaps too prescriptively designed by the centre."

"When the National Challenge was launched, it maintained the impetus for improvement but again the feeling was that the centre was driving too much, leaving local communities out of the picture."

"I understand those concerns, although I also firmly believe that floor targets have helped to focus attention on driving improvement in the lowest achieving schools."

This study, whilst highlighting headteachers' concerns around the floor targets, nevertheless reflects the point made by Michael Gove that focused attention has led to a driving of improvement and successful gains in attainment.

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