

[This is an extract from a report published by Ofsted, the English School Inspectorate, in December 2010.]

Executive summary

The London Challenge school improvement programme was established in 2003 to improve outcomes in low-performing secondary schools in the capital.¹ Primary schools were included in the scheme from 2008. The programme uses independent, experienced education experts, known as London Challenge advisers, to identify need and broker support for underperforming schools. The advisers are supported by a small administrative team based in the Department for Education (DfE). The cost of the support and the services brokered comes directly from the DfE and is spent as the adviser directs. Many of these advisers are also National or Local Leaders of Education.²

London secondary schools have continued to improve and the average attainment of pupils in London secondary schools is above the national average. After the summer examinations in 2010, only four London secondary schools (about 1%) now remain below the floor target. Primary schools that have become partners with London Challenge are also improving rapidly, despite the relatively recent start to their programmes. The contextual value-added measures of the participating schools, taken all together, have risen significantly from below average in 2008 to above average in 2010. This represents real gains in achievement for the pupils in these schools; they have not just narrowed this gap but, on average, their achievement on this measure now exceeds the average achievement nationally. Four factors have been common to both the primary and secondary schools.

First, from the beginning of London Challenge, London schools have received clear, consistent leadership from the team leaders appointed by the DfE. Their message has been the pressing need to improve educational standards and the sense of professional duty incumbent on teachers to do this for London children. Over time, that message of commitment and encouragement has been repeated consistently by the London Challenge leadership team. These endeavours have reinforced a clear sense of moral purpose among teachers and school leaders to close attainment gaps between London and the rest of the country. The staff in almost every school that contributed to this survey expressed their commitment

¹ Ofsted first reported on the London Challenge initiative from 2003 to 2006. It found that London schools had improved dramatically and that there was much to celebrate. The programme continued to develop within London and began working with primary as well as secondary schools. The model was extended in 2008 to two additional 'City Challenge' programmes in Manchester and the Black Country. The more generalised 'National Challenge' programme was also introduced by the then Government in 2008 to all English secondary schools whose standards were below the floor target.

² National Leaders of Education are outstanding school leaders who, with their own staff, use their skills and experience to support other schools. They work to increase the leadership capacity of other schools to help raise standards. Local Leaders of Education work similarly, at a more local level. For further information, see:

www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professional-development/national-leaders-of-education.htm.

to London children, not simply to those in their own school. Their sense of pride in being part of a city-wide education service, irrespective of whether they were receiving or providing support, was a fundamental characteristic of London City Challenge.

Second, following the audit of need conducted by London Challenge advisers, the programmes of support for schools that require improvement have been managed by experienced and credible advisers. Monitoring of the programme has been done through a school improvement partnership board established for each school receiving support, usually chaired by the adviser, and attended by school governors, school leaders and their mentors, and local authority representatives. They have ensured that the programmes have been rooted securely in an accurate audit of the needs of individual schools. The London Leadership Strategy (coordinated jointly by the managers of London Challenge and by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services) has provided the pool of 'system leaders', current headteachers, that can be called upon by the London Challenge advisers to mentor a target school's headteacher.³ These leaders are matched carefully to a particular school, often through a core group of such leaders, to ensure that a good working relationship is rapidly established with the school's headteacher. This matching of partners under the leadership of the London Challenge advisers has been a critical early step in brokering good support.

Third, once the actual needs of a school have been identified and support for the leadership has been set up, the main work of helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school begins. This may be through local authority advisory staff or externally brokered consultants. Recently, however, substantial improvements have been achieved through effective partnerships with so-called 'teaching schools'. Teaching schools provide extended coaching and practical activities on their own site to groups of teachers from several schools that need support and are within easy travelling distance. The training provided includes separate courses to improve teaching from being predominantly satisfactory to securely good □ the 'Improving teacher programme' □ and 'From good to outstanding'. Participants and providers with whom discussions were held during the survey were unanimous in their appreciation of the positive impact that this approach was having on raising standards in both the host and participant schools.

Fourth, schools that have improved and left the 'Keys to success' programme of London Challenge have developed robust systems to track pupils' progress and provide effective intervention for pupils at risk of underachievement.⁴ Using data to evaluate the effectiveness of school provision and particular programmes of intervention has become embedded in these improving schools. The systems

³ The London Leadership Strategy was set up to meet three key objectives in 'Vision for London 2008 □ 2011'. These were: dealing with underperformance and raising standards; creating many more good and great schools; closing attainment gaps.

⁴ A 'Key to success' school had low standards, was below a floor target, or was in an Ofsted category of concern (that is, it was deemed to require special measures or had a notice to improve).

have worked without external support, giving schools the information they need to respond quickly to pupils' underachievement.

Key findings

- Since the introduction of London Challenge, secondary schools in London have performed better and improved at a faster rate than schools in the rest of England in terms of their examination results.
- The primary schools in London Challenge since 2008 are improving faster than those in the rest of England. The contribution of London Challenge to this improvement is evident in data on pupils' progress since 2008.
- At their most recent inspection, 30% of London's local authority controlled secondary schools were judged to be outstanding, reflecting the positive impact of London Challenge. This compares with 17.5% for the rest of England. Of the 34 academies in London that have been inspected, eight have been judged to be outstanding (24%), with 22% of all inspected academies (84) judged outstanding.
- Only 2.4% of London's secondary schools are currently judged by Ofsted to be inadequate, compared with 4.1% in the rest of England, and 9% of London academies. Across England, 9.5% of academies that have been inspected have been judged to be inadequate.
- The leaders of London Challenge have motivated London teachers to think beyond their intrinsic sense of duty to serve pupils well within their own school and to extend that commitment to serving all London's pupils well. This has encouraged successful collaboration between London school leaders and teachers across schools. This is a key driver for improvement.
- London Challenge has deployed its support strategically. London Challenge advisers have successfully established school improvement partnership boards for schools causing concern, ensured an accurate audit of needs and brokered the resources necessary to meet those needs. They chair regular school partnership boards that monitor and review progress.
- Networks of experienced school leaders from the London Challenge Leadership Strategy, coordinated by London Challenge, provide much of the expertise to tackle the development needs within supported schools and drive improvements in progress. A key strength of these leaders is their skill in matching people and schools, creating a sense of mutual trust. The leaders of the schools that contributed to the survey stated positively that the support is implemented with them and not imposed on them.
- Improvements as a result of schools' involvement in London Challenge are sustained once the support ends because the schools continue to participate in development programmes for teachers.
- These improved schools have also embedded the use of performance data to track pupils' progress and steer intervention and have secured the quality of teaching.