

Achieving excellence

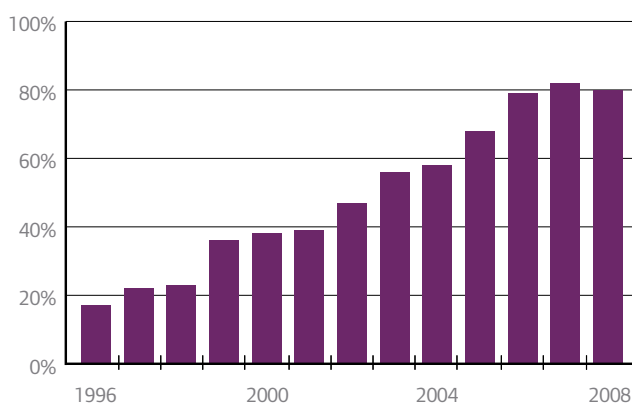
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Few of the schools featured here were born great; they had to achieve greatness. This narrative starts in the early nineties. This was the time when many of the headteachers took up their posts, drawn to challenges which others eschewed.

27 These headteachers were determined to transform the schools they took on, had the highest expectations and aspirations for students, and wanted to do something for what were disadvantaged and often complex, fractured or dysfunctional communities. They welcomed the accountability posed by rigorous inspection and – to some extent – the publication of results, and turned these policies to their advantage, for example by drawing from the inspection methodology and handbooks to develop approaches to internal evaluation and quality assurance.

28 There should be no misconceptions: turning around the fortunes of a flagging school in challenging circumstances is very hard work and requires unwavering self-belief and perseverance. Improved results do not come easily and there can be setbacks.

Figure 3: Percentage of pupils achieving five or more grade A* to C GCSE results at Robert Clack School over 14 years



29 The succession of results represented in Figure 3 shows an unusually sustained upward trajectory from a very low base to high academic success. The school serves an area containing significant deprivation, drawing its intake of White British with a significant minority of Black British students from two of the most disadvantaged wards in the country. Higher than average proportions of students are eligible for free school meals or have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Not short of ambition, the school is a specialist college in mathematics and computing, as well as science.

30 Specialist status, leadership incentive grants and the funding streams that accompanied other government initiatives enhanced opportunities for the creative use of resources. Several of the schools featured here engaged strongly with initial teacher training. They embarked on a range of partnerships, particularly with other schools. They were at pains to understand and work with their communities and, above all, they built a climate in which high expectations of students and ambitions for the school were matched by trust in and support for the staff.

31 These schools, on the whole, do not occupy particularly favourable sites. Typically, and like many other schools, they comprise a mixture of buildings, including some that are old and in need of replacement. At the time of visiting, few had benefited from the Building Schools for the Future funding programme. However, all were committed to creating a pleasant and positive environment, with prominent displays of work and overt celebrations of students' achievements. Displays are also frequently used to reinforce the schools' key values, messages and priorities.

32 While the schools have very strong links with their communities, they also work hard to create a safe, harmonious school environment that leaves the community's problems and tensions outside. The culture and norms inside the school can often be very different to those outside; as one headteacher put it: 'The street stops at the gate.'

Starting the journey to excellence

33 Where a school is dysfunctional, the direction in the pre-academy nineties was towards improvement or closure. This was the case at Greenwood Dale School. When the headteacher arrived in 1992, the roll was 500 students and falling. He describes the school as a 'total mess, with staff smoking in lessons, discipline non-existent and standards abysmally low. It was regarded as a racist school by the local, largely Muslim community'. Decisions were tough and progress slow, but they typify issues commonly faced in turning failing schools around.

Transforming a dysfunctional school

The school had a £200,000 deficit budget and a quarter of the staff were made redundant in the first term of the new headteacher's leadership. The examination results were transformed in two years, rising from 12% to 30% of students achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C, after which results plateaued for several years. The headteacher introduced a range of 'short-term fixes', such as establishing systems and procedures and insisting on professionalism, but found it took more time and a lot of work for the school to become good. This involved attracting and retaining staff, beginning to build bridges with the community, and focusing on the things that matter most:

- discipline
- teaching and learning
- the curriculum.

34 Staff turbulence was a common feature of the schools, particularly but not only in London. In Luton, for example, when the headteacher took over Challney High School for Boys in 1990, there was little doubt as to the challenges.

Staffing challenges

The school served a community consisting almost entirely (96%) of immigrant and refugee families, a high proportion of whom did not speak English at home, if at all. Ninety per cent of staff were male; the headteacher wanted a better balance and female staff are now in the majority. Standards were low and the learning environment poor, with many classes housed in temporary huts. It was extremely difficult to recruit staff and nearly as hard to retain them. Solving this problem of staff turbulence was the key to the school's subsequent success. There was also much disillusionment among the staff; the first stage was convincing them that they could rise to the challenge.

35 The evidence from this and the other outstanding schools with similar backgrounds suggests that the quality of leadership is paramount and that no problem is insurmountable.

Turning around a flagging school requires self-belief and perseverance.

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36 The headteachers in this sample are not, by and large, iconic – although some have earned national respect, acclaim and recognition; they have taken on challenging schools out of a deep commitment to improving the lot of their students and communities. Moral purpose may be at the heart of it, but successful headteachers need a range of other attributes and skills if they are to succeed in dealing with the challenges presented by turbulent and complex communities.

37 Such headteachers have a number of particular qualities which have been captured in inspection reports. What stands out in the headteachers of the outstanding schools, and is reflected by their colleagues and students, are characteristics such as:

- clear and unshakeable principles and sense of purpose
- vigilance and visibility
- courage and conviction
- predisposition to immediate action, letting nothing slip
- insistence on consistency of approach, individually and across the organisation
- drive and determination
- belief in people
- an ability to communicate
- leadership by example
- emotional intelligence
- tireless energy.

38 Together, these characteristics are evident in each school's values and ethos. The headteachers live the vision and model good practice. Their approach is infectious, starting with the senior leadership team. In time the values become central to the school's ethos, underpinning everything it stands for and does. Achieving excellence, however, starts with getting eight fundamentals right.

Having vision, values and high expectations

39 The headteachers of outstanding schools are impressive people who are, literally, following their vocation. They know why they are there and what they want to achieve. Their purpose is often simply expressed in terms of ensuring that the school does its utmost to help every young person achieve as much as he or she can. This can be seen as a moral purpose inasmuch as it is not just a goal but is seen as a duty. These headteachers would view themselves as failing if they were not striving to help all their students to achieve the greatest possible success. They also have a vision of how this can be achieved and what the school could become. Their ambitions are principally for the students and the school, but often also for the community, which is, for them, not something that has to be accommodated or related to: it is the reason for the school's existence.

The importance of common values

A key aspect of Morpeth School's success is a very high level of shared, common values and beliefs. As the headteacher says: 'It's often in schools in pockets, but it is at an unusually high level here.' Staff share a strong moral commitment to improving opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and a strong belief in what they can achieve. These values are seen as 'partly held, partly developed'. They form part of the selection process when staff are recruited, but are also reinforced by the strong culture of the school. As one teacher said: 'You just get on the train that is going at 100 miles per hour.'

40 For a headteacher new to the school, the search starts on day one for like-minded people who share a philosophy and values. Reaching the level of shared understanding reflected in schools like that illustrated above takes time and a lot of discussion, energy and modelling.

41 Greenwood Dale School provides a fine example of a school with an unmistakable operational culture.

Values to the fore

The school lives its values. Everyone matters; the headteacher knows every student, but it is clear that they all – students and staff – have responsibilities as well as rights. They feel trusted and respond to this. The culture encourages innovation and experimentation but never allocates blame. If something does not work out or targets are not met, the leadership seeks to know how they could have supported the person better. The result is a staff that works extremely hard in an appreciative and encouraging environment and students who understand exactly what is expected of them at school. Small things matter; staff are smartly dressed as professionals, and students reflect as well as respect this. Everything is done to the highest possible standard, consistently, relentlessly and simply, but in a civilised way and without the tensions that would arise if the regime was externally imposed rather than stemming from the self-belief and professionalism of all who work in the school.

42 Both these schools use highly effective, usually indirect, ways of encouraging people to give their best. They provide an atmosphere in which staff feel encouraged to take on initiatives as long as they are well considered and properly planned. Staff are occasionally surprised that the headteachers agree so readily to new proposals and projects. The headteachers know that such a stance helps motivate staff and that there is usually little real risk.

Attracting, recruiting, retaining and developing staff

43 These schools now tend to have very stable staffing. One reason is that teachers are reluctant to leave because teaching is enjoyable, the ethos is positive and interesting things happen. There are constant opportunities for professional development. However, the schools also actively engineer this stability. Their approach runs counter to the orthodox view held in many schools that it is good

for staff to gain experience and move on. If teachers are good, the headteachers seek to retain them, giving new challenges, responsibilities and experience within the school. This high level of stability has a number of benefits.

- It reduces the turbulence in staffing that many schools experience (which often leads to temporary or supply teachers filling gaps while new appointments are made).
- Teachers are strongly versed in the school's culture, values and norms.
- Teachers are also schooled in the school's practices and policies. This helps to support consistent practice.
- Students know the teachers well. They do not have to spend time getting to know too many new teachers. This continuity is particularly valued by many vulnerable students, who can find changes of staff unsettling.
- It supports the development of a strong corporate, team-based culture.

44 High staff turnover, the scourge of many urban schools, can be one of the biggest disruptive influences on developing a positive school culture. Often, though, the problems are more immediate, such as procuring mathematics teachers or even simply putting qualified teachers in front of classes. The more successful the school, however, the less acute is the problem. The schools give high priority and put a great deal of energy into recruitment – and worldwide recruitment is not uncommon. As schools build up a cadre of highly effective staff, they become determined not to compromise for the sake of expediency. Several of the schools would rather not appoint in the absence of a strong candidate for a post but, equally, would appoint two to a single vacancy if there were two outstanding candidates.

45 These schools train many of their own teachers. They are, typically, heavily involved in initial teacher training, some as 'training schools'.¹⁰ Such involvement puts these schools in a good position to see a lot of trainees and to pick the best. More than this, leaders also see the benefits of being able to train and mould their teachers from the beginning, ensuring that they share their values and teach in a way that suits the needs of their school. As one headteacher put it: 'If you've been trained here, you are

¹⁰ Further information on training schools can be found at: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/trainingschools/>

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already imbued with the culture and ethos.’ These schools often use graduate or employment-based initial teacher training (EBITT) or school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) schemes to train people from the local area, ensuring that their staffing profile reflects that of the local community.

46 Staff shortages were an endemic problem when Vic Galyer became headteacher of Challney High School for Boys in Luton. His radical solution was to develop the Chiltern Training Group (CTG) – a centre to train not only staff for his school but for the whole of Luton.

Chiltern Training Group

The headteacher arrived in 1990. Within two years he had established SCITT provision, the CTG, working with other schools in Luton. This began a development that continues to go from strength to strength in broadening and deepening its training provision. Many benefits accrued. It provided a supply of newly qualified teachers already attuned to the school’s ethos, practices and expectations. It involved every established member of staff in a mentoring role, inducing them to engage in evaluating lessons and assessing proficiency. It led to a new staff profile with a balance of gender and ethnicity, and it reduced staff turnover from a turbulent flood to a healthy trickle. It provides an accelerated route to professional cohesion and consistent practice. The CTG has now trained over 1,000 teachers and many more teaching and learning support assistants.

47 The CTG has trained 50% of its own school’s staff and about 15% of the total teaching force of Luton. Over 30% of the CTG cohort is drawn from minority ethnic groups, helping to build staffing which is more representative of the demography of Luton.

48 The quality and extent of professional development are not only key to school improvement but also a

significant factor in retaining staff. The first step in taking over an underperforming school may be to embark on a process best termed ‘re-professionalisation’. One headteacher speaks of ‘professionalising staff so as to develop a community that focuses on the core issues: teaching and learning, and achievement and attainment’.

Recruitment and professional development at Plashet School

The best contenders for middle leader posts have often proved to be internal candidates. They have benefited from the school’s extensive programme of in-service training, from the experience gained through mentoring newly qualified or trainee teachers and modelling good practice to their colleagues and visiting teachers. Plashet’s finely tuned systems of planning, performance management and professional development, including Chartered Teacher status, give staff what one described as ‘a natural idea of where they’re going next’. This meets many of the school’s priorities for succession planning, although care is taken to ensure that there is also a regular infusion of fresh talent from outside.

The large departments give scope for more junior members to be trained for and take on additional responsibilities. The focus is on practice rather than abstruse theory. Arrangements are continually reviewed and improved. When it was determined that regular Monday evening working parties had lost momentum and impact, these sessions were consolidated into whole-staff sessions spread across the year. Out of these have come cross-curricular strategies and new approaches to teaching and learning, sometimes presented as booklets. They have changed attitudes; there has been a move away from a view of ‘each teacher as a one-man band’ towards acceptance that what individuals do in the classroom is part of the whole-school pedagogy, has value and should be shared.

49 Wood Green High School recognises the value of engaging in initial teacher training to the school's existing staff.

Professional development benefits from hosting trainee teachers

The school appointed a professional development manager, who had experience of mentoring. She was able to sharpen and update the professional skills of the staff and establish a culture of in-house debate about teaching. All the departments are now expected to work regularly with initial teacher training students. This, the school's leaders believe, constantly refreshes the overall style and quality of teaching by bringing in new thinking, maintaining enthusiasm and providing a continually renewed pool for recruitment. In some departments, all teachers are now trained mentors, well qualified to support young teachers and well practised in professional debate and evaluation.

50 The associated impact of all this was noted in the 2002 inspection report. 'Much of the teaching is outstandingly good and students learn far more than is usually expected.'

Establishing disciplined learning and consistent staff behaviour

51 All the schools place a very strong emphasis on the school as a workplace. Its business is learning and everyone is there to learn and help others to learn. Establishing this as the indigenous culture of the school takes time. When improving most schools, the initial emphasis is placed strongly on behaviour. A common response to the behavioural challenges is to specify exactly what the school will and will not stand for. All the schools inculcate a strong work ethic. Students, in the main, know they are there to learn and therefore expect an interesting curriculum and expert teaching. Middleton Technology School, for example, which describes its catchment area as being 'beset with alcohol and drugs in one direction and gangs in the other', will not include students who have

shaven heads or emblematic patterns in their hair, trainers which bear brand marks and conspicuous designs and other manifestations of group or gang culture. In the schools generally, complete prohibitions on knives, alcohol and drugs are automatic. A police officer is linked with several of these schools, in some cases based on the premises.

Sorting out behaviour

Ask the students at Robert Clack why the school is so successful and they will tell you: 'because staff enforce the rules'. They appreciate the fact that behaviour is excellent and disruption rare. It wasn't always like that. When Paul Grant took over as headteacher, behaviour was appalling. In his own words, he began by 'stirring up the hornets' nest', doing 300 fixed-term exclusions in the first week. He made a point of seeing the parents of every excluded child, sometimes at 06.00 or 23.00. In many cases, parents were initially aggressive and abusive. As he says, however, what people in communities such as Dagenham say they don't have enough of is time. He invested a considerable amount of time with parents and their children, targeting the most difficult and disillusioned, and working to find solutions. He knew that he couldn't win every battle and had to permanently exclude 11 students in his first year. In the past seven years, however, only two students have been excluded.

The headteacher felt that formal assemblies were vital, and began touring classrooms to explain to students how he expected them to behave. The first students to challenge those expectations were dealt with swiftly and severely so that other students gained confidence and became less fearful. He also introduced the concept of the governing body 'as a kind of mystery power'. The students were told: 'The governing body is giving me clear instructions that there will be no slippage on behaviour. They have instructed me to take all necessary actions.' He also used assemblies to send positive messages home: 'Tell your mums and dads it's changing. Thank them for their support.'

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52 Although behaviour is now excellent, school leaders are wary of the slightest complacency. The importance of supervision is stressed and teachers are expected to turn up very promptly for all duties. Along with his senior colleagues, the headteacher spends most of his time in corridors or lessons. Lesson changes are meticulously managed. One recent innovation is the introduction of two social inclusion managers – one at each of the school's two sites. Although they are both teachers (and ex-heads of year), they have virtually no teaching commitments. Instead, they spend their time around the corridors or dropping into lessons. Many schools have members of staff 'on call' for particular lessons, but the difference here is that there is continuity, with the social inclusion managers able to follow issues through and no gaps during lesson changes. They also link closely to the strong system of year heads.

53 The outstanding schools manage behaviour issues very well without instilling an oppressive atmosphere. They have incentive and reward schemes, and supportive and celebratory cultures, as shown in Bartley Green School.

Balancing discipline with encouragement

Alongside the discipline must run a strong current of care and encouragement, both for students and for staff. Chris Owen, the headteacher of Bartley Green School, believes strongly in what she calls 'the healing and invigorating power of praise and celebration'. Over the years, she has noticed a change of culture from the days when students simply would not stand up in assembly to be given a prize to their eagerness now to win recognition. Care is taken to ensure that boys and girls are represented equally when awards are handed out. The headteacher also takes care to thank members of staff for going the extra mile in any way and organises protected time for planning and preparation before a challenging initiative, punctuated by 'moments of celebration'.

54 In the outstanding schools, students are typically very positive about their relationships with teachers and with each other. Staff also feel strongly supported, but know that their headteachers do not want to see standards slip.

55 Most of the schools see permanent exclusions as a last resort, but do occasionally resort to them. A notable exception is Challney High School, which has had as much reason to exclude as any. The school has not permanently excluded a student for 13 years. It always seeks and finds alternative solutions. The retiring headteacher rationalises his determination thus: 'You have to change the culture in which exclusion remains as one of the sanctions. If we were to exclude, I estimate that over 60 students would have been excluded during this period. If you exclude one boy, another will pop up. It is far better – and more consistent with our culture – to use our huge investment in pastoral support, with many skilled non-teaching support staff, and our ability to personalise learning, to address the problem.' 'No permanent exclusions' is spreading as a local-authority-wide objective, for which Leicester is an example.

56 Challney High School believes that many problems of extreme behaviour arise because of students' difficulty in accessing the curriculum which, in turn, can be linked to inadequate literacy and lack of success. It has responded with a focus on literacy, providing intervention through Reading Recovery for the poorest readers and other support in the curriculum. The school's principles dictate that: 'Where parents have difficulties with a child, they expect the school to support them through the problem. Exclusion can make the situation impossible and cause the family to become dysfunctional.'

57 If there are serious problems with a student, parents are brought in immediately, whether early in the morning, or during or after school. The school will have a professional conversation with parents, who generally express their confidence in the school's ability to handle the matter in the best way possible for their son. The school has a very strong commitment to being there to support families.

58 Many schools are let down by a lack of consistency by staff. This can show itself in the way staff speak to students, their response to behaviours which some tolerate while others turn a blind eye, speed of response to situations, dealing with an issue that has arisen or not dealing with it 'because it is not my responsibility'; the examples are numerous. One of the hallmarks of very good or outstanding schools is a high degree of consistency in approaches and responses, regardless of which staff member is involved.

Staff consistency

Greenwood Dale School expects all staff to offer a consistent approach to attitudes, behaviour and discipline in the school, including matters ranging from jewellery and chewing gum to staff dress. The headteacher, Barry Day, leaves staff in no doubt at the beginning of the school year: 'I see the maintenance of good discipline as my prime responsibility and I take that responsibility very seriously.' The reason for consistency at Greenwood Dale is put like this: 'It is essential to remember that, if a member of staff lets an incident go or has low expectations, it makes it more difficult for the rest of us. Our students can be challenging, but we have shown that most can be supported to achieve success.' Not for nothing are the student code of conduct, mission statement and school aims displayed in every classroom in the school. Tutors are asked to go through them with their tutor groups.

59 Consistency of approach is a characteristic shared by all 12 schools. They are truly corporate cultures, with staff and usually students working for each other sensitively and cooperatively. Students do not receive mixed messages or perceive staff to have vastly different values. They see common purpose: adults who are working in students' interests, who like being in the school, who care for it and are ambitious for its future.

Assuring the quality of teaching and learning

60 Monitoring and evaluation are seen as crucial to assuring the quality of teaching and learning. Challney High School introduced a rigorous approach to self-evaluation in the mid-nineties, based on Ofsted's inspection framework. In Bartley Green School, members of the senior leadership team do 'drop in' classroom visits every day, which both support staff and ensure that teaching and learning are of the expected standard. Time is ring-fenced for staff to work in teams: engaging in productive discussion about pedagogy, planning lessons that inspire students to become independent and effective learners, and being reflective rather than simply dealing with administration. Teachers are expected to make good practice visits to other schools and disseminate their findings on their return. They undertake peer observations across departments so that good practice is widely shared and inter-disciplinary collaboration fostered. Morale is clearly high; teachers and support staff speak with evangelical zeal about the challenges and rewards of life at the school, illustrating the point being made by the headteacher: 'We attract staff with moral purpose.'

Teaching and learning

Lessons at Bartley Green School demonstrate consistent good practice, evidence of continuing professional development and rigorous performance management. The rapport between teachers and students is very positive; the pace is brisk and activities varied; and students respond promptly and confidently to opportunities to collaborate, solve problems and present ideas to their peers. There are clear and non-negotiable expectations about appropriate behaviour, which are calmly and firmly insisted upon.

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61 Some of the schools have also identified very clearly what they expect to see in all lessons. One headteacher has expressed surprise that, as a headteacher, a learning and teaching policy was one of the few that he was not required to write. At Seven Kings High School, a policy has been in place for many years and is seen as key to the school's improvement. It is frequently held up in staff meetings and referred to as the single most important policy document in the school.

A learning and teaching policy

The policy shapes school practice and is rigorously enforced. It is clear, sharp and overtly prescriptive: the word 'must' is continually used. An accompanying appendix of good practice provides a rich array of ideas, but the main purpose of the policy is to set down very clear expectations about what will happen in every classroom. In many cases, this is at a very detailed level: for example, teachers are told that they must decide where students will sit and that homework must be set in the first quarter of the lesson. Teachers are also told very clearly that they are not to spend the first lessons of the year on the type of routine activities common in schools at this point. They are told that their job is to 'light fires' and excite students about learning at the school.

Leading, and building leadership capacity

62 There is no disguising the role and importance of these headteachers in driving forward the improvement of all 12 schools. Inspection and research have both shown that the quality of leadership is second only to the quality of teaching in terms of the school's impact on students' achievements. This report catches the schools at a time when most of the long-standing headteachers are still leading their schools, a few of the heads have been there for a relatively short period and two leaders are new to headship. All the schools have strong leadership teams and a large measure of distributed leadership. All the headteachers place a strong emphasis on creating effective leadership at all levels through their schools.

63 The process of building leadership capacity starts from the headteacher's first day in a new school when, usually, a group of senior staff is inherited. They may be disciples of a culture and values that need to be sustained and nourished, with clear roles, a corporate sense of identity and good distribution of leadership. Alternatively, the leadership team may be a more disparate body in terms of skills, values and commitment or, occasionally, one which is not effectively taking responsibility or being accountable, possibly because it has never been asked to. The headteachers of outstanding schools realise the importance of building a capable and committed team, taking any necessary steps to achieve this. The outstanding schools featured here have teams, not just at senior but also at other levels, whose members know they each have a crucial role in ensuring that the school remains highly successful. The following example shows, perhaps typically, the situation that one of the headteachers found when appointed to the headship of the current school.

A change for the better

Before the change of headteacher, the school:

- was comfortable and happy
- had a strong pastoral system, though this was heavily reliant on personalities of postholders rather than systems
- had little culture of change and improvement
- had a questionable work ethic, for example a head of faculty working too hard made staff feel guilty and disapproved of by their line manager
- set expectations around happy, well-adjusted students, with little discussion of whether they should also achieve higher academic levels
- had a well-liked headteacher who was very easygoing, genial and supportive, but not challenging, often absent, and who allowed poor staff to remain in post.

The new headteacher:

- faced initial staff resentment; belief that the school was happy and successful and did not need to change
- gradually changed the culture over a few years; did not do too much too soon
- retained what was good
- maintained a relentlessly positive attitude; showed incredible energy
- was a lateral thinker; prepared to take a gamble
- had a very 'can do' attitude: said 'yes' wherever possible
- was prepared to tackle difficult issues, for example weeding out poor staff
- trusted and motivated staff
- was approachable and relaxed
- made good use of promotion to bring alienated staff onside
- used the wider senior leadership team to involve more staff as leaders.

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64 Most of the schools have large senior leadership teams with a flat structure, although individual structures vary considerably. One school has four deputies, but two have none. By making all assistant headteachers equivalent, these two schools are signalling the importance and interchangeability of their roles. They gain the experience which, to some extent, is denied them by having deputies, particularly long-serving deputies who do not aspire to headship.

65 The outstanding schools have embraced the concept of distributed leadership, with the caveat that many of the headteachers remain very 'hands on'. They cannot resist getting engaged. This is one reason why they teach, are a presence in the school at all hours of the day, and prefer to be out in the school than in their office: 'management by walking about'. The other reason is that they are demonstrating the practice they wish to see adopted by their leaders and future leaders. At Morpeth School, leaders are not simply modelling leadership but also the professional culture and values of the school.

Leaders as professional examples

The senior leadership team is strong and very stable. Senior leaders provide role models for the behaviours and values that they want to see in the school, for example they all have a significant teaching commitment (which they take very seriously) and carefully demonstrate the way they want staff to relate to students and to each other. The headteacher's view is that driving improvement through accountability is not sustainable in the long term: the school's performance can quickly decline if there is any let-up. He acknowledges, however, that struggling schools now feel forced into adopting this strategy, as they are expected to make very rapid improvements. Generating the conditions which encourage the commitment and effort of the staff is, in his opinion, more productive and more sustainable than formal performance management.

66 If the first two principles are: get the leadership team you want, and ensure that leaders are role models, the third is to build leadership capacity. This is done not only by developing existing leaders but by growing new ones. All the schools invest strongly in this.

Leadership development

The headteacher recognises that building strength in middle managers as well as senior management and ensuring that succession planning is well grounded are crucial to Bartley Green School's continuing success. She reflects on her own learning journey: 'I've had to grow in terms of leadership style – from being a one-man band to working collaboratively.' Developing a resilient network of distributed leadership has been a challenge, balancing the benefits of teamwork against the need, she feels, schools like Bartley Green have for strong leadership. 'A challenging school can't survive OK leadership.' She is confident that she has appointed or 'grown' a high-calibre senior team and that the school's middle management is steadily strengthening.

Providing a relevant and attractive curriculum

67 Many of the headteachers subscribe to a widely held belief that a good curriculum, well taught, does much to reduce behaviour problems. They have sought to develop the curriculum in ways that engage their students and support their drive for improvement. Each school, however, has a slightly different approach to the curriculum and timetabling, with five- and 10-day timetabling both in evidence. From Year 7, several of the schools are providing a more skills-based curriculum, ranging from literacy and numeracy to practical and thinking skills, delivered through approaches which range from Reading Recovery to out-of-classroom research, and from subject-focused to thematic approaches.

68 The schools have generally not been rushing into diplomas, although this is likely to change as several are developing sixth form provision for the first time, generally in partnership with other schools. In some cases, schools

have concentrated in particular on finding an appropriate curriculum for those students who find learning in the traditional subjects difficult, or personalising the curriculum to provide as much choice as possible. There are few signs of the schools using the applied curriculum as a device simply to maximise examination results at the end of Year 11. Indeed, one or two have pulled back from the four-GCSE equivalent provision they had been offering. Personalisation has become something of an obsession at Harton Technology College.

Curriculum of choice

Harton Technology College has three specialisms: technology, modern foreign languages and applied learning (vocational courses), and is pursuing permission to establish a sixth form as a high-performing specialist school. The school refuses to go down the route of multiple vocational GCSEs. The curriculum is based on a strong core packed into a 10-day, 50-hour timetable. There are four option blocks: technical; vocational (applied learning); modern foreign languages; and a free options block. The assistant headteacher responsible for the curriculum and timetabling goes to extraordinary lengths to meet students' choices. The key pressure is accommodating several languages, partially solved by providing a basic information and communication technology (ICT) qualification in Year 9 and reducing mathematics for the more able from nine hours to eight. Statistics is strong and taken in Year 10, owing to considerable overlap with mathematics, particularly in data-handling. The curriculum is based on the 'maggie principle', gathering subjects when possible. Graphics, for example, is also started in Year 9. There is banding in Key Stage 4, where the technology band contains slimmed-down language options which include language for business. The work-related band has 10 hours each fortnight at the further education college, taking catering, hairdressing, or engineering. There is considerable personalisation of the curriculum, and the options form for students encourages them to 'indicate anything else'.

69 Extra-curricular provision is typically rich, and many schools have comprehensive programmes which involve substantial learning outside the classroom.¹¹ Some organise well over 100 visits each year. All feel the gains in learning are well worth the effort and justify the time spent on such activity. Specialist status has also made a considerable impact in extending pupils' horizons and enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment.

Achieving through a specialism

Closely linked to improving behaviour was the development of a curriculum and an approach to teaching and learning that could engage a very diverse community of students and raise attainment. Bartley Green School's first specialism – technology – was chosen because it covered four key subject areas and could involve and challenge students of all abilities and aspirations. The additional funding was invested in a substantial upgrading of the school's ICT resources. Most departments now have dedicated computer suites and many teaching rooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards. 'We've really used money well. And we spend it all. Good learning is good learning for everybody.' The problem-solving and self-evaluation essential to design and technology have percolated through the whole curriculum. The school has developed detailed, accessible and reliable systems for collating and analysing data to inform the high level of academic and pastoral guidance given to students.

¹¹ See *Learning outside the classroom: how far should you go?* (070219), Ofsted, 2008.

Achieving excellence continued

70 In many cases, specialist status had been used to trigger further development, with schools taking up additional specialisms. The schools, however, have used their specialist status in very different ways. At Lampton School, for example, specialist status in the humanities has been used to drive the way the school promotes and celebrates diversity – something it regards as central to developing its strong ethos. Robert Clack School initially became a science college, and recently added a mathematics and computing specialism. The headteacher’s aim was to choose what he saw as tough, difficult subjects that would challenge the school and its students. At Wood Green High School, specialist status as a sports college has been central to its continued development.

Driving forward with sport

The Director of Sport is evangelical about the impact of specialist status on his department, the school as a whole and the wider community. It has raised the aspirations of students, reflected both in greatly improved GCSE results and in the level of participation in extra-curricular activities. The department’s development of assessment for learning and pathway planning has been recognised nationally and adopted by other schools and colleges. All students are involved, whatever their level of skill or area of particular interest. There is extensive outreach through the School Sports Partnership, as well as through Wood Green’s own family of schools and community clubs. The list of the sports college’s activities is long, impressive and still expanding. Many of the school’s students gain valuable experience through the Young Sports Leaders programme; many others delight in the opportunities to train with professional coaches in high profile places.

Assessment, progress-tracking and target-setting

71 One common feature of strategies for raising achievement in all the schools is the intelligent use of assessment data, progress-tracking, target-setting and support for students slipping behind. National assessment and test data are used alongside assessment data generated in the school to predict the target grades for each student at GCSE. Periodically, the data are updated and progress towards the target estimated. Targets are set in discussion with students. Parents are also involved.

72 The schools are rigorous in the way that they use target-setting, assessment and tracking to raise achievement. All have developed information and data systems that suit the needs of their school, either by modifying commercial systems or by developing their own. They continue to refine them, ensuring that data are simple, accessible, easy to understand and manageable. They are careful not to ‘drown in spreadsheets’. The schools also realise that assessment information is useless if it is not highly accurate and they have worked hard to ensure that teachers are able to estimate students’ attainment very precisely. Lampton School’s GCSE predictions, for example, were within 1% for all the major outcome indicators last year. The system at Challney High School has been progressively refined.

The schools are rigorous in the use of target-setting, assessment and tracking to raise achievement.

Emark

Emark is a spreadsheet developed by the school's data manager as a fine-meshed, flexible and accessible medium to track the progress of groups and individuals and to ensure that no student becomes 'invisible'. Work is in progress to extend Emark as a web-based system, accessible by staff and students and their families when off-site.

Emark strongly supports the school's main business of teaching and learning. It serves as an electronic mark book for teachers, with each department able to log on to its own area. Subject leaders are expected to monitor students' progress and respond quickly to indications of stalling or erratic performance. Some departments have adapted their area to meet specific priorities, for example tracking of coursework in English. The system can identify 'threshold' students and so trigger targeted interventions. Teachers record progress as points linked to National Curriculum levels or predicted GCSE grades. Using red, amber and green to indicate 'actual' against 'expected' levels of progress and attainment is clear and easy to grasp, which is useful in discussions with parents. Students have a

regularly updated grid in their planners, downloaded from the system, indicating their current attainment and personal targets. Transparency is important and is valued by students and staff. The regularly updated cohort lists posted near the school canteen, showing students' current levels, generate constructive discussion rather than unease.

The system is highly flexible. Data can be retrieved in many combinations and at any time, which makes Emark a valuable management tool, for example in reviewing the impact of provision for gifted and talented students or those with English as an additional language. The effectiveness of the school's large management team owes much to the scope and accuracy of the data accessible through Emark; information is reliably shared, the impact of interventions easily tracked and emerging challenges quickly identified. Most importantly, Emark is seen to inform but not replace discussion. As one of the leadership team remarked: 'All data are useless unless they bring people together for a conversation.'

Achieving excellence continued

73 Middleton Technology School has adapted a commercial monitoring and tracking system to produce something close to an expert system.

Assessment, progress-tracking and target-setting at Middleton Technology School

An assistant headteacher is responsible for raising expectations and standards through the use of data. She is assisted by two teachers with a particular interest in developing the tracking system. Refined approaches to progress-tracking and target-setting are found in all the outstanding schools, supported by at least two main providers of education software. The system at Middleton is constantly being developed to extend and refine its usefulness. Its main components are shown below.

Building blocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assessment calendar in the school development plan ■ Reporting calendar ■ Progress monitoring milestones ■ 'SMART' targeting ■ Mentoring of students
Familiarisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Train middle leaders to understand and use the data ■ Brief the 'progress and learning coordinators' (heads of year)
Roll out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All staff have access to electronic assessment and progress-tracking system ■ Data on performance in Years 9 and 11 have priority
Fundamental tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Home page for each teacher ■ Individual, subject and class data presented ■ Targets generated automatically
Output: performance data for all staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ GCSE A* to C grade predictions ■ GCSE A* to G grade predictions ■ End of Year 7 and end of Year 8 levels ■ Key Stage 3 levels ■ Key Stage 2 to 4 data and GCSE predictions (used to help create curriculum pathways)
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Minimum of three formal assessments and a teacher assessment each year
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Two interim and one full report (with parents' evening) during the school year
Developments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assessment tracker and electronic marker being integrated to produce automatic targets and generate priorities for students to work on ■ Homework sheet and reward scheme to be included

74 The assessment system helps identify individual students who are slipping behind. Follow-up arrangements are differentiated in proportion to the extent of slippage. If students are making:

- insufficient progress in one subject, the form tutor follows up
- insufficient progress in more subjects, subject leaders follow up with individual students
- insufficient progress in five to 10 subjects, the student is monitored and supported by the senior management team and a senior leader follows up.

Inclusion: students as individuals

75 All the outstanding schools have high regard for the needs, interests and concerns of each individual student. They are highly inclusive schools. They talk to students individually and collectively, listen to their points of view and consult them constantly. The student voice is universally seen as very important and students' views are valued. Seven Kings High School is also concerned to ensure that conversations about learning happen with all students. In the early nineties they became anxious about 'ghost children' who passed through their school career without notice. The school introduced a system of regular interviews with a senior leader or head of year for every child; these continue to this day. The focus is on their learning and progress, and also on their experiences in lessons. In Greenwood Dale School, the headteacher interviews all Year 11 students at the beginning of the year. Similar practices occur in the other schools featured in this report.

76 Underachieving students tend to have problems related either to their attendance or to their circumstances, such as difficulties at home, the wrong curriculum or peer group tensions. Some of the problems with behaviour that surface in schools are undoubtedly due to poor teaching and learning. At Middleton Technology School, inclusion is led by an assistant headteacher with the help of a learning and progress coordinator (head of year) and learning and progress mentors in each year. The coordinator focuses on academic issues, the mentor on behavioural issues. There is also an inclusion unit staffed by two behaviour

support workers. Support staff engage in a great deal of training on behavioural issues, covering such aspects as social and emotional literacy and anger management. Others, Middleton finds, stem from domestic and social circumstances. The main catalysts are reported to be so-called 'gang' cultures, anti-social behaviour and alcohol. The school-based police officer and close links with the youth service help to deal with these challenges. The school caters for a considerable group of children who are looked after, and some of its students are themselves young carers, for whom there is a school-based young carers' society. Support agencies are welcomed into the school, where they have shared use of an office.

Inclusion in practice

Inclusion at Harton Technology College and other schools in the group centres on reducing or removing barriers to learning. This is the main role of the learning support mentors, who maintain contact with targeted parents and carers, supporting their children who are students at the school, letting them know about events that relate to them, and trying to draw them into the school community.

Middleton Technology School takes its responsibility for looked after children very seriously, linking closely with the achievement officer responsible for looked after children in Rochdale. The school's learning support unit deals effectively with internal exclusions. A breakfast club, open from 07.30, a range of after-school activities, including a homework club, and some weekend courses form part of a comprehensive range of provision. The other challenge is attendance, which is a constant focus. Persistent absentees and their parents are telephoned. These calls are supported by home visits and legal action remains a last resort. The school is reducing its fixed-term exclusions, and good inter-school arrangements exist for temporary placements in another school. The school's attendance target is an ambitious 96%.

Achieving excellence continued

From good to great

77 Many schools make improvements and achieve an outstanding inspection judgement, only for their effectiveness to decline in the following years. The schools in this sample have managed to become, and to remain, outstanding. The next section turns to the difficult (and possibly greater) challenge of sustaining and building on the excellence they have achieved.

Great schools maintain rigour and consistency while continuing to innovate and develop.