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Evaluation of the Gaining Ground Strategy

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DfE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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Executive Summary

Evaluation of the Gaining Ground Strategy: Final report

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Report brief

This report sets out the findings from an evaluation of the impact and value for money of the Gaining Ground Strategy. The strategy was launched with a budget of £40 million and ran for two years (September 2009 to July 2011). It supported school improvement in secondary schools that had reasonable-to-good GCSE examination results, but had poor progression rates in English and mathematics. The strategy comprised four main strands focusing on: school-to-school partnership working; additional support from School Improvement Partners (SIPs); additional training in Assessment for Learning (AfL); and study support. This report focuses on the impacts and legacy arising from the strategy.

Conclusions

- Gaining Ground made a valuable contribution to enhancing participating schools' strategies, plans and interventions for improving pupil attainment and progression.
- This evaluation indicated that the strategy provided significant stimulus and resources which mobilised schools to accelerate changes, to strengthen leadership and improve classroom practice, study support and pupils' progress.
- Gaining Ground enabled schools to take stock of their strengths and limitations and further develop their infrastructure to lead, manage, and coordinate improvements related to the performance of staff and pupils.
- Improvements came from helping to make schools more outward-looking and learn from the effective practice they observed in partner schools. There were indications that the improvements made were becoming embedded in participating schools.

Schools' priorities and expectations

- Most of the Gaining Ground headteachers surveyed reported that the highest priority over the last two years had been to improve overall pupil progress from Key Stage 2 (KS2) to Key Stage 4 (KS4) in mathematics, followed by reducing in-school variation in the quality of teaching.
- Schools expected that participation in Gaining Ground would provide them with additional resources and support that would improve pupil attainment, achievement and progression. Other expectations were increased momentum in creating a more positive culture, implementing school improvement plans, strengthening leadership and improving pupil performance tracking systems. The evaluation's findings suggest that these expectations were largely met.

Use of Gaining Ground resources

- Schools valued the resources provided through Gaining Ground which they said had enabled them to augment and accelerate approaches to improving their performance and pupils' achievement.
- Most Gaining Ground schools provided out-of-school hours study support for pupils, funded through the strategy. Case-study evidence indicated that Gaining Ground had helped to introduce, target or extend these study-support sessions.
- Most Gaining Ground schools valued the school-to-school partnership working initiated through the strategy, which enabled them to share and observe practice on planning and managing school improvement interventions, developing and using systems for pupil tracking, teaching and study support.
- School-to-school partnership working was most effective where the schools had similar characteristics, were within reasonable travelling distance, and had staff time and commitment from both parties and partnerships at different levels of seniority.
- SIPs played a key role in supporting Gaining Ground schools and facilitating school-to-school support by finding them appropriate partner schools. A greater proportion of Gaining Ground than comparison schools worked with SIPs to identify areas of under-performance and to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress.
- Most Gaining Ground schools had used the funding to invest in training for Assessment for Learning (AfL) and/or Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP), and had worked closely with staff to improve the reliability and validity of teacher assessment of pupil progression.

Impacts

- There was strong evidence of Gaining Ground's particular impact on systems for monitoring, tracking and evaluating pupil progress and of improved use of data for target-setting and action-planning.
- There was evidence of impact on school leadership, particularly on middle managers and their relationship with Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs). There was particular impact on the heads of mathematics and English departments in terms of enhancing their performance in leading improvements.
- The findings from the case-study visits suggested that Gaining Ground schools were developing more engaging, high-quality and effective teaching, although the findings from the pupil surveys suggested that pupils' attitudes towards teaching and learning were similar across Gaining Ground and comparison schools.
- There was case-study evidence of a positive change in school ethos and culture, with more motivation amongst staff and pupils to focus on progress and achievement.
- Governing bodies were reported to have access to better quality data. They had become more aware of issues faced by schools and were more able to engage due to better use of data.
- Most of the Gaining Ground strands were considered beneficial, but particularly the additional funding for study support, school-to-school support and the additional SIP days.
- Additional funding for academic focussed study support was valued for helping to develop capacity and provision, for allowing for creativity and experimentation, for encouraging targeting and allowing for intensive intervention.

- School-to-school support was considered beneficial due to the exposure to new ideas and approaches and for giving staff the opportunity to learn from a high-performing school's experiences.
- The additional SIP days had helped SIPs to provide bespoke support and to be more deeply engaged and involved with schools. SIPs also served as brokers between schools.

Legacy of the strategy

- The vast majority of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools reported that they had established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in English and mathematics, and most of the local authority (LA) staff surveyed agreed.
- A slightly greater proportion of headteachers in the Gaining Ground sample reported that their schools were making good and sustainable progress in closing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners compared to those in the comparison group of schools.
- The majority of SIPs reported that the strategy had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement going forward in a number of other areas, including putting in place a whole-school approach to improvement.

Issues and challenges

- The 'coasting' schools deficit label used in the early days of Gaining Ground was generally regarded as misapplied and unhelpful.
- Some headteachers were dissatisfied with the process of matching them to partner schools and others perceived the links to be too casual or lacking in support.
- Geography was also mentioned as a barrier to school-to-school partnerships, with schools needing to be within a reasonable travelling distance of one another (no more than

a 45-minute journey) for shared learning to take place.

- There was a perception amongst some headteachers that some partner schools did not deliver adequate support, and a view that external monitoring arrangements could have been more rigorous.

Pupil outcomes

- Analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) revealed that over the two years of the strategy, a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school:
 - made an additional 0.22 levels of progress in English and mathematics
 - was 13 percentage points more likely to achieve five GCSEs graded A*-C including mathematics and English
 - achieved an additional 21 points at Key Stage 4
 - experienced a reduction of 0.7 percentage points in the total number of lessons missed
 - experienced a reduction of 0.19 percentage points in the total number of lessons missed due to unauthorised absence.

Value for money

- The primary research provides evidence that the strategy has been very effective in meeting two of its original objectives (which related to enhancing strategic activities within the school) and less effective at meeting the two objectives relating to classroom practice.
- Whilst the survey data suggests little difference between outputs at Gaining Ground schools compared to similar comparison schools (other than improving systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance), there is evidence the strategy is linked with positive outcomes. The cost-effectiveness ratios show that an average investment of £78 per pupil

(or £88,194 per school over two years) is associated with a positive impact on outcomes relating to attainment, progression and absence.

Recommendations

- Government should continue to encourage and enable schools to work with and learn from each other to improve standards. Government should also consider how it can promote and facilitate the brokerage of school-to-school partnerships which includes assisting with the matching process and introducing schools to one another.
- Government should be aware that targeted funding, alongside a specific challenge to schools, can catalyse action. Any future work with schools seeking to improve should consider their spending priorities and the financial incentives that might play a part in driving their improvement.
- Schools seeking to improve their performance should consider the following learning points which show that schools can improve by:
 - developing a positive culture of expectations which continually raises the aspirations of governors, staff and pupils and challenges them to achieve more
 - improving the use of systems for tracking and monitoring pupils' progress to identify their individual development needs and shape the action to be taken
 - drawing on the experience and expertise of higher-performing schools which provide innovative and effective practice examples for strengthening the management of change, the organisation and content of teaching and learning, and the provision of pupil support.

Scope of the evaluation

- The overarching aim of this evaluation was to assess the impact and value for money of the Gaining Ground Strategy.
- The evaluation was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and SQW.
- The evaluation aimed to ascertain:
 - the impact of the intervention as a whole
 - the impact of the individual elements of the Gaining Ground Strategy
 - the value for money provided by the Gaining Ground Strategy.
- The report's findings were drawn from interviews with 33 headteachers or senior leaders in Gaining Ground schools; 11 headteachers or senior leaders in partner schools; 9 chair of governors; 9 School Improvement Partners (SIPs), 27 subject leaders of mathematics and/or English; and 31 pupils. Survey responses were collected from: 200 Gaining Ground headteachers; 100 comparison school headteachers; 104 SIPs; 17 LA officers; 2,050 Year 8 and 1,773 Year 11 pupils from Gaining Ground schools; and 1,275 Year 8 and 821 Year 11 pupils from comparison schools.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Department for Children, Schools and Families commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and SQW to evaluate the impact and value for money of the Gaining Ground Strategy. This report provides an overview of the impact and legacy of the Gaining Ground Strategy. It draws on data collected from case-study interviews with staff in 22 Gaining Ground schools and endpoint surveys of headteachers and pupils in schools participating in the strategy and a matched comparison group of similar schools. The views of Local Authority (LA) officials and School Improvement Partners (SIPs) were also collected and are drawn on in this report. In addition, a value for money assessment and an analysis of schools' attainment and attendance data were also undertaken.

1.2 Gaining Ground

The Gaining Ground Strategy was launched on 13th November 2008 with a budget of £40 million over the two-year life of the strategy (September 2009 to July 2011). The Gaining Ground Strategy supports school improvement in secondary schools that have reasonable-to-good GCSE examination results, but have poor progression rates in English and mathematics. Local authorities (LAs) were asked to identify the schools they considered would benefit most from the support and challenge outlined in the strategy. To be eligible for support schools needed to have examination results above the then Key Stage 4 floor target of at least 30 percent of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics. Poor progression rates were defined as having a significant proportion of pupils not making the expected three levels of attainment in English and/or mathematics over Key Stages 3 and 4. LAs were asked to prioritise schools which had such results for three consecutive years or more. The strategy was designed to provide a holistic package of support based around a structured assessment of individual schools' needs. The schools selected were expected to exhibit one or more of ten indicators. A full list of the range of criteria used to identify schools for inclusion in the strategy can be found in the technical appendices. The range of different criteria that could be applied and the flexibility granted to LAs in selecting schools for the strategy is reflected in the diversity of schools that ultimately participated¹. The aims and supporting activities (strands) of the strategy are set out in Table 1.1 below.

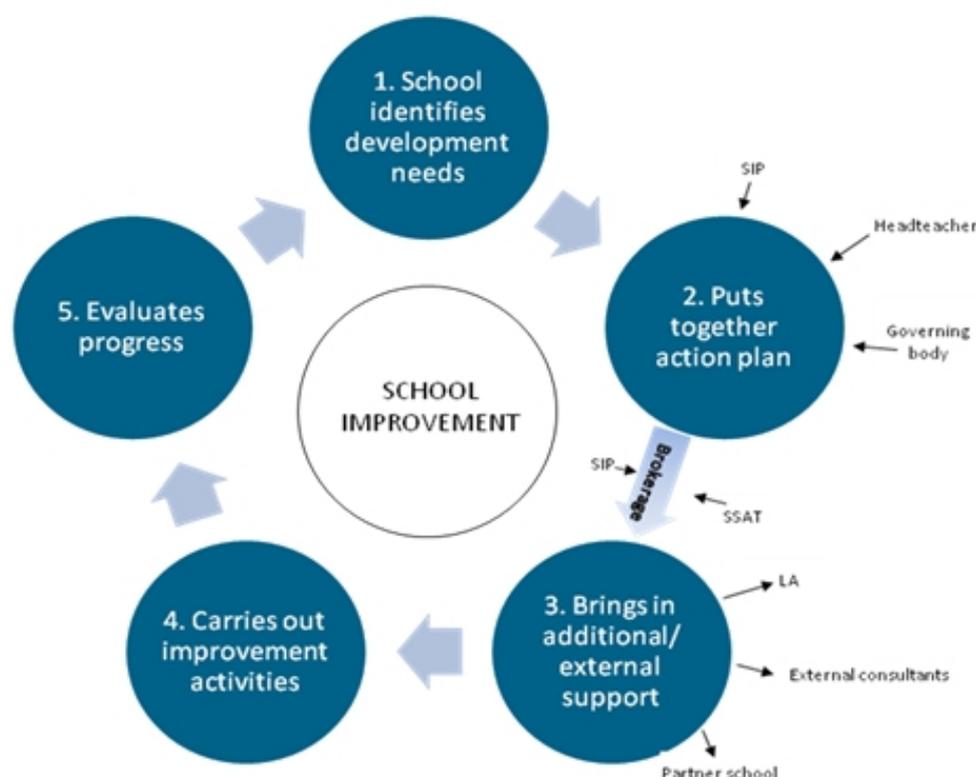
¹ Over half were community schools, but there were also substantial numbers of foundation, voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools. There was a broad range of GCSE attainment represented, with schools from all five performance quintiles participating, although lower-middle performing schools were most commonly included. However, the strategy's emphasis on progression was reflected in the fact that nearly half of Gaining Ground schools were in the bottom quintile of GCSE performance as measured by Contextual Value Added (CVA) scores, and over three quarters were in the bottom two quintiles. Gaining Ground schools were typically from the middle of the distribution of deprivation levels (as measured by percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals). They were twice as likely to have 'average' levels of deprivation (i.e. lie in the middle quintile) compared to all schools nationally, and there were very few in the top or bottom quintile most deprived (six and five per cent of Gaining Ground schools respectively). Further details of the characteristics of Gaining Ground schools are provided in the technical appendix.

Table 1.1: Aims of Gaining Ground and supporting activities

Aim	Supporting activity
(a) Challenge the cautious ethos: to achieve change in eligible schools by exposing them to other schools that have achieved more with similar pupil intakes.	Provision of school-to-school support: eligible schools were partnered with high-performing schools to support, challenge and inspire them. Eligible schools in conjunction with their SIP identified their key focus areas using a standard form, which was submitted to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). SSAT was funded to identify and arrange a suitable partner school and to monitor and quality assure school-to-school support arrangements. The partner school received £10,000 per annum for two years to support partnership working.
(b) Strengthen governance: to increase the level of challenge and accountability, thereby acting as a catalyst for school improvement.	4 extra days of tailored SIP support: this was used for schools to formulate, monitor and evaluate plans for improvement. Training for SIPs was provided by the National Strategies. Additional support was provided for schools to consider, where appropriate, the strategic leadership of a trust or the combined governance of a hard federation as a way to strengthen governance arrangements for the long-term. £20,000 was made available to help fund legal and other aspects of the Trust formation process, if the school wished to form a Trust.
(c) Improve classroom practice: by providing increased access to specialist support for eligible schools.	Funding to access additional specialist support brokered by the SIP: funding was allocated based on an analysis of individual school needs to support improved progression including, for example, buying in consultancy from subject specialists or Advanced Skills Teachers (£10,000 per annum for two years). Support for establishing and embedding ' Assessing Pupils' Progress ' including targeted delivery of Assessment for Learning (AfL) support training to help ensure a sound grasp of progression data/effective assessment for learning and intervention planning.
(d) Provide opportunities to inspire and challenge 'stuck pupils': by offering study support which is crucial to engaging and motivating pupils	Academic Focused Study Support (AFSS): £20,000 per annum for two years was available to support activities to focus improvements beyond the classroom, the outcome of which would be high quality extended services, in particular study support, to engage and motivate pupils. Funding could be used, for example, for homework assistance, book clubs and mathematics games or Olympiad type events. Funded activities were intended to be fun, and to re-engage, stretch and motivate pupils.

The Gaining Ground Strategy could be characterised as a five-step cycle that involved participating schools putting together an action plan and carrying out the planned improvement activities with the help of external support, notably from their partner school and SIP (see Figure 1.1 below).

Figure 1.1: Gaining Ground School Improvement Cycle



The SIP was expected to support schools to improve pupil progression by:

- challenging the headteacher and leadership on their self-evaluation and the priorities that emerged as result
- supporting the creation of a high-impact school improvement plan
- brokering the support the school needed to successfully implement the improvement plan
- supporting the school in monitoring and evaluating the impact of its actions and the support it had received.

The partner school provided school-to-school support in the form of advice, peer learning and the sharing of good practice on key focus areas identified by the school in conjunction with their SIP.

1.3 Aims of the evaluation

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact and value for money of the Gaining Ground Strategy. This was in order to determine if resources had been targeted effectively and to provide lessons for future policy interventions around school improvement. The evaluation aimed to ascertain:

- the impact of the intervention as a whole
- the impact of the individual elements of the Gaining Ground Strategy
- the value for money provided by the Gaining Ground Strategy.

Specifically, the evaluation aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy improved attainment in the targeted schools?
2. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy improved progression in the targeted schools?
3. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy increased pupil positivity towards their school experience?
4. How beneficial have practitioners found the Gaining Ground Strategy?
5. What has been the impact and effectiveness of the overall strategy?
6. What has been the impact and effectiveness of individual elements of the strategy?
7. What can be learnt from this policy to shape future school improvement policies?
8. Is the Gaining Ground Strategy delivering value for money?

1.4 Methodology

The methodology comprised a multi-faceted approach, namely: large-scale surveys, involving a comparison group of schools; analysis of secondary data (again with a comparative focus); case-studies; and a rigorous value for money element. The methodology was designed to capture **processes, expenditure, impact and change** in Gaining Ground schools over the course of the strategy. Below we outline the methodology in greater detail, namely:

- scoping stage
- surveys and sampling procedures
- case studies
- assessment of Value for Money
- National Pupil Database (NPD) modelling.

1.4.1 Scoping stage

The evaluation commenced with an **initial scoping stage**, designed to develop the evaluation framework and to ensure a thorough understanding of Gaining Ground Strategy. As part of this, the research team met with lead policy officials, undertook an analysis of key policy documents and interviewed delivery partners. The main output from the scoping exercise was an agreed evaluation framework and logic model that mapped the anticipated outcomes and impacts, showed how key research questions would be addressed, and outlined the key data sources to be used for value for money and other evaluation questions.

1.4.2 Surveys and sampling procedures

Following the scoping stage it was necessary to **identify a comparison group of schools**. Using data held on the NFER Register of Schools (RoS), which holds up-to-date information about each school in England, including information such as size, governance and student attainment, a comparison group of similar schools to those in Gaining Ground using a technique called Propensity Score Matching was identified. Based on the schools actually chosen for Gaining Ground, this technique fits a logistic model to predict schools “propensity” for selection given their characteristics. Included in the model are measures of Key Stage 4 outcomes, prior attainment (at Key Stage 2), and other background variables (such as the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)). Comparison schools are then selected that have similar propensity scores to Gaining Ground schools. Further details about the matching process can be found in the technical appendices. The creation of this comparison group was integral to assessing the additionality of changes observed within Gaining Ground schools and deriving value for money estimates. The creation of the comparison group allowed relative performance of Gaining Ground schools to be compared with similar schools using survey data. For the purposes of the evaluation, a total of 398 Gaining Ground schools and 450 comparison schools were identified.

Baseline and endpoint surveys were administered to:

- pupils in years 8 and 11 in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools. The pupil surveys were designed to assess the impacts of Gaining Ground on areas including the school environment, pupils’ attitudes and aspirations, perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning, and pupils’ sense of progression and achievement
- headteachers in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools
- School Improvement Partners (SIP) working with Gaining Ground schools
- staff in local authorities who were working schools participating in Gaining Ground.

The findings from the endpoint surveys are presented in this report.

To minimise the burden on stakeholders and to maximise the response rates, different approaches to data collection were used with different stakeholders. Headteachers and SIPs took part in a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) while LA staff and pupils were asked to complete a survey online. To minimise the burden on schools, prior to the surveys going out, letters were sent to local authorities asking them to state if there were any schools which should not be approached at that time for any particular reason.

The headteacher and pupil surveys were designed so that many of the same questions could be used with respondents from both Gaining Ground and comparison schools. For example, headteachers were asked for their views on common themes, including the impacts of their school improvement work on teaching and learning, pupils, leadership, and systems of monitoring and evaluation. Similarly, pupils were asked for their views on school, studying and lessons. This allowed for direct comparisons to be made between the two samples. The questions included a series of snapshot questions ('what is the situation now?') and reflective change over time questions ('what has been the impact over the last two years?'). In addition, the Gaining Ground headteachers were asked a series of additional questions about their experiences of the strategy, and the extent to which they attributed any improvements to participating in Gaining Ground.

Schools were sent instructions on how to administer the online pupil survey. They were asked to administer the questionnaire to two Year 8 and two Year 11 form groups, which would generate responses from around 60 pupils in each year group. To help maintain a random sample of pupils, schools were asked to select the first two form groups alphabetically in Year 8 and Year 11.

The baseline surveys were undertaken between June and July 2010, while the endpoint surveys were undertaken between March and July 2011. For both rounds of surveys, reminder letters were sent out, while telephone reminders were targeted at headteachers. The response rates are presented in Section 1.5 below.

1.4.3 Case studies

We undertook a total of 40 visits to Gaining Ground schools, comprising 18 baseline and 22 endpoint visits to schools. The case studies focused on processes associated with implementation of the strategy in the first year, and impacts arising from the strategy in the second year. They looked in depth at:

- how schools, along with partner schools and SIPs, identified where they could improve achievement, and put in place activities to deliver the improvements
- the nature of their Gaining Ground activities
- issues and challenges associated with these activities, and how these were overcome
- the impacts arising from the activities, and how these had come about.

The schools were selected to capture the full variety of Gaining Ground activities, and included a geographical spread and schools with range of characteristics, such as the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Case studies were selected on the basis of the responses to the survey of schools where schools had agreed to participate in further research. The case-study instruments were designed in the context of the evaluation framework to expand on the understanding gained from the structured surveys, and particularly to extend information on qualitative impacts, for individual groups involved in the strategy and on a more holistic, school level.

The case studies involved gaining perspectives from a range of different interviewees involved in the school's Gaining Ground activity, including:

- the headteacher
- the SIP
- a member of teaching staff with some responsibility for pupils being targeted as part of the strategy, or for Gaining Ground activities as a whole (where appropriate)
- the head of maths and/or English
- a senior leader from the partner school
- a governor representative
- a relevant LA representative (where appropriate).

Nine schools were involved in both the baseline and endpoint visits and so were able to provide a longitudinal perspective of the implementation and impact of the strategy. The baseline visits took place towards the start of the evaluation period (between June and October 2010) with the final round of visits taking place shortly after the end of the funding period (between October 2011 and January 2012). Where it was not possible to organise all interviews within a case study visit, interviews were carried out by telephone.

The findings from the endpoint visits to schools are presented in this report.

1.4.4 Assessment of Value for Money (VFM)

The evaluation has drawn together information gathered through the survey and case-study strands to develop value for money estimates. Assessing VFM is about comparing intervention costs with benefits, and also considering the extent to which objectives have been met and activities delivered at minimum cost. The cost effectiveness of the strategy was analysed by considering economy, efficiency and effectiveness measures. These have been calculated from administrative and monitoring data, as well as data gathered through the primary research activities of the evaluation. These measures effectively analyse and test the relationship between different parts of the strategy's 'logic chain', which flows from rationale and objectives, through spending, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. It is

important to remember that the VFM ratios and qualitative evidence need to be considered within the context of the wider evaluation of the strategy as a whole.

1.4.5 National Pupil Database (NPD) modelling

This report also draws together findings from an analysis of student-level attainment, progression and attendance data. In total, five outcome variables have been constructed:

- total and unauthorised absence variables for each pupil in each of the four years were defined as sessions missed in the Autumn and Spring terms divided by the number of available sessions. These were then multiplied by one hundred for practical reasons, to ensure fewer zeros in the modelling coefficients
- total capped points score at Key Stage 4 in GCSE and equivalent qualifications. This is based on listing each pupils' qualifications in descending order of points score, and summing these points for the top eight qualifications (or rather, those equivalent to eight GCSEs worth of study – e.g. a double award subject would count for two on the list)
- a dichotomous variable identifying whether a pupil has achieved at least 5 GCSEs at grade A*-C including English and mathematics
- average progress in English and mathematics from Key Stage 2-4 was defined in terms of National Curriculum levels.

1.5 Nature of the evidence used in this report

This report draws predominately on responses to endpoint surveys with headteachers, pupils, SIPs and LA officers undertaken between March-July 2011. It also draws on interviews undertaken in 22 case-study schools between September 2011 and January 2012.

Table 1.2: Response rates to endpoint surveys

Survey	Method	Total sample size	Number of responses	Target	
		N	N	N	% achieved
SIP	CATI	266	104	100	104
LA	Online	91	18	60	30
Headteacher					
GG	CATI	398	200	200	100
<i>Comparison</i>	CATI	450	100	100	100
Pupil					
GG Yr8	Online	-	2050	From 49 schools 5,250	39
<i>Comparison Yr8</i>	Online	-	1275	From 25 schools 6,000	21
GG Yr11	Online	-	1773	From 53 schools 5,250	34
<i>Comparison Yr11</i>	Online	-	821	From 21 schools 6,000	14

While the response rates to the SIP and headteacher surveys were very good, the response rates to the LA and pupil surveys were lower. This could have been due to the following factors:

- **Timing of the endpoint surveys:** The LA survey was administered at a time (June 2011) when there was great upheaval in LAs, with many undergoing significant restructuring. As a result, we cannot be certain how many of the online questionnaires were successfully delivered to staff that could complete them.
- **Participation was optional:** Many of the schools said they were too busy to take part in the pupil survey. Despite efforts to minimise the burden placed on schools, and to communicate well in advance the value of participating in the evaluation in terms of future policy formulation and the opportunity to provide their feedback, there was no requirement for Gaining Ground schools to take part in the evaluation.

Despite the lower than anticipated response rates to the pupil surveys, we were nevertheless able to undertake a robust statistical analysis of the data based on responses from several thousand pupils, including factor analysis and modelling using matched NPD data.

1.6 Analysis and reporting

This report draws on an analysis of the data collected as part of the endpoint surveys, supplemented with a second round of case-study visits to 22 Gaining Ground schools. The report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 explores schools' reasons for joining the strategy and their priorities and expectations.

Chapter 3 reports on survey and case-study schools' use of Gaining Ground resources, both financial and 'in-kind'.

Chapter 4 explores case-study interviewees' and survey participants' views on the perceived impacts of the strategy over the two years, focusing specifically on the impacts of the four strands of the strategy, and the different groups effected. It also explores respondents' perceptions of the strategy's added value.

Chapter 5 explores research participants' views on the legacy of the strategy, including the sustainability of the activities that have been implemented. It also explores research participants' views on whether there is any scope to adapt elements of the strategy to the new school improvement environment.

Chapter 6 explores schools' issues and challenges with the strategy.

Chapter 7 presents the findings from an analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD). It focuses on five main outcomes – three related to pupil attainment and two related to their attendance.

Chapter 8 presents the findings from the value for money analysis, together with survey and case-study respondents' views on whether the strategy offered good value for money.

The concluding chapter draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation, provides a final assessment of the effectiveness of the strategy and presents recommendations for policy and practice.

Findings from descriptive analysis are reported within the chapters. The main variables discussed throughout relate to the type of respondent and the observed differences between responses from Gaining Ground and comparison school respondents. Comparison headteacher responses were weighted based on their schools' characteristics to ensure comparability with the Gaining Ground responses. More details of this weighting are provided in the technical appendices. Note also that it is not appropriate to conduct standard statistical significance tests on weighted data, and so these are not reported. Selected findings from factor analysis are reported in relation to the pupil survey data, with a full breakdown presented in the technical appendices. Pupil data was weighted firstly to ensure that each responding school (rather than each responding pupil) carried equal weight in our analysis, and then further weighted to ensure that responding comparison schools were indeed comparable to Gaining Ground schools. In addition to exploring the perceived impacts of the strategy collected through the surveys and case-study visits, we explored the measured impacts collected through an analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD). Through statistical modelling we explored the complex relationships between these variables and the impact of Gaining Ground on outcomes. In order to achieve this, we used Multilevel Modelling (MLM). Further details are provided in Chapter 7 and in the technical appendices.

Key findings are summarised at the beginning of each of the chapters.

2. Schools' priorities and expectations

Key findings

Priorities

- Most headteachers reported that their highest priority had been to improve overall pupil progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in mathematics, followed by reducing variation in the quality of teaching.
- More than half gave high priority to: improving overall pupil progress in English; improving monitoring and tracking procedures; and developing leadership capacity at the middle level.
- The two most frequently reported low priorities were improving after-school enrichment activities and improving the effectiveness of the governing body.

Expectations

- Schools expected that participation in Gaining Ground would provide them with additional resources and support that would improve pupil attainment, achievement and progression. Other expectations were increased momentum in creating a more positive culture, implementing school improvement plans, strengthening leadership and improving pupil performance tracking systems.
- Schools regarded involvement in Gaining Ground as an opportunity to enhance their performance and the outcomes for pupils.

This chapter presents the main reasons for schools deciding to take part in the Gaining Ground Strategy and identifies their priorities and expectations. It draws on data from surveys of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools and headteachers in comparison schools and data from case studies. The chapter explores headteachers' priorities for school improvement over the last two years, and for those participating in the Gaining Ground Strategy, their reasons for taking part.

2.1 Schools' priorities

In order to develop an understanding of schools' reasons for taking part in the strategy, Gaining Ground headteachers were surveyed about their priorities for school improvement. Headteachers from the comparison schools were posed the same questions so that any differences in priorities could be explored and identified. Headteachers from both samples were asked to indicate the level of priority (low, medium, or high) they considered nine areas of development to have; they could also indicate that a particular area was not a priority at all, or had not been identified as an issue. The findings from the survey of Gaining Ground headteachers are presented in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Gaining Ground headteachers' views on the priority assigned to different areas of school improvement over the last two years (2009-2011)

Response	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Not a priority/ not identified as an issue
	%	%	%	%
a) To improve overall pupil progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in English	5	17	76	3
b) To improve overall pupil progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in mathematics	3	10	87	1
c) To fully embed monitoring and tracking procedures across the whole school	6	21	73	2
d) To develop leadership capacity at the middle level	6	31	63	2
e) To develop leadership at the senior level	18	47	31	5
f) To reduce in-school variation in the quality of teaching	2	18	80	2
g) To ensure that the Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) approach is embedded in all core subjects	12	44	41	3
h) To improve after-school enrichment activities	44	39	13	5
i) To improve the effectiveness of the governing body	29	37	27	8

Source: NFER CATI survey of Gaining Ground Headteachers, 2011

A series of single response questions.

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

N=200

Table 2.1 shows that:

- the area reported as being a high priority by the most headteachers was to improve overall pupil progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in mathematics (87 per cent), followed by reducing in-school variation in the quality of teaching (80 per cent)
- around three-quarters of the responding headteachers reported that improving overall pupil progress in English (76 per cent) and fully embedding monitoring and tracking procedures across the whole school (73 per cent) were high priorities
- developing leadership capacity at the middle level (63 per cent) was also a high priority
- the two most frequently reported low priorities were improving after-school enrichment activities (44 per cent) and improving the effectiveness of the governing body (29 per cent).

Headteachers' expectations of what Gaining Ground would help them to achieve, outlined in section 2.2, reflect their highest school improvement priorities reported above.

Additional analysis revealed a broadly similar pattern of responses from the headteachers of comparison schools. The main differences were that more headteachers of comparison schools reported that reducing in-school variation in the quality of teaching was a high priority (89 per cent) and more indicated that the following were low priorities: improving after-school enrichment activities (61 per cent), improving the effectiveness of the school's governing body (38 per cent) and developing leadership at senior level (29 per cent).

The findings indicate that, while reducing in-school variation in the quality of teaching was a high priority in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools, a lower proportion (80 per cent) of Gaining Ground headteachers considered it important. This could be explained by some Gaining Ground schools focusing on this less than expediting other interventions to improve pupil performance such as designing and targeting intensive support on particular groups of pupils.

The data also indicates that, while improving after-school enrichment activities, enhancing the effectiveness of the school's governing body and developing leadership at senior level were considered as low priorities by notable proportions (around a fifth or more) of Gaining Ground schools and comparison schools, more Gaining Ground schools regarded them as areas of development. This could be explained by Gaining Ground helping to focus participating schools on making improvements in these areas. However, it is surprising that more than two-fifths of Gaining Ground headteacher respondents rated improving after-school enrichment activities as a low priority given that one of Gaining Ground's aims was to inspire, re-engage and stretch pupils through giving them access to academic focused study support such as homework assistance, book clubs, mathematics games and Olympiad-type events. This finding could be explained partly by these schools deciding that this type of support was adequate and embedded in their provision already, and partly by their prioritisation of other actions, such as improving whole-school pupil tracking systems, as more important in their drive to raise performance.

2.2 Schools' expectations

The case studies revealed that schools participating in Gaining Ground had a range of expectations of what their involvement in the strategy would achieve. **The main expectation was to receive additional resources and support** that would enable them to experience improvements in pupil attainment and achievement. This aspiration was shared by headteachers, subject leaders and governors who wanted to raise attainment, particularly in English and mathematics at Key Stage 4. They hoped that Gaining Ground would assist them in implementing whole-school changes which would support the drive to achieve improved progression and outcomes for pupils. Schools expressed a range of additional expectations presented below relating to bringing about these changes.

A common expectation was that participation in Gaining Ground would help schools to create a **more positive ethos and culture**, by providing the impetus for reviewing the school's ambition, performance and potential, and the momentum for carrying through change. This was encapsulated in this subject leader's observation: 'We needed to think about where we were going, not just about the money. Gaining Ground makes you focus on the ethos of improvement'. Other interviewees explained that this meant encouraging staff and pupils to think differently and more positively about what they could achieve collectively and individually. They said that this entailed nurturing a culture shift based on increasing aspirations about ambitions and goals, raising expectations of institutional and personal performance, changing attitudes to be more proactive and can-do, and raising pupils' self-esteem. Creating a culture of challenge, where teachers challenged pupils to raise their expectations, and a culture of celebration, where pupils' progress and performance were publicly acknowledged, were the types of changes schools said they were striving to achieve. Headteachers emphasised that these changes in outlook were instrumental to realising their ultimate aim of improving outcomes for pupils.

The case studies found that governors and staff hoped that Gaining Ground would provide a **stimulus to move forward** their existing school improvement plans and act as a **consolidator to join up institutional interventions**. This expectation was articulated by a chair of governors who viewed Gaining Ground as 'part of a wider agenda for change to improve results and raise the bar'. Other interviewees explained that they wanted to augment their own strategies by gaining access, through Gaining Ground, to other schools' approaches to teaching, improving performance, and in some cases, behaviour management. This governor's interpretation of Gaining Ground, as 'an opportunity to engage with national developments to tune into best current practice nationwide', reflected this outward-looking view to importing new ideas and ways of working.

Another expectation expressed by headteachers and governors was that involvement in Gaining Ground would help to **strengthen the leadership** of their school which they thought was required to set the direction for, and support the implementation of, the whole-school cultural changes needed. They considered that participation in Gaining Ground gave them the opportunity to increase leadership capacity and develop middle leaders to take more responsibility for managing change and transforming the school's performance. Partner schools also viewed involvement as a way of developing their staff through providing coaching to teachers in Gaining Ground schools.

Staff and governors in case-study schools hoped that Gaining Ground would furnish them with **additional resources to support their drive for improving pupil outcomes**: 'We were on a journey, so we took the resource to accelerate the learning', was one headteacher's comment, while a deputy head elsewhere remarked that his school 'recognised that with Gaining Ground money, we could be radical and implement things that we would not be able to do otherwise' including expanding the curriculum. Interviewees thought that Gaining Ground funding would help to give teachers more time to enhance their teaching and provide more intensive support for pupils, in some cases focusing this on particular groups of pupils.

Schools expected that participating in Gaining Ground would help to **improve their systems for tracking pupils' progress and using performance data**. They considered that existing approaches could be enhanced in order to build up a more comprehensive school picture of performance and use tracking data in a more targeted way to challenge pupils to raise their performance and identify pupils who required additional support.

The case-study evidence showed that schools regarded Gaining Ground as an opportunity for renewing effort to improve their performance and pupils' outcomes, even if some were disappointed initially in being labelled as 'coasting' schools.

Finally, it should be noted that the research found that schools' expectations of what they would gain from participation in Gaining Ground were largely fulfilled as the impacts reported in Chapter 4 show.

3. Use of Gaining Ground resources

Key findings

- Schools valued the resources provided through the Gaining Ground Strategy which they said had enabled them to augment and accelerate strategic and operational approaches to improving their performance and pupils' achievement.
- School Improvement Partners (SIPs) played a key role in supporting Gaining Ground schools and facilitating school-to-school support by finding them appropriate partner schools. A greater proportion of Gaining Ground than comparison schools worked with SIPs to identify areas of under-performance and to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress.
- Most Gaining Ground schools valued school-to-school partnership working which enabled them to share and observe practice on planning and managing school improvement interventions, developing and using systems for pupil tracking, teaching and study support. School-to-school partnership working was most effective where the schools had similar characteristics, were within reasonable travelling distance, had staff time and commitment from both parties, and partnerships at different levels.
- Most Gaining Ground schools provided out-of-school hours study support for pupils. Case-study evidence indicated that Gaining Ground had helped schools to introduce, target or extend these study-support sessions which included additional tutoring particularly in English and mathematics, revision classes, and one-to-one mentoring.
- More than seven out of ten Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers had brought in additional specialist staff to support pupils. Schools used Gaining Ground funding to pay for learning mentors or teaching assistants, particularly to strengthen support for pupils in English and mathematics.
- Most Gaining Ground schools had invested in training for Assessment for Learning (AfL) and/or Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP), and had worked closely with staff to improve the reliability and validity of teacher assessment of pupil progression. Case-study evidence suggested that Gaining Ground was helping schools to use assessment of pupil progression more systematically.
- A larger proportion of Gaining Ground than comparison school headteachers reported that they had provided training for governors to enable them to be more challenging and hold the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to account. The case studies indicated that governors valued this training which had increased their understanding of schools' priorities and resources. Headteachers considered that upskilling governors was an area for continuing development.

This chapter presents findings on the types of activities undertaken by schools as part of Gaining Ground and compares the extent to which they were undertaken with comparison schools. The chapter also describes school-to-school partnership working, the role of the SIP, additional AfL training and study support. An evaluation of the impact of these activities and components of Gaining Ground is provided in Chapter 4. As reported earlier, comparison headteacher responses were weighted based on their schools' characteristics to ensure comparability with the Gaining

Ground schools' responses. More details of this weighting are provided in the technical appendices. Note also that it is not appropriate to conduct standard statistical significance tests on weighted data, and so these are not reported.

3.1 Overview of activities undertaken

The evaluation surveyed headteachers in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools regarding the activities they had undertaken over the last two years (2009-2011) in order to develop a picture of how gaining Ground resources had been used. The survey results on the extent to which schools had worked with a partner school or National Leader of Education (NLE) to support school improvement work are presented below.

Table 3.1 Worked with a partner school or National Leader of Education (NLE) to support school improvement work

Activity	Extent undertaken	HT Gaining Ground schools %	HT comparison schools %	Total %
Worked with a partner school or NLE to support your school improvement work	To a great extent	50	20	40
	To some extent	40	25	35
	To a small extent	9	30	16
	Not at all	1	24	9
	Unable to comment	0	1	<1
Total		100	100	100
		N=200	N=100	

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The table shows that there was a marked difference in the responses of Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers. While nine out of ten Gaining Ground headteachers said that they had worked with a partner school or NLE 'to some' or 'a great extent', less than half of the comparison headteachers reported similar levels of activity. These findings can be explained by the centrality of school-to-school support in the Gaining Ground Strategy. SIPs generally facilitated school-to-school support by identifying partner schools for, and matching them with, Gaining Ground schools. In the main, these matches worked well with occasional lack of fit being attributed by Gaining Ground staff to lack of 'chemistry' between staff in the two schools or the distance between them and their partner school requiring a 45-minute or longer journey. These challenges are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The case-study data revealed that **Gaining Ground schools valued the support provided by partner schools**. The support included opportunities for Gaining Ground schools' senior leaders and subject leaders to confer with their equivalents in partner schools regarding planning and practice in a range of areas such as leadership and development, organisation of the curriculum and the collection and

use of pupil monitoring data. Gaining Ground school staff reported how useful it was to visit partner schools to see first-hand how they put in place pupil support systems (including study and revision skills classes), to do 'learning walks', to observe lessons, and in some cases, to participate in team teaching with partner school colleagues. Exchange visits, where subject leaders shared ideas and practice, were also appreciated.

There was little difference in the survey responses of Gaining Ground and comparison headteachers regarding investment in training for APP, with around eight out of ten indicating that they had invested in this training to 'some extent' or a 'great extent'. This finding suggests that **enhancing teachers' skills in APP is an equal priority for Gaining Ground and comparison schools**. The case studies indicated how Gaining Ground often complemented and accelerated school improvement activities already underway and this was the case with APP and AfL. There was also little difference in the survey responses of Gaining Ground and comparison headteachers regarding how closely they worked with staff to improve the reliability and validity of teacher assessment of pupil progression, with more than 90 per cent (94 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers and 98 per cent of comparison headteachers) indicating that they had done this.

Table 3.2 shows that a larger proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers (three out of ten) than comparison school headteachers (two out of ten) reported providing training and support for governors 'to a great extent' to enable them to be more challenging and hold the SLT to account. **Strengthening school governance was a key feature of the Gaining Ground Strategy** which explains the investment made by Gaining Ground schools in training for governors. Training was provided in governors' roles in school leadership including interpreting and using school and pupil performance data to support and challenge the SLT. The case studies revealed that, while governor training had taken place, not all members of school governing bodies had been able to participate, and headteachers considered that upskilling governors was an area for continuing development.

Table 3.2 Provided training and support for governors to enable them to better challenge and hold SLT to account

Activity	Extent undertaken	HT Gaining Ground schools %	HT comparison schools %	Total %
Provided training and support for governors to enable them to better challenge and hold SLT to account	To a great extent	30	22	27
	To some extent	43	45	44
	To a small extent	18	27	21
	Not at all	7	6	7
Total		100	100	100

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Table 3.3 shows that **there were marked differences between Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers in the extent to which they reported working with SIPs to support governors** which reflects Gaining Ground's impetus to strengthen school governance. While around three-quarters of Gaining Ground headteachers reported they had worked with SIPs 'to some' or 'a great extent' to support governors, half of comparison headteachers reported doing this.

Table 3.3 Worked with the SIP to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress

Activity	Extent undertaken	HT Gaining Ground schools	HT comparison schools	Total
		%	%	%
Worked with the SIP to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress	To a great extent	23	7	18
	To some extent	51	43	48
	To a small extent	15	34	21
	Not at all	11	16	13
	Unable to comment	1	0	<1
Total		100	100	100

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The headteacher survey also found that a high proportion of headteachers from Gaining Ground (67 per cent) and comparison schools (56 per cent) reported having worked with a SIP 'to a great extent' to identify areas of underperformance. Gaining Ground schools received four additional days of SIP support per year to assist them to formulate, monitor and evaluate plans for school improvement.

More than seven out of ten Gaining Ground headteachers (71 per cent) and comparison school headteachers (76 per cent) had brought in **additional specialist staff** to support pupils. The case studies indicated that Gaining Ground schools were using the additional support especially in English and mathematics. This was illustrated by the school that had used Gaining Ground resources to pay for a learning mentor who was running additional sessions in English (with targeted pupils) four days a week. This proved so successful that the school appointed a teaching assistant in mathematics and another in modern foreign languages to do a similar job.

More than eight in every ten Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers (83 and 89 per cent respectively) reported that they had provided out-of-hours study support to pupils to 'some' or 'a great extent'. The Gaining Ground case-study schools often provided this support for targeted groups of less-well performing pupils, through after-school sessions or, in some cases, through breakfast clubs, Saturday classes or provision in school holidays. The schools reported that Gaining Ground helped to resource these study-support sessions. Further findings on study support are provided in section 3.5.

Around seven in every ten headteachers in Gaining Ground schools (72 per cent) and comparison schools (72 per cent) had drawn on the advice of external consultants to ‘some’ or ‘a great extent’. The case studies showed that Gaining Ground schools had used consultants mainly to work with their SLT to review the school’s aims and ambitions.

The remainder of this chapter looks in more detail at the use of the different strands of the strategy: school-to-school partnership working; the role of the SIP; additional AfL training; and study support.

3.2 School-to-school partnership working

School-to-school partnership working was a key feature of the Gaining Ground Strategy. As reported in Table 3.1 above, 90 per cent of headteacher survey respondents said that they had worked with a partner school or NLE to support school improvement work. The case studies revealed that, in most instances, Gaining Ground schools and their partner schools valued the partnership working that took place. Partnership working included school exchange visits, sharing ideas and practice on planning and managing school improvement interventions, conferring on systems for collecting and using pupil performance tracking data, observing and, in some cases, team teaching lessons and training and sharing ideas and practice on school leadership and staff development.

The following **characteristics of an effective school-to-school partnership** were identified from the case-study interviews:

Figure 3.1: Ten characteristics of an effective school-to-school partnership

Shared goals and ambitions	Trust
Structured plan for improvement but room for flexible working	Relationships that work
Similar school characteristics	Staff time/commitment from both parties
Within reasonable travelling distance	Partnerships at different levels
Benefits 2 way	Monitoring and assessment

Source: NFER Gaining Ground Evaluation

The characteristics in Figure 3.1 indicate that school-to-school partnerships are more likely to be effective if the schools have shared goals and ambitions for development and are broadly similar in terms of socio-economic context and pupil intake. Conversely, if the schools are too dissimilar, they will feel that the gap between them

will inhibit the transmission of real learning. Gaining Ground schools pointed out the importance of their partner schools being within a reasonable travelling distance (e.g. no more than a 45-minute drive), otherwise the staff time involved made the working relationship too resource intensive. The case-study evidence also indicated that school-to-school partnerships were more likely to be effective if they were structured and based on links at different levels of the institutions where staff had enough time to invest in exchanging practice and real learning from each other. Trust was another important characteristic in school-to-school partnerships. This meant that staff and governors needed to be able to trust the staff and governors in another school when discussing professionally sensitive issues concerning school leadership, school improvement and pupil performance where they could explore shortcomings and areas for development in a non-judgmental environment. Trust was a significant component of another characteristic, relationships that work, meaning that they are beneficial and have practical value. Monitoring and assessing these partnerships was found to be important. For example, in some cases Gaining Ground schools explained that, though the working relationship with their partner school had been very useful initially, it had been subsequently discontinued because their staff considered that they had gained and implemented what they needed from the partnership.

3.3 Role of School Improvement Partner (SIP)

A core component of the Gaining Ground Strategy was access to additional SIP support. In the surveys of SIPs and of LAs the nature and effectiveness of this support was explored. SIPs were asked how many of the additional SIP days (eight over the two years) their school had used. Their responses are presented in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4 Additional days of SIPs' time used

Additional days of SIPs' time used	%
0.5 days	1
1.5 days	1
2 days	4
3 days	2
4 days	9
5 days	8
5.5 days	2
6 days	19
7 days	11
8 days	44
Total	100
N=104	

Source: NFER CATI survey of SIPs, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Table 3.4 shows that just under half of responding SIPs (44 per cent) reported that their school had used their full allocation of days. A further 40 per cent had used from five to seven days of additional SIP time. Nearly one in five SIPs (17 per cent)

reported that their school had used only four or fewer of the allocated eight days. It should be noted that the timing of the SIP survey (March 2011) coincided with the discontinuation of national SIP provision. Therefore, some SIP contracts may have been cut short before the SIP could use all of their allocated days, while others may have been able to use their remaining days in the summer term.

The survey of SIPs showed that they had undertaken a range of activities with Gaining Ground schools (see Table 3.5). **The three main activities which SIPs carried out to 'a great extent' were identifying priorities for improvement, providing on-going support and guidance for the headteacher, and monitoring improvements made by the school.**

Table 3.5 Activities undertaken by SIPs with Gaining Ground schools

To what extent were you able to do the following:	To a great extent %	To some extent %	To a small extent %	Not at all %	Not required to do %	Unable to answer %	Total %
identify priorities for improvement	84	16	0	0	0	0	100
provide ongoing support and guidance for headteacher	81	14	3	1	1	0	100
monitor improvements made by the school	81	16	3	0	0	0	100
identify the type of support needed by the school	64	31	3	1	0	1	100
develop the capability within the school to analyse pupil progression data	43	40	6	6	4	1	100
develop the capability of the senior leadership team	42	43	11	2	2	0	100
monitor the quality of support received by the school	41	38	14	6	1	0	100
assess the quality of teaching and learning (e.g. through the observation of lessons, reviewing lesson plans)	41	34	7	11	8	0	100
facilitate the development of the school-to-school partnership	40	40	14	5	0	0	100
broker the support needed by the school	39	39	13	6	4	0	100
provide training for governors to enable them to undertake a more effective challenge role	35	42	10	9	5	0	100
deliver training for school staff	20	24	18	22	14	1	100
N=104							

Source: NFER CATI survey of SIPs, 2011

A series of single response questions

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

SIPs were asked to provide a breakdown of how their time had been used. The average amount of time spent on key activities was 6.2 days, and was reported to break down as follows: 0.8 days brokering Gaining Ground support for their school; 2.9 days directly providing support to the school; 1.9 days monitoring, reviewing and evaluating progress made by the school; and 0.6 days on general administration.

When asked if they expected to continue providing support to their school as part of Gaining Ground until July 2011, 69 per cent affirmed they would and a further ten per cent said they would, subject to funding. Around one in five indicated that they would not continue to support their school as part of Gaining Ground. The case studies showed that SIPs were continuing to provide support where schools had bought in their services as consultants following the discontinuation of national SIP provision.

The survey of LA staff asked them to indicate how effectively they considered SIPs had supported Gaining Ground schools in their authority. Eleven of the 15 respondents said SIPs' support had been 'very effective' with a further three reporting that it had been 'fairly effective' and one saying 'not very effective'. Chapter 4 presents findings on the reported impact of SIPs' Gaining Ground work.

The survey also asked LA staff to indicate the extent to which SIPs had been able to carry out four specific activities. The majority indicated that SIPs had 'to a great extent' established a relationship of trust with schools' SLTs (14 out of 17 respondents), agreed with schools their priorities for improvement (14 respondents) and identified the types of support needed by schools (11 respondents). In contrast, they were less positive about the extent to which SIPs had provided or brokered support with six respondents reporting 'to a great extent', seven 'to some extent and four 'to a small extent'.

The evidence presented in this section reveals that **SIPs played a key role in the delivery of the Gaining Ground Strategy**. Gaining Ground school staff said that they valued the advice and support provided by SIPs who gave them independent feedback on their school which helped them to determine ways of improving performance. A typical experience was a school where the SIP had helped staff to sharpen self-evaluation techniques and assisted the headteacher in developing robust and realistic action plans. As a result of Gaining Ground funding and the contribution of the SIP, the school's whole monitoring system had changed. Chapter 4 presents findings on the reported impact of SIPs' Gaining Ground work.

3.4 Additional Assessment for Learning (AfL) training

The headteacher survey revealed that a larger proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers (42 per cent) than comparison school headteachers (33 per cent) had invested in training for AfL 'to a great extent' (see Table 3.6). The most likely explanation of this finding is the impetus and support provided by the Gaining Ground Strategy to invest in AfL training.

Table 3.6 Investment in training for Assessment for Learning (AfL)

Activity	Extent undertaken	HT Gaining Ground schools	HT comparison schools	Total
		%	%	%
Invested in training for Assessment for Learning (AfL)	To a great extent	42	33	39
	To some extent	45	51	47
	To a small extent	8	15	10
	Not at all	6	1	4
Total		100	100	100

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The support provided by Gaining Ground for **establishing and embedding AfL** was appreciated by staff in the case-study schools. This was exemplified by the subject leader who remarked that Gaining Ground had helped to reinforce and develop AfL which had not been used systematically enough in the past. Elsewhere, a headteacher explained that, although plans were already in place to develop AfL and APP, Gaining Ground had helped the SLT to realise their goals and, as a result, formative assessment of pupils was progressing well. The head of mathematics in this school also noted that Gaining Ground had provided additional resources to purchase APP training from a mathematics specialist school.

3.5 Study support

Study support, which was a core element of the Gaining Ground Strategy, was often provided through after-school clubs and activities. Table 3.7 presents survey findings on Gaining Ground and comparison school pupils' participation in these activities.

Table 3.7 Participation in after-school clubs and activities – all pupils

All pupils		Gaining Ground schools %	Comparison schools %	Total %
I take part in after-school clubs/activities	Always true	14	13	14
	Mostly true	17	20	18
	Sometimes true	40	40	40
	Never true	28	30	28
	Missing	<1	<1	<1
Total		100	100	100
		N=3823	N=2096	N=5919

Source: NFER Survey of pupils, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The table shows that the participation of Gaining Ground and comparison school pupils in after-school clubs and activities was broadly similar. Around one-third of pupils in both school types indicated that it was 'always' or 'mostly true' that they took

part in after-school clubs or activities. The survey also found no major differences between the responses given by Year 8 and Year 11 pupils.

The case studies revealed that **schools used Gaining Ground resources to fund a range of study-support activities**. They had mostly used the resources to provide new activities, or in some cases, extended existing activities to support more or different groups of pupils. While most of these activities were provided in school, some were provided off-site. Examples of the activities are presented below.

Schools provided pupils with study support through **mentoring and coaching** from staff. This included weekly goal setting and mentoring, which teachers used to show pupils where they needed to improve their performance, and intensive one-to-one or group support sessions over several weeks in particular subjects, especially English and mathematics, in lesson time and after school. An example of mentoring, characterised as assertiveness mentoring, involved teachers using monitoring data (grade predictions) to identify pupils who were GCSE borderline in terms of achieving five GCSEs at grades A*-C and mentoring these pupils by working with them to identify the aspects of subjects they were struggling with and then consulting their subject teachers to develop a subject-specific learning and support plan. A headteacher who claimed that this type of support 'has had huge benefits', explained that the mentors, often members of the school's SLT, acted as the pupil's champion and intermediary, 'the terrier that won't let them go'. Peer support was also used to provide enhanced study support, which this subject leader referred to: 'Peer support is another useful method – using the smart pupils to help others'. Findings on the reported impact of study support are presented in Chapter 4.

A further illustration of study support was provided by the school which arranged for Year 10 pupils who were performing at grade D or below in mathematics to participate in a mathematics immersion course at a local university. Another example was the school which took a group of pupils to a hotel for one morning each week for a term for intensive study support including in English and mathematics. Elsewhere, schools used Gaining Ground funding to resource breakfast clubs for both English and mathematics, providing study support targeted particularly at GCSE C/D borderline pupils in these subjects. There was evidence of Gaining Ground schools using improved data monitoring systems to help pupils identify their own learning needs and using DVDs and personalised learning resources to help them develop greater ownership of their learning. There was no evidence that where schools targeted particular groups of pupils this was to the detriment of other pupils which is probably explained by Gaining Ground providing extra resources to support additional activities. The question of how sustainable these additional interventions are is discussed in Chapter 5.

Gaining Ground resources were used to provide **examination revision classes** which were sometimes supplemented by the production of revision timetables and revision guides, and in one case, by a survival pack for pupils preparing for their GCSE examinations. A subject leader noted that the provision of revision materials was valued by pupils, saying 'it made them feel cherished and I would see them revising on their own at lunchtime with them'. Schools provided what some called 'master classes' on examination techniques which were offered to all Year 11 pupils

in a generic way for all subjects or focused on English and/or mathematics or targeted on particular groups such as GCSE C/D borderline pupils and GCSE A/A* pupils. An example was the school which used Gaining Ground funding to run a Year 11 internal conference, including speakers from colleges and universities, which included training pupils in study skills, how to manage their time to best effect and how to manage stress.

Another example was the school which introduced **drop-down days** which were two-day off-site sessions, one for English and one for mathematics, for Year 11 pupils on examination techniques including what a successful answer looks like. A subject leader noted that: 'it's very focused and provides the final push', adding that it was money well spent. Another school was using a learning mentor in English and a teaching assistant in mathematics to support examination preparation through after-school sessions, which this Year 11 pupil found useful: 'We've been through some test papers and she's made sure that I've understood the papers, what I need to do and we've practised different types of writing, like short writing and long writing'. Staff from partner schools sometimes contributed to revision sessions as exemplified by the head of mathematics from a partner school who ran a one-day revision workshop for GCSE C/D borderline pupils in the Gaining Ground school.

Gaining Ground funding was also used to purchase additional teaching and learning resources which augmented study support, teaching and learning. These resources included interactive whiteboards, visualisers and mathematics software.

This chapter and Chapter 2 have presented evidence that Gaining Ground has helped to improve participating schools' performance by augmenting and accelerating their school improvement work. Examples of the additional activities generated by the strategy include working with a partner school or NLE to support school improvement work and working with a SIP to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress. In contrast, responses to the headteacher surveys suggested that Gaining Ground and comparison schools were engaging in similar activities such as investing in training for APP, bringing in additional specialist staff to support pupils, drawing on the advice of external consultants and providing study support out of school hours. Consequently, it appears prima facie that comparison schools were doing just as much as their counterparts who were involved with the strategy. However, it should be noted that the case studies yielded a more nuanced intervention narrative which revealed that Gaining Ground provided an impetus to initiate and follow through change, opportunities to learn and benefit from partner schools and SIPs, consolidation of institutional improvement interventions and enhanced ways of supporting pupils. The findings from this wider evidence base provide a more rounded picture of Gaining Ground which helps to explain the apparent disparity between the interpretations of Gaining Ground's additional outputs presented in this chapter and in Chapter 4 through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, compared with those presented in Chapter 8, which primarily uses survey data to assess the value for money of the Gaining Ground Strategy.

4. Impact of the Gaining Ground Strategy

Key findings

- There was strong evidence of Gaining Ground's particular impact on systems for monitoring, tracking and evaluating pupil progress and of improved use of data for target-setting and action-planning.
- There was evidence of impact on school leadership, particularly on middle managers and their relationship with, and sometimes role on, SLTs.
- The Gaining Ground Strategy appears to have had a positive impact on average Key Stage 2-4 progress in English and Mathematics amongst Gaining Ground pupils, relative to those in comparison schools.
- There was case-study evidence of an impact of Gaining Ground on pupil attainment and results, particularly in mathematics and English which, in turn, had an impact on proportions of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades overall at GCSE.
- The findings from the case-study visits suggested that Gaining Ground schools were developing more engaging, high-quality and effective teaching, although the findings from the pupil surveys suggested that pupils' attitudes towards teaching and learning were similar across Gaining Ground and comparison schools.
- Most of the Gaining Ground strands were considered beneficial, but particularly the additional funding for academic focused study support, school-to-school support and the additional SIP days.
- Additional funding for study support was valued for helping to develop capacity and provision, for allowing for creativity and experimentation, for encouraging targeting and allowing for intensive intervention.
- School-to-school support was considered beneficial due to the exposure to new ideas and approaches, for giving staff the opportunity to learn from a high-performing school's experiences and due to the perceived value of a mentoring-type relationship. Relationships were thought to be mutually beneficial for most partnerships.
- The additional SIP days had helped SIPs to provide bespoke support and to be more deeply engaged and involved with schools. SIPs also served as brokers between schools, helping partners to maintain focus.

4.1 Progress made

The **perceived impact** of the Gaining Ground Strategy is discussed here in Chapter 4, and it is noticeable that there has been impact in the areas of priority outlined in Chapter 2. The **measured impacts** collected through an analysis of the NPD data are presented in Chapter 7. The discussion presented in this chapter is based on the findings from surveys of headteachers, SIPs, LA personnel and pupils about changes which occurred in schools over the life of the strategy and, in the case of Gaining

Ground schools, the extent to which progress made could be attributed to the strategy. Findings in relation to progress made have been summarised under the following headings and can be found in the sub-sections below:²

- use of data and evidence
- leadership
- teaching and learning
- attainment and progression
- school ethos and culture.

The chapter then goes on to explore the impact of Gaining Ground specifically on pupils and the impact of the different Gaining Ground strands.

Additionality of the strategy

It is important to first consider the extent to which impacts can be attributed to Gaining Ground. All but one per cent of headteachers felt that Gaining Ground *had* made a positive difference to their school, with just over two thirds (67 per cent) reporting that this difference had occurred 'to a great extent'. Nearly three-quarters of the headteachers (73 per cent) felt that only a few of the activities undertaken which were aimed at improving pupil progress would have been possible without Gaining Ground, although more than a quarter (26 per cent) said that most or all of the activities could still have been carried out. However, SIPs were more conservative about the impact of the strategy than headteachers, with about four out of ten SIPs (39 per cent) reporting that without the strategy, 'most' or 'all' of the activities would have been possible.

The vast majority of headteachers (89 per cent) said that the implementation of activities would have been *slower* without Gaining Ground and more than three-quarters (76 per cent) said that *fewer pupils* would have taken part in activities aimed at improving their progression without the strategy. The vast majority of SIPs (85 per cent) agreed that the process would have been slower without Gaining Ground and about three-quarters of them (76 per cent) thought that fewer pupils would have been involved in the absence of the strategy.

Just over-two thirds (69 per cent) of headteachers and just over half (56 per cent) of SIPs said it would have not been possible for their school to have put together an equally effective package of support without Gaining Ground. A quarter (26 per cent) of headteachers and more than a third (37 per cent) of SIPs thought the school could still have achieved this without the strategy.

Most headteachers responding to the survey reported that the Gaining Ground Strategy had contributed to improvements in their schools, with approximately half (48 per cent) responding 'to a great extent' and a similar proportion (45 per cent) 'to some extent'. Approximately half of the SIPs surveyed (49 per cent) felt that the

² Comparisons are made between the Gaining Ground and comparison schools; differences in response of more than five percentage points are highlighted.

strategy had made a difference to schools ‘to a great extent’ and a further four out of ten (40 per cent) said this was the case ‘to some extent’. All of the SIPs said it had made some difference. Just over half of the LA personnel interviewed (ten out of 18) felt that Gaining Ground had made a positive difference to participating schools ‘to some extent’ and a further three responded ‘to a great extent’ and ‘to a small extent’ respectively. One person felt that the strategy had made no difference to participating schools.

SIPs were also asked what, if any, additional activities *they* had been able to undertake with their school as a result of their participation in the Gaining Ground Strategy. Their responses most often referred to the benefit of having additional time to do what they were already doing, but also that they were able to spend more time with specific individuals or groups (such as headteachers and governors), and had more time for training and developing the links with the partner school. Notably, eight per cent of SIPs reported that they did not undertake any additional activities as part of the strategy.

The responses from the case studies reflected those collected through the surveys, with most headteachers reporting that Gaining Ground had made a positive impact on their school. They felt it had provided impetus, focus, structure, and resources for enhancing school improvement. Although most interviewees did not think Gaining Ground was the only factor contributing to change, the strategy was considered to be a significant contributory factor. Comments included:

Gaining Ground allowed us to be more adventurous than we used to be. Gaining Ground has allowed us to do the things we wanted to try.

[Headteacher]

It [Gaining Ground] was a supplementary impact, but incredibly useful.

[Headteacher]

Gaining Ground accelerated the [school improvement] process.

[Headteacher]

The funding was described as a ‘catalyst for change’. As one headteacher said, ‘having the resource gave us the opportunity to think strategically about what we could do to enhance our pupils’ performance, and that was the most useful thing of all’. The flexibility of the strategy was appreciated and thought to enhance impact. For example, ‘we used it [Gaining Ground funding] flexibly to meet the needs of the children and the school’.

4.1.1 Impact on use of data and evidence

As shown in Chapter 2, almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools had assigned high priority to fully embedding monitoring and tracking procedures across the whole school. Indeed, most Gaining Ground headteachers who responded to the survey felt that the strategy had made a positive difference to systems of monitoring and evaluation. Half (50 per cent) felt this was the case 'to a great extent' and a further third (34 per cent) 'to some extent'.

There is further evidence of this impact of the strategy, as a higher percentage of Gaining Ground schools' (than comparison schools) headteachers 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that:

- whole-school systems for monitoring, tracking and evaluating pupil progress had been improved in the past two years (97 per cent, as compared to 91 per cent of comparison headteachers). Moreover, 86 per cent of SIPs 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there were such improvements resulting from Gaining Ground. Across the 18 LA staff interviewed, eight reported that schools had better developed procedures for monitoring and tracking pupils' progress 'to a great extent'; five felt this was the case 'to some extent'.

Gaining Ground accelerated the process of interrogating data and putting a robust system in place.

[Assistant headteacher]

- action-planning and intervention work was now better informed by the analysis of pupil data (whilst the percentage of Gaining Ground and comparison headteachers 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' with this statement was broadly comparable (96 per cent as against 93 per cent), a small but noticeably higher proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers 'strongly agreed' (70 per cent, as opposed to 62 per cent of comparison headteachers). Among SIPs, 84 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that Gaining Ground had resulted in analysis of pupil data that was more effective and which informed action planning and intervention.

Staff are now creating, using and analysing data to have an impact on student achievement and progress.

[Headteacher]

Almost all schools (92 per cent overall) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there was more consistent and effective use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) amongst teachers. There was no noticeable difference between Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers' views. Among SIPs, 85 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the strategy had resulted in more effective use of AfL within Gaining Ground schools. Across the 18 LA staff interviewed, 11 felt that schools had made more effective use of AfL 'to a small extent' (four) or 'to some extent' (seven); six reported schools had done so 'to a great extent' (the remaining interviewee did

not comment). Thirteen LA staff reported that pupil target setting was better developed 'to some extent' (seven) or 'to a great extent' (six).

A markedly higher percentage of Gaining Ground headteachers compared with comparison headteachers felt that there had been a positive impact 'to a great extent' of school improvement on data used by governors (55 per cent as opposed to 45 per cent, as shown in Table 4.1). A considerable majority (at least 95 per cent) of headteachers surveyed in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools responded 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent' that other aspects of data use had been enhanced, including: data management systems for tracking and monitoring pupils' progress; the use of data to inform ambitious target-setting for pupils; the use of data to target support for pupils; and the monitoring of each pupil's progress in relation to an expectation of at least three levels of progress from KS2 to KS4. In addition, 81 per cent reported enhanced scrutiny of data by subject leaders.

Table 4.1 Impact on quality of data used by the governing body

		HT Gaining Ground schools %	HT comparison schools %	Total %
The quality of data that is used by your governing body	To a great extent	55	45	52
	To some extent	37	50	41
	To a small extent	4	5	4
	Not at all	4	0	2
	Unable to comment	1	0	<1
		N=200	N=100	N=300

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

As noted in Chapter 8, the marked positive difference between Gaining Ground and comparison schools' reporting of a positive change in improvements to systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance is evidence of the value for money provided by Gaining Ground.

Impact on using data and evidence: what the case studies showed

The case-study findings supported the survey findings, in that all case-study schools referred to some type of impact on the use of data. Staff in ten schools mentioned that new systems were in place, which enabled improved processes for data tracking and analysis. The more efficient systems meant data was easier and quicker to upload, collate and analyse, having an impact on the ability of teachers to use up-to-date data to track pupil progress and develop individual learning plans. Interviewees felt new systems or software packages enhanced the '*transparency*' and '*accuracy*' of data. As one headteacher said, '*moving to the new software package has demystified the data for many teachers*'. There were a number of examples of governors being trained to use data packages, along with teachers/leaders in schools. The role of partner schools was often to assist in developing new systems of data tracking, based on their own good practice.

In eight schools, the improved *use* of data was mentioned (although it was unclear whether new technology/systems were in place, or just better use of existing systems). Staff across schools appeared to have become more '*data savvy*'. Data was used more widely and in a more systematic way for tracking pupil progress and for informing action planning. There were examples of interactive use of data, with it helping to identify which pupils were most '*vulnerable*' and in need of support. In two schools, new staff/teams were referred to, including a new '*data manager*' and a '*raising achievement team*'.

Staff in three schools specifically referred to an increased use of evidence to monitor the quality of teaching and learning, including teachers' self-evaluation and more rigorous performance management systems. This was perceived to be important for improved '*accountability*'.

4.1.2 Impact on leadership

Senior Leadership Teams

Overall, almost all of the Gaining Ground headteachers surveyed felt that the strategy had made a positive difference to school leadership at least 'to some extent'; almost half (46 per cent) felt this had been the case 'to a great extent' and a further 47 per cent 'to some extent'. A slightly higher proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers considered that their SLT's ability to track school performance had been enhanced 'to a great extent' (81 per cent compared with 76 per cent of comparison headteachers). Of the 18 LA staff interviewed, 13 felt that Gaining Ground had empowered headteachers to enact necessary changes to bring about school improvement, at least 'to some extent' (four of these said 'to a great extent').

Six said that the strategy had led to senior leadership capacity being increased to 'a great extent', and a further six said 'to some extent'.

The case studies showed that some Gaining Ground schools' SLTs had used consultants, mainly to work with them to review the school's aims and ambition. This process was welcomed by SLTs as exemplified by a chair of governors who observed that external consultants had helped to give the school a clearer strategic direction that had been cascaded down to all levels in the school.

Middle Managers/Heads of Department

As discussed in Chapter 2, high priority had been assigned to developing leadership capacity at the middle management level. Indeed, **a greater proportion of surveyed headteachers in Gaining Ground schools compared with those in comparison schools considered that middle leaders' performance in leading improvements in teaching had been enhanced 'to a great extent' over the past two years (41 per cent compared with 26 per cent respectively).**

A higher percentage of Gaining Ground than comparison headteachers responding to the survey 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the head of mathematics had become a more effective leader (72 per cent, as compared to 66 per cent of comparison headteachers). Eleven of the 18 LA staff felt that Gaining Ground had helped develop leadership capacity in the mathematics department to at least 'some extent' (of these, four said 'to a great extent'). There was no obvious difference in the proportions of Gaining Ground and comparison school headteachers 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that the head of English had become a more effective leader, although more than three-quarters (78 per cent) of both groups of schools felt this had been the case over the past two years. Of the 18 LA staff interviewed, most felt that Gaining Ground had helped leadership capacity being developed in the English department to at least 'some extent' (of these, five said 'to a great extent').

Leadership and management: what the case studies showed

As suggested by the survey findings, the case studies confirmed a particular impact of Gaining Ground on the involvement of middle managers (specifically heads of mathematics and English) in the overall leadership of schools. SLTs were working much more closely with middle managers in many case-study schools, and in some cases heads of department had been recruited onto SLTs. This was perceived to strengthen leadership overall and make it much more *'collegiate'*. Middle leaders had more *'ownership'* and *'autonomy'*. One senior leader said, for example, *'I think it's so powerful having both the heads of mathematics and English as part of the SLT of the school, because there's so much focus on the two subjects now. To have that bigger picture is incredibly useful'*. With this increased involvement of middle management came increased accountability.

Middle managers in some case-study schools had been coached by staff in partner schools, which had helped them to gain more skills and confidence in relation to leadership. They had exposure to new ideas, approaches and practices from partners and training received. Coaching had often focused on the use of data for monitoring pupil progress (see Section 4.1.1 above). There were also examples of improved coherence across middle leaders, with data sharing occurring across departments so that heads of departments could have a *'common language of learning'*. There had been changes to leadership personnel in some case-study schools, with some heads of department leaving and new leaders being recruited, or new leadership structures being implemented.

Overall, as one headteacher commented, *'middle managers feel more empowered now...they seem more in control'*. A senior leader reiterated this, saying, *'there is a lot more autonomy for heads of department now to make the changes they feel are needed'*.

The role of governors

It seems from the survey findings that the Gaining Ground Strategy has had a particular impact on the governing body's leadership. A higher percentage of Gaining Ground than comparison headteachers 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the governing body was now more engaged and better able to hold the SLT to account (80 per cent, as compared to 68 per cent of comparison headteachers).

Amongst SIPs surveyed, 69 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that Gaining Ground had contributed to the governing body being more engaged and better able to hold the SLT to account (only nine percent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'; others were neutral or could not comment). Of the 18 LA staff included, eight felt that Gaining Ground had 'to some extent' led to governing bodies functioning more efficiently, although only one said this was the case 'to a great extent' (in fact, seven said only to a small extent and one said this had not been the case at all).

Overall, headteachers surveyed in Gaining Ground and comparison schools held similar views on the extent to which they were supported and challenged by their school's governing body (see Table 4.2 below). A slightly greater proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers felt they were *challenged* by governors 'to a great extent' (51 per cent compared with 45 per cent of comparison headteachers).

Table 4.2 **Extent to which headteachers agree with leadership statements**

Extent of agreement with following statements:	HT Gaining Ground schools agreeing 'to a great extent'	HT Gaining Ground schools agreeing 'to some extent'	HT comparison schools agreeing 'to a great extent'	HT comparison schools agreeing 'to some extent'
	%	%	%	%
I am effectively <i>supported</i> by the school's governing body	64	32	65	32
I am effectively <i>challenged</i> by the school's governing body	51	42	45	50
	N=200	N=200	N=100	N=100

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Leadership of Governing Bodies: what the case studies showed

Similar to the survey findings, which showed that governors were more *engaged*, there was a general consensus across case-study schools that Gaining Ground had made governors more *aware* of the school's need to improve. Since Gaining Ground had begun, the governing body of some schools was receiving fuller reports with evidence of progress, made possible by the increased use of monitoring data (see Section 4.1.1 above). As discussed in Chapter 2, training had been provided for governors on how to interpret and use school and pupil performance data to support and challenge the SLT. Governors valued this training as illustrated by the case-study interviewee who said that the course she attended had developed her knowledge and helped her to understand where the school should focus resources. She reflected that, as a result, she was more challenging of the SLT and acted now more like a critical friend to the school's leadership.

However, this was perhaps the exception, as only in a minority of case-study schools were reports of governors (particularly the Chair) becoming more *challenging*, rather than just more aware and supportive (this reflects the survey findings that governors tended to be more *supportive* than *challenging*). One SIP commented, for example, '*they [governors] have become more challenging than before...in contrast to the former spoon-feeding style*'. As the evidence for this was limited, it suggests that there was more that governors could do to develop their 'challenge' role.

In some schools, governors had received RAISEonline (*Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation*) training, which had helped them to better *engage* with data and measures of progress, and to have a better understanding of questions raised by SLTs.

4.1.3 Impact on teaching and learning

Overall, 80 per cent of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools assigned high priority to reducing in-school variation in the quality of teaching and learning over the past two years (see Chapter 2). Indeed, **most of the Gaining Ground school headteachers surveyed (89 per cent) felt that the strategy had made a positive difference to teaching and learning**; two fifths of these (41 per cent) felt this had been the case 'to a great extent'.

Gaining Ground headteachers did not respond to survey questions about changes to teaching and learning over the past two years substantially more positively than comparison headteachers, although more than 90 per cent of respondents in both groups 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that: teaching was more engaging and effective; the quality of teaching had improved; ambitious target-setting for individual pupils had been enhanced; targeted support in mathematics and English had been enhanced; and interventions to assist pupils identified as under-achieving had been enhanced. Among SIPs, 89 per cent felt that the strategy had contributed to more engaging and effective teaching in Gaining Ground schools; 81 per cent felt there was more high quality teaching. The following quotes from case studies are given for illustration:

We got more involved so it was more fun, rather than just having to listen. If you have fun then you remember...

[Pupil]

Teaching in the department has gone from satisfactory to good and we want to be outstanding now.

[Senior leader]

The children know where they are on a progress scale and students can pick their own targets.

[Senior leader]

There was evidence of considerable enhancements in **personalised approaches to teaching and learning** across both groups of schools (with more than 90 per cent saying this was the case to 'some' or 'a great extent'), although a markedly higher percentage of comparison headteachers responded 'to a great extent' (55 per cent, as compared to 43 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers).

As shown in Chapter 2, only 13 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers had assigned high priority to improving **after school enrichment activities** in the past two years, although the proportion suggesting that school improvement work had enhanced study support out of hours to 'some' or 'a great extent' was much greater (79 per cent of Gaining Ground schools, although this was a similar proportion to the 82 per cent of comparison headteachers reporting this change, suggesting that the two groups of schools were reporting broadly similar levels of activity). While over half of SIPs (52 per cent) felt that Gaining Ground *had* contributed to an improved range of engaging activities being available out of school hours, they were not comparing to schools not involved in the strategy. Indeed, among pupils, a higher percentage of comparison pupils than Gaining Ground pupils 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the number of after school clubs/activities was increasing (65 per cent compared with 54 per cent respectively). There were examples from case studies of extra activities which took place as a result of the strategy, which are given in the box below, although similar activities may have taken place in comparison schools. As

discussed in Chapter 8 which explores value for money, there was little evidence of real difference in school improvement activity between Gaining Ground and comparison schools. More details of the use of Gaining Ground resources for study support are given in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5).

Out-of-hours clubs: what the case studies showed

A number of case-study schools had used Gaining Ground funding to run out-of-hours revision/study days or sessions, often held off-site (for example, at a partner school or local hotel). These were structured sessions, often targeted at particular groups, including C/D borderline pupils, or those expected to get A/A* grades. These acted as master classes for pupils to reinforce exam skills and provided the opportunity to review past exam papers. Some revision sessions were held at weekends or during the holidays and sometimes involved staff from partner schools. A pupil in one school talked about the experience of this type of session: *'We went through past papers...all the sessions were helpful. Some teachers use different techniques, so to get everyone's views helped. They made it fun with pizza and hot chocolate, so it was serious but it was relaxed'*.

Similarly, a senior leader commented that a mathematics revision day delivered at a partner school had *'broadened their [pupils'] horizons. They gave very positive feedback about it. I went with them...the activities were good, very well organised'*.

In one case-study school, targeted pupils had spent time out-of-hours with a learning mentor who had been appointed with Gaining Ground funding. One pupil involved said, *'any type of after-school class helps. If you really work hard in school and after class you might be able to exceed your target grade, so I definitely think it's a good idea'*.

Pupils' attitudes towards teaching and learning

Pupils' attitudes towards teaching and learning were similar across Gaining Ground and comparison schools, suggesting both groups of pupils were generally satisfied with their school experience and the quality of teaching. More than three-fifths of pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools said it was 'always' or 'mostly true' that: the teaching in school is good; teachers make it clear what they need to do in lessons; and that they are given work that stretches and challenges them. Pupils were least likely to think that teachers explain why they are teaching what they teach.

Pupils in Gaining Ground schools were no more likely than those in comparison schools to agree that learning in their school was getting better (42 per cent and 44 per cent). In fact, amongst Year 8 pupils, those in comparison schools were slightly more likely to 'strongly agree' that this was the case (13 per cent compared with seven per cent in Gaining Ground schools). Such a difference did not exist for Year 11 pupils.

Pupils who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that teaching was getting better were asked an open question about why this was the case. The main reason, mentioned by two fifths in Gaining Ground and comparison schools (42 and 44 per cent) was that teachers' approaches and techniques had changed. Around a third (32 and 33 per cent) felt that teachers' attitudes had changed. There was also evidence from the case studies that teaching was getting better in Gaining Ground schools, as explored below.

4.1.4 Impact on attainment and progression

Findings on the impact of Gaining Ground on attainment and progression based on the NPD analysis are presented in Chapter 7.

LA staff were asked the extent to which they thought Gaining Ground had had an impact on pupils' attainment and progression. More than two-thirds of the 18 respondents indicated that 'to some' or 'a great extent':

- greater progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 had been made by pupils generally (16 respondents, of which ten responded 'to some extent')
- attainment in English had increased (14 respondents, of which nine responded 'to some extent')
- attainment in mathematics had increased (14 respondents, of which eleven responded 'to some extent')

LA staff saw Gaining Ground as having had less of an impact (their responses primarily being to 'a small' or 'some extent') on:

- pupils consistently achieving their potential (15 respondents, of which four responded 'to a small extent')
- progress in closing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners (14 respondents, of which six responded 'to a small extent').

Evidence from the case studies can be found in the box below.

Teaching and learning: what the case studies showed

There was evidence of more engaging, high-quality and effective teaching in Gaining Ground case-study schools. As one assistant headteacher said, *'It has gone from a chalk and talk to a highly engaging environment'*. Staff in around a quarter of case-study schools made specific reference to changes in teaching approaches, using terms such as *'creative'*, *'innovative'*, *'independent learning'* and *'skill-based'* to describe their new practices. In some schools, new equipment and resources had helped this process, including use of digital cameras, whiteboards, visualisers and online resources such as *MyMathematics*.

The *quality* of teaching and learning had been a focus in some schools, with five case-study schools specifically reporting that teaching had improved from Ofsted's 'satisfactory' category to 'good' or 'outstanding'. As one senior leader said, *'teaching in the department has gone from satisfactory to good, and we want to be outstanding now'*. To support improvements in quality, interviewees spoke of observing colleagues internally as well as in partner schools. Comments included, *'teachers are told to learn from each other and they evaluate each other's performance'* and *'[observing in the partner school] really opened their [teachers] eyes'*.

An Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) was brought in to support one case-study school and the headteacher said, *'when the AST came in and took a lesson, the boys got up and clapped. It really helped the mathematics department, [their teaching became] unrecognisable'*. As one headteacher commented, *'you can't underestimate the impact of seeing and experiencing high quality teaching in the other [partner] school'*.

There were examples of case-study schools which had introduced more differentiation in their teaching, offering pupils a more individual approach with targets based on their needs. Better support strategies were in place, including one-to-one and small group work. Many case-study schools had focused their efforts on teaching and learning in mathematics and English. As one headteacher said, *'the culture in mathematics has changed significantly since implementing Gaining Ground. It now has a clear focus on achievement and individual focus on the specific needs of pupils'*.

As discussed above, the strategy had also helped to create new opportunities for learning outside of the classroom, such as revision classes and mentoring sessions. These classes helped reinforce exam skills, provided targeted support to small groups of learners, and helped broaden pupils' horizons.

Attainment and results: what the case studies showed

The case-study findings suggest that involvement in the Gaining Ground Strategy gave schools the space and time to think more creatively about how to increase attainment. As one headteacher said, '*Gaining Ground gave us the impetus to think differently*'.

Schools involved had often focused efforts on mathematics and/or English, and more than half specifically referred to improved mathematics GCSE results since the start of Gaining Ground, with slightly fewer also reporting improved results in English GCSE (this is not to say that others did not experience improvements, rather that they just did not report this specifically). For many schools, this had contributed to an increase in the proportion of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades (overall, and/or including mathematics and English). In fact, most schools referred to some sort of improvement in attainment, whether it was in the proportion achieving 5 A*-Cs overall, 5 A*-Cs including mathematics and English, or A* and A grades overall or in mathematics and/or English. Staff in at least four schools discussed improvements in value added scores. Comments included:

... certainly impacted on our levels of attainment, so in the last two years we've seen an increase in all measures and it's been particularly good to see mathematics and English now coming in around the 82 per cent-83 per cent 5 A-C mark – for mathematics that represents a really significant increase, partly inspired by Gaining Ground.* [Headteacher]

...definitely [made a difference]...my grade in mathematics, I was predicted a D and they moved me up a set and I got a B in the end, so it did definitely help...all the little things...the classes after school, getting you to do different stuff. [Pupil]

In some cases, those interviewed referred to an impact on attainment for specific groups, such as those eligible for free school meals, those with special educational needs (SEN), or gifted and talented (G&T) pupils. As one headteacher said, '*it has narrowed the gap with SEN students, so some are getting C grades now, instead of D/E*'. In at least two schools, pupils had been entered for mathematics and/or English GCSE early (for example, at the end of Year 10). In one school, if pupils achieved the grade they were hoping for (and for some this was a grade C) then they did not re-sit the examination in Year 11. Rather, they went on to do other mathematics/English qualifications at Level 3 to prepare them for A level, or do other GCSE subjects to broaden their range of opportunities.

Although Gaining Ground was not regarded as the *only* factor contributing to schools' improved results, it was thought to have played a considerable role. For example, the focus on teaching and learning, improved use of data to track pupil progress, and support from partner schools were all thought to play a part in improving results.

See Section 4.1.5 below for case-study examples of pupils' enhanced motivation to achieve.

4.1.5 Impact on school ethos and culture

As discussed in Chapter 2, a common expectation was that Gaining Ground would help schools to create a more positive ethos and culture. Impact related to ethos, in terms of behaviour and attendance, motivation to achieve, and schools as supportive environments, is discussed below.

Behaviour and attendance

Overall, there was no evidence from the surveys of a particular impact of Gaining Ground on pupil behaviour, as findings across Gaining Ground and comparison schools were similar. However, the teachers and pupils in Gaining Ground case-study schools appeared to be more cognisant of recent improvements in behaviour, with staff in around a third of case-study schools specifically referring to the positive impact of Gaining Ground on behaviour and exclusion rates. For example, changes in teaching and learning were thought to have engaged pupils, which, in turn, had improved behaviour. As one pupil commented, for instance, ‘there seems to be a lot less disrupting of lessons, and...if you look in detention, there used to be like loads of people in detention...now when you look in the hall there’s hardly anyone sitting there’.

Eleven LA staff felt that ‘to some extent’ pupils were more positive about school; one other said this was the case ‘to a great extent’. Similarly, ten felt that to some extent pupil attendance had improved; three said this was the case ‘to a great extent’. There were examples of case-study schools in which staff and pupils reported a specific impact on attendance.

Motivation to achieve

Almost all headteachers surveyed across Gaining Ground and comparison schools ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that over the past two years all pupils had become better encouraged to achieve their best (94 per cent overall, with no particular difference between the groups of schools).

Evidence from at least half of the case-study schools suggested that Gaining Ground had had a positive impact on pupils’ aspirations and motivations to achieve. As one pupil said, ‘now we come to school to learn stuff, whereas before it sometimes felt like you were just killing time’. One headteacher said, ‘pupils expect to achieve’. There were examples in case-study schools of pupils’ raised aspirations to attend ‘Oxbridge’ or other further/higher education institutions. In a number of case-study schools, it was perceived that staff and pupils had more focus on achievement. Comments included, ‘the staff’s attitudes are much better, we are more focused on what we have to do (as motivators)’. Celebration of success and rewards, such as retail vouchers, trips, pizza lunches and other treats for pupils who had worked hard had been used in some case-study schools.

Pupils' perspectives on their school ethos

The surveys of Year 8 and Year 11 students in Gaining Ground and comparison schools included questions which sought their views on school ethos. For example, pupils' feelings about, and pride in, their school and their sense of it changing and improving over the preceding two years were explored. The similarities and differences in the responses of pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools were explored.

Pupils in Gaining Ground schools were not markedly more positive about their schools than pupils in the comparison schools. Views were mostly very similar. For example, a similar percentage (less than or equal to five percentage points difference) of Gaining Ground and comparison pupils 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statements:

- I am proud of my school (45 per cent overall).
- Pupils care about each other (32 per cent overall).
- My school is becoming a more caring place (37 per cent overall).
- Overall, my school is getting better (47 per cent overall).

Pupils' perspectives on why school is improving

Pupils who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their school was, overall, getting better, were subsequently asked to explain why they thought this was happening in the form of an open-response question. There was a high degree of similarity in the responses of pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools. Pupils (some of whom gave multi-faceted explanations, which were coded in several ways) primarily gave explanations which could be categorised under four headings: resources and opportunities (33 per cent overall); the learning environment (27 per cent overall); pupils (including aspirations, attitudes, motivation, behaviour, efforts, attainment, and/or the composition of the pupil body; 25 per cent overall); and teachers and lessons (22 per cent overall).

4.2 Impact of Gaining Ground on pupils

Most Gaining Ground school headteachers surveyed felt Gaining Ground had had an impact on pupils (54 per cent said 'to some extent' while 38 per cent said 'to a great extent'). Only two per cent felt there had been no impact on pupils (the remaining eight per cent said there had been a 'small' amount of impact). Almost all headteachers felt that school improvement work over the last two years had enhanced or improved pupils' attitudes and outcomes in the ways listed in Table 4.3 below, at least 'to some extent'. There was little difference overall between headteachers of Gaining Ground or comparison schools. The main difference, although still fairly small, was in the proportion of headteachers reporting that school improvement work had had an impact on pupils' progression from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 'to a great extent' (40 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers compared with 32 per cent of comparison headteachers).

Table 4.3 Headteachers' views on impact of school improvement on pupils

Extent to which school improvement work over last two years has enhanced or improved pupils':	HT Gaining Ground schools agreeing 'to a great extent'	HT Gaining Ground schools agreeing 'to some extent'	HT comparison schools agreeing 'to a great extent'	HT comparison schools agreeing 'to some extent'
	%	%	%	%
Understanding of how to improve	51	46	47	50
Aspirations	46	48	51	46
Progress in English	45	49	41	48
Progress in mathematics	44	47	45	45
Progression from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4	40	56	32	63
Access to good and timely information, advice and guidance	38	47	41	49
Attendance	37	40	36	44
Satisfaction with school	37	54	32	63
Attitude towards learning	34	61	36	60
Motivation to work hard	30	64	26	69
	N=200	N=200	N=100	N=100

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Pupils' attitudes towards school and studying

The attitudes towards school and studying of pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools were broadly similar (often similarly positive). We created composites using factor analysis of pupil responses and undertook multi-level modelling of these (reported in detail in the technical appendices). This analysis also showed that there was no significant difference between Gaining Ground and comparison pupils in Years 8 or 11 regarding their attitudes towards school or studying overall.

This could suggest that pupils in Gaining Ground schools (identified as such for having pupils who were not progressing at their expected rate) have had a positive experience from the strategy, which has in turn helped to re-align their attitudes with pupils in other schools. It could, in contrast, suggest that the Gaining Ground Strategy did not necessarily result in impact over and above that noticed from other school improvement activities in comparison schools.

However, analysis of factor scores (controlling for all background characteristics) revealed that, across both types of school, Year 11 pupils had significantly more positive attitudes towards mathematics compared with pupils in Year 8 (they scored 0.29³ *higher* on the scale for 'positive attitude towards mathematics'). However, the model revealed that Gaining Ground pupils in Year 8 scored higher (0.38 higher) than Year 8 pupils in comparison schools. Regarding English, the opposite was found. Year 11 pupils overall scored significantly *lower* (0.66 lower) than Year 8 pupils for 'attitude towards English', and Year 8 pupils in Gaining Ground schools scored lower (0.30 lower) than Year 8 pupils in comparison schools.

Similar proportions of pupils in both groups also said that it was true that they enjoyed most of their subjects (61 per cent in Gaining Ground schools and 64 per cent in comparison schools) and that they got more sense of achievement from work than they used to (55 per cent and 56 per cent). Half of pupils in both groups were also in agreement that they felt more positive about studying than they used to. Similar proportions of pupils in both groups also 'agreed strongly' or 'agreed' that over the past two years they enjoyed studying more than they used to (41 per cent and 40 per cent).

Views on support from teachers

There were no notable differences in the views of pupils in both Gaining Ground and comparison schools on the extent to which they were being supported by teachers. More than three-fifths of pupils in Gaining Ground (63 per cent) and comparison schools (68 per cent) said their teachers tell them what they need to do to improve, 'at least most of the time' (most of those remaining said this happened 'sometimes').

Just over half of the pupils in both groups of schools (56 per cent in Gaining Ground and 58 per cent in comparison schools) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that teachers were doing more to help them improve. Just over half (57 per cent of pupils in both groups) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that teachers offered more support to help them improve.

However, the multi-level modelling analysis showed that Year 8 pupils in Gaining Ground schools were significantly more negative about teachers and lessons compared with Year 8 pupils in comparison schools (scoring 0.20 points lower on a scale of 'positive views' than Year 8 pupils in comparison schools).

Pupil progress and confidence

The multi-level modelling analysis showed that there was no significant difference between Gaining Ground and comparison pupils in Years 8 or 11 regarding their attitudes towards making progress.

³ Composites were scaled to range between zero and ten. This implies that for five-point scales, each unit increase in a factor score is equivalent to a pupil responding with the next most positive response for 40 per cent of the items making up that factor.

Similar proportions of pupils in both groups 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they were doing better at school over the past two years (65 per cent of Gaining Ground pupils and 66 per cent of the comparison group). However, Year 8 pupils in comparison schools were slightly more likely than pupils in Gaining Ground schools to think that they were doing better at school over the last two years (79 per cent and 70 per cent respectively); there was no such difference amongst the Year 11 pupils.

Amongst Gaining Ground case studies, there were examples in at least five schools of perceived improvements in pupil confidence and self esteem. As one pupil said, for example, '[I have more] *confidence. You feel a bit more independent...new experiences...it will help you*'. Similarly, a senior leader said, '*some students saw an immediate confidence boost as a result of Gaining Ground initiatives*'.

Pupils' plans following Year 11

Just over half of Year 11 pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools were planning to do AS/A levels following Year 11. Just over a quarter in both groups planned to do another type of post-16 course. A minority thought they would do an apprenticeship, other on-the-job training or get a paid job. Therefore, pupils in both groups had similar aspirations at the end of the Gaining Ground period.

Similar proportions of Year 11 pupils in Gaining Ground and comparison schools were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the opportunities that they had to discuss what they wanted to do after Year 11 (75 and 80 per cent respectively). Around two-fifths of Year 11 pupils (41 per cent in Gaining Ground schools and 43 per cent in comparison schools) said they had been encouraged to think about applying for university; 38 per cent in both groups said they had not been encouraged. Half of the Year 11 pupils in Gaining Ground schools felt it was 'very likely' or 'likely' that they would go to university (compared with 46 per cent in the comparison schools).

This chapter has presented evidence of the additional value of Gaining Ground. In particular, a considerable proportion of headteachers felt that only a small amount of activities would have taken place without the strategy, and that fewer pupils would have benefited. Regarding specific impacts, there was clear evidence of improved systems of monitoring, tracking and evaluating pupil progress, often facilitated by support from partner schools. There was also evidence of an impact on the leadership of middle management and of governors' engagement with SLTs, which was greater than that reported in comparison schools. In other areas, such as improvements in teaching and learning and school ethos, impact did not appear to be greater than in comparison schools according to survey findings. However, findings were similarly positive and Gaining Ground case studies provided positive illustrative examples of change across strategy schools. It did seem that comparison schools were reporting a greater increase in out-of-hours clubs and activities, although, again, Gaining Ground case studies offered some very positive examples of such practices.

In summary, the wide evidence base drawn on in this chapter, including surveys and case studies, provides a full picture of the impact of Gaining Ground, which helps to explain to some extent the disparity with the findings reported in Chapter 8, which, based on survey findings, suggests fewer additional outputs for Gaining Ground schools compared with the comparison group.

4.3 Impact of different strands

While Chapter 3 included a discussion on the *nature* of the support provided by each of the Gaining Ground strands, this chapter explores *impact* of the strands. The following section explores the views of headteachers, SIPs and LA staff in terms of *which* strands of the strategy they found most beneficial. It is followed by sections which amalgamate views on each of the strands.

4.3.1 Most beneficial Gaining Ground strands

Headteachers' views

As shown in Table 4.4, most of the strands were considered beneficial by the majority of headteachers. **Academic focussed study support** was most strongly endorsed (66 per cent of headteachers said this had benefited their school 'to a great extent'; a further 21 per cent responded 'to some extent'). Headteachers were also very positive about **school-to-school support** (with 87 per cent of headteachers indicating that their school benefited from this strand 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent') and the **four additional SIP days** (81 per cent).

Access to specialist support, such as additional AfL training, was also considered beneficial, although to a lesser degree (two-thirds of headteachers said that this aspect of the strategy benefited their school 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent'). Similarly, 61 per cent of headteachers indicated that **national events, conferences and training** were beneficial 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent'. However, almost one-fifth (19 per cent) felt that this strand did not benefit their school at all (although this could be because they had not attended, rather than having attended and not found such events as beneficial). As the table shows, 82 per cent of headteachers felt that funding for the Trust formation process had not benefited their school at all (most likely because this had not been relevant to them).

Table 4.4 Headteachers' views on the extent to which their school had benefited from specific strands of the Gaining Ground Strategy

Gaining Ground strand	To a great extent %	To some extent %	To a small extent %	Not at all %
Funding for academic focused study support (AFSS)	66	21	8	7
School-to-school support	46	41	11	3
Four additional SIP days	41	40	11	9
Access to specialist support	20	47	22	12
National events, conferences and training	18	44	20	19
Funding for Trust formation process	3	8	8	82
N=200				

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

In a follow-up question, headteachers were asked which strand of the strategy had had the greatest benefit for their school. Table 4.5 below shows that funding for Academic Focused Study Support (AFSS) was considered by headteachers to be the most beneficial strand overall (41 percent), followed by school-to-school support (40 per cent).

Table 4.5 Headteachers' views on which strand of the Gaining Ground Strategy had had the greatest benefit for their school

Gaining Ground strand	%
Funding for AFSS	41
School-to-school support	40
Four additional SIP days	10
Access to specialist support	4
Other	4
National events, conferences and training	3
Funding for Trust formation process	1
N=200	

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

View of SIPs and LA staff

As might be expected, SIPs were most likely to report that the four additional SIP days had *most* benefit, and this could be because they had most awareness of this strand; 66 per cent felt that their extra support had benefited schools 'to a great extent'; 31 per cent said this was the case 'to some extent'. Large proportions of SIPs also felt **school-to-school support** and **funding for AFSS** had benefited schools at least to some extent (85 and 79 per cent, respectively).

Interestingly, when asked to say overall which strands they felt had greatest benefit, similar proportions of SIPs referred to school-to-school support and the four additional SIP days (a third), followed by the funding for AFSS (a quarter). Although this seems to contradict the findings above slightly, it shows that SIPs were positive about all of these three strands. One SIP felt that none of the strands had provided any benefit.

LA staff held similar views and felt the additional SIP days, school-to-school support and funding for AFSS to be the most valuable strand for schools. One LA staff member indicated that none of the strands had been valuable in driving improvements.

In identifying the strand of the strategy that they thought was most valuable, headteachers and SIPs were asked to explain their reasoning. Their responses are explored in the next section.

4.3.2 Views on the additional funding for study support

Sections 3.5 and 4.1.3 outline the *nature* of the study support provided via Gaining Ground. Headteachers gave the following reasons for identifying this strand as most beneficial:

- the additional funding for study support enabled the school to **develop capacity and provision** which could not otherwise have been attempted, i.e. '*things we wouldn't have been able to do with our normal budget*'. For example, as one headteacher explained, it '*gave us the confidence to appoint new staff*'. Such staff included additional teachers (so that class sizes could be reduced), learning coaches, learning mentors, and higher level teaching assistants (delivering additional, off-timetable support). One headteacher emphasised the fact that these people could be given '*a single item agenda*', such as raising the achievement of specific groups, sometimes in specific areas of the curriculum
- the funding allowed for **creativity and experimentation**, and the **recognition and reward of staff** contributions, which '*motivates staff more*'. Headteachers commented that '*it allowed us to be more creative in how we organised things, especially with our challenging year 11 group*' and '*[it] enabled us to try things, to see whether they worked without worrying*'
- the funds for additional study support **encouraged targeting and allowed intensive intervention** – '*highly focused packages of support*', sometimes delivered on a one-to-one basis – with groups of students that would otherwise have continued to under-achieve, so the '*funds went on making a difference to the students*'

- **results were immediate and measurable:** *'results in English and Mathematics are very positive', 'results have gone through the roof', 'we've been able to track directly the impact on youngsters' progress', '[there's] a definite data link'.*

SIPs seeing the **funding for AFSS** as of particular benefit to the Gaining Ground school they worked with offered the following explanations:

- it enabled **intensive support to be targeted at specific under-performing groups** that would not otherwise have been available (e.g. SEN, G&T)
- it had been **welcomed by pupils**, who had *'given very positive feedback'*
- it had been of *'the greatest immediate effect'* (as headteachers had expressed), providing some *'quick wins'*, e.g. having a measurable impact on schools' results. One SIP commented that the benefits of the school-to-school partnership might in time be equivalent, but would take longer to become apparent.

4.3.3 Views on school-to-school support

Section 3.2 in Chapter 3 outlines the nature of the **school-to-school support** provided via Gaining Ground. The surveyed headteachers who identified this strand of the strategy as most beneficial drew attention to the following:

- the **exposure to new ideas and approaches** (*'different perspectives and angles', 'fresh ideas to draw on'*) through professional dialogue, joint planning with peers (*'teachers can learn from each other'*), observation and visits (*'so they could feel and touch what it was like to be in an outstanding school ... seeing the best and bringing it back', 'departmental swaps ... led to an exponential improvement'*)
- **the chance to learn from another school's experiences**, including their mistakes, and thereby accelerate improvement (*'enabling us to shortcut the learning process', 'most effective systems and structures from the partner school have been transferred'*)
- the value of a **mentoring** type relationship offering encouragement, validation and checks/supportive challenge (*'a relationship of honesty and trust'*).

Many of the headteachers who were surveyed thought or hoped that the school-to-school relationship would be sustained in some form, even though the funding to support it had come to an end.

Amongst SIPs surveyed, those who perceived the **school-to-school support** as of greatest benefit remarked on:

- the **calibre or particular expertise of the partner school** (*'one of the 100 most improved', 'judged as Outstanding by Ofsted', 'Mathematics is a specialism'*)
- **the value of a new perspective** (also mentioned by headteachers) or – where the partnership had led to collaboration beyond the designated partner school – new perspectives. As one SIP commented, *'it makes people get out of their own*

environment and possibly start questioning their methods, seeing if they can be improved'

- the **mutually beneficial relationship** which had developed in many instances (similarly, headteachers mentioned relationships built on trust). This was seen firstly as having a positive impact on confidence in the supported school (*'it raised morale ... because teachers felt that they could offer support as well as receive it'*) and secondly, as increasing the likelihood of the partnership extending beyond the duration of Gaining Ground (*'they both learn from each other and form bonds that will continue'*). There was evidence from case-study schools of the impact of participation on partner schools. Comments from partner schools included, *'the best CPD is helping other schools'*, and *'it empowers not only the receiving school, but when you've got your own people doing training and supporting fellow professionals it is empowering for them as well'*.

Several SIPs emphasised that the benefits of the school-to-school support they had observed were contingent on careful matching of schools and the development of a rapport between headteachers and other senior leaders.

School-to-school support: what the case studies showed

Staff and governors in Gaining Ground schools said that partnership working had given them valuable access to good practice and they appreciated having the opportunity to discuss ways of improving performance with teachers from partner schools. They felt that this helped them to review practice in their school and identify strengths as well as areas for development. The following comments from headteachers highlight the dividends gained from partnership working:

I think school improvement works when you work closely with other schools. It doesn't work if someone comes in with a big stick and starts beating you. It works when you link up with a school that allows you to explore your need with them, not just at the headteacher level, but also in the subject teacher level that may be necessary. I do believe very much in school-to-school improvement, I think it's very successful.

The opportunity to go there [to the partner school] and watch somebody else teach...that is a real value, being able to see other people, because you rarely get the opportunity to go out of school to watch somebody else teach. [Head of department]

It focuses your thinking in a different direction because you see how somebody else does something...what we were seeing was an 'outstanding' department.

The Gaining Ground partner school headteachers also noted that partnership working was useful to their school because it gave their staff the experience of coaching teachers in Gaining Ground schools where they could see and learn from other practice. This two-way benefit is one of the characteristics of effective school-to-school partnerships outlined below.

4.3.2 Views on the additional SIP days

Section 3.3 in Chapter 3 outlined the role of the SIP; headteachers responding to the survey who identified the **additional SIP days** as the most beneficial strand drew attention to:

- the value of an **independent perspective** ('basically to have an independent viewpoint', 'a wonderful, critical friend ... [who] has conducted objective assessment of our progress')
- the scope provided by the additional days for the **SIP to get to know and become known by the wider school community**, not just the headteacher ('[she] has been able to work in the classroom with middle and senior leadership', 'he was an external person that nobody knew about before, now everyone knows who he is')
- the scope provided for the **SIP to give more bespoke support**, and for the SIP and the school to work together in a more collaborative way ('setting ... targets that are personal to our school' 'not just looking at data, we used [the days] to look at middle leaders, do lesson observation and have a monitoring schedule').

Amongst SIPs surveyed, those identifying the **four additional SIP days per year** as the element of greatest benefit drew attention to:

- the additional support and challenge that Gaining Ground enabled them to provide, often characterised by a **closer engagement** with the school and **deeper involvement** in monitoring and evaluation
- their role in **maintaining focus**, direction and the 'pace of improvement'. One SIP remarked that it 'prevented them from going off track, and kept their eye on the ball'
- the **work they were able to do with stakeholders other than the headteacher** – for example, subject leaders, wider staff and school governors ('I worked directly with staff on developing improvement strategies, and with governors on interpreting data')
- their capacity to **broker additional support**, where needed.

SIPs responding to the survey were asked about their level of agreement with a series of statements about their experiences of working on the Gaining Ground Strategy. As shown in Table 4.6, the majority of SIPs responded positively about their experiences of working on Gaining Ground. The statement that SIPs most commonly 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with related to their ability to **establish trust and a strong working relationship** with the senior management team of their Gaining Ground school (94 per cent). This was closely followed by their ability to **influence the school** (92 per cent). About three-quarters of the SIPs surveyed (74 per cent) either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were able to put together a **holistic or integrated support package** that was tailored to the needs of the school. A similar proportion (71 per cent) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were able to **broker the best support** for their school. The area that elicited the most disagreement related to **training and support**. Specifically, 19 per cent of SIPs did not feel that they were adequately supported and trained to carry out their role in Gaining Ground.

Table 4.6 SIPs' experiences of working on Gaining Ground

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	%	%	%	%	%
I was able to establish trust and a strong working relationship with the Gaining Ground school senior leadership team	60	34	5	2	0
I was able to influence the school	44	48	5	2	1
I received sufficient support and training to enable me to undertake my role for Gaining Ground	27	39	14	16	3
I was able to put together a holistic/integrated package of support that is tailored to the development needs of the school	26	48	16	8	2
I was able to broker the best support for my Gaining Ground school	23	48	17	8	4
N=104					

Source: NFER CATI survey of SIPs, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Most LA staff felt the SIPs had at least 'to some extent' enhanced the capabilities of senior leaders, developed the skills of leaders to analyse pupil data effectively, and supported governors to more effectively support and challenge leaders.

SIP support: what the case studies showed

Gaining Ground school headteachers appreciated the independent advice provided by SIPs which helped them to develop a strategic approach to school improvement. The case studies ascertained that the support from SIPs was well received by headteachers and governors who appreciated SIPs' advice and suggestions for improving teacher and pupil performance. Comments from headteachers illustrate how valuable SIP support could be:

I would have been absolutely dead without the help of the SIP. He was so skilled and experienced. It doesn't matter what the situation, he would always come up with some useful advice or pearl of wisdom. I think you have to have a very skilled SIP to get the level of support, but he provided me with a lot of support and challenge. [Headteacher]

If the strategy hadn't given us the free SIP time I probably wouldn't have bought it in and it [the impact of the strategy] would have probably been weaker as a result. [Headteacher]

I think having somebody like the SIP to broker the arrangement [with the partner school] is important...it's somebody who is there formally requiring you to meet from time to time. [Headteacher]

Governors in the case-study schools also valued support from SIPs, which included them running sessions for school governing bodies on the use and interpretation of performance data, as this interviewee reported:

The SIP has been really good. He has really done a lot to raise the game and to raise the expectations of the SLT. [Headteacher]

Elsewhere, a chair of governors explained that the school 'was in a different world' now in terms of use of data compared to two years previously, resulting in leaders having a better grasp of how their pupils were performing.

One SIP summed up the impact of Gaining Ground for them:

It's been the additionality of time for me...it's time to support the new head...it's been invaluable. [SIP]

5. Legacy of the strategy

Key findings

- The vast majority of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools reported that they had established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in English and mathematics, and most of the LA staff surveyed agreed. However, the headteachers in comparison schools reported they were doing just as much in this regard.
- A slightly greater proportion of headteachers in the Gaining Ground sample reported that their schools were making good and sustainable progress in closing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners compared to those in the comparison group of schools.
- The majority of SIPs reported that the strategy had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement going forward in a number of other areas, including putting in place a whole-school approach to improvement. Most also reported that they thought their schools were likely to receive improved Ofsted ratings as a result of the strategy, although a notable minority (about one in ten) disagreed.
- Most of the LA staff responding to the online survey reported that the strategy would have a lasting benefit for schools. This appeared to include some form of continuing school-to-school partnership work, although their responses suggested that most thought this would continue at a reduced pace or intensity.

This chapter explores research participants' views on the legacy of the Gaining Ground Strategy, including the sustainability of schools' improvement work over the last two years, and the activities Gaining Ground schools plan to continue with now the strategy has come to an end. It also explores research participants' views on the scope to adapt elements of the strategy to the new school improvement environment.

5.1 Sustainability of activities

The views of headteachers

The headteachers of the Gaining Ground and comparison schools were asked to what extent they agreed that their school improvement work had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement in three areas⁴. First, they were asked to what extent they had established **strategies and systems for improvement in progression rates in English**. Almost all of the headteachers surveyed 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they had established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates in English, with a slightly higher proportion of those in Gaining Ground schools 'strongly agreeing' (70 per cent compared to 66 per cent in comparison schools).

⁴ As reported earlier, comparison headteacher responses were weighted based on their schools' characteristics to ensure comparability with the Gaining Ground responses. More details of this weighting are provided in the technical appendices. Note also that it is not appropriate to conduct standard statistical significance tests on weighted data, and so these are not reported.

Second, they were asked to what extent they had established **strategies and systems for improvement in progression rates in mathematics**. Again, there were no notable differences in the responses of headteachers from Gaining Ground and comparison schools, with the vast majority of those surveyed ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that they had established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates in mathematics. This time, a slightly smaller proportion of headteachers from Gaining Ground schools ‘strongly agreed’ compared to those in comparison schools (54 per cent and 62 per cent respectively).

Third, they were asked to what extent they were making good and sustainable progress in **closing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners**. A slightly greater proportion of headteachers in the Gaining Ground sample ‘strongly agreed’ that their schools were making good and sustainable progress in closing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners compared to those in the comparison group of schools (40 per cent and 36 per cent respectively).

The views of SIPs

SIPs were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements designed to explore whether participating in Gaining Ground had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement going forward (see Table 5.1 below).

Table 5.1 SIPs’ views on the extent to which Gaining Ground had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement going forward

Response	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Don’t know %
a) has established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates in English	1	8	8	47	36	1
b) has established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates in mathematics	1	6	6	52	34	2
c) has established strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates generally	0	5	5	62	29	0
d) is likely to receive improved Ofsted ratings	3	8	14	39	37	1
e) is making good and sustainable progress in narrowing the gap in attainment between different groups of learners	0	5	14	58	23	1
f) has put in place a whole school approach to improvement rather than targeting pupils in Years 10 and 11	1	10	12	49	26	3

Source: NFER CATI survey of SIPs, 2011

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100
N=104

As shown in Table 5.1:

- overall, the majority of SIPs reported that the strategy had equipped their schools to make sustained improvement going forward in all of the areas listed above
- the area where SIPs most frequently ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that Gaining Ground had equipped schools to make sustained improvement was in establishing strategies and systems for sustained and continuous improvement in progression rates generally (91 per cent). It is notable, however, that SIPs were more cautious in their estimates of the impact of the strategy in these areas than the headteachers of Gaining Ground schools
- the areas where SIPs most frequently ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ were in helping schools to put in place a whole school approach to improvement and that schools were likely to receive improved Ofsted ratings as a result of their involvement in the strategy (11 per cent respectively). However, in both cases about three quarters of SIPs reported that the strategy had made a difference in these areas.

The views of LA staff

LA staff responding to the online survey were asked whether they expected any improvements associated with Gaining Ground to be sustained by participating schools. The majority (17 of the 18 who responded) said they thought they would, with 12 answering with a firm ‘yes’, and 15 reporting ‘yes, to a degree’. Although the survey did not explore which improvements they were referring to when answering, a follow-up question asked whether LA staff thought the school-to-school partnerships would be sustained. Three staff responded with a firm ‘yes’, and 11 reported ‘yes, to a degree’. The responses suggest that while most LA staff thought the strategy would have a lasting benefit for schools, including some form of continuing school-to-school partnership work, the latter was likely continue at a reduced pace or intensity.

Sustainability of activities: what the case studies showed

In order to provide further detail about research participants' views on the legacy of the strategy, the case-study interviews followed up the issue with headteachers, SIPs and middle leaders.

Most schools agreed that, with sufficient funding in place, the impacts would be sustainable. Interviewees identified a number of legacies, including:

- a new culture of achievement, where pupils and staff were proud of their school
- a more outward looking culture, with a greater willingness to work with other schools
- a continuous drive to improve, including by sharing practice within and outside the school.

In addition to a legacy of cultural change, some schools had planned specific follow-on activities to drive forward school improvement by:

- refining grading systems to raise attainment
- targeting young people for 'assertiveness training'
- embedding AfL practices
- transferring good practice developed in mathematics and/or English to other subject areas
- improving opportunities for G&T pupils and/or boosting the number of HE admissions
- continuing to work with partner schools and outside consultants
- running residential study camps.

In addition, many schools pointed to the changes they had made to the way they managed and used pupil performance/tracking data as one of the lasting impacts of the strategy. For example, a governor said the strategy had 'raised the game' in terms of the use of data, while a middle leader explained: 'We now know that we need to track these kids to a much finer degree and react appropriately when we see something happen...that's becoming common practice now'.

A small number of interviewees suggested that the strategy was geared more towards short-term gains as opposed to longer-term improvements, owing to the fact that most of the funding was expected to be spent on study support. However, there appeared to be widespread recognition that broader changes were required for schools to kick-start lasting improvement, as one SIP explained: 'Smart headteachers recognise that in order to ensure lasting legacy they had to change the whole school, not just target Year 11s'.

A shortage of financial resources and staff time were cited as the main barriers to sustainability. However, most schools were optimistic that they would be able to find the resources necessary to continue those activities they considered to be making the most difference. Typically these activities appeared to be some kind of additional study support targeted at particular groups of learners.

One SIP queried whether any lasting legacy might be compromised by the decreased likelihood of continued LA involvement due 'to the necessary introduction of chargeable services'. This, he thought, would have an impact, particularly on 'lower performing schools that need external support to improve'.

Yet, many interviewees spoke of the strategy leaving 'a legacy of ambition', as one head explained: 'We used to think there was a ceiling, now we think we can keep improving'.

5.2 Lessons learned for new school improvement environment

Case-study interviewees were asked if, in the context of the new school improvement environment, there was any learning to be had from the Gaining Ground Strategy. Several schools thought they could continue to apply and build upon the experience gained from the school-to-school support strand. For some schools there was an immediate application for this knowledge for, since the start of the strategy, five of the 22 case-study schools had become part of a chain of Academy schools, while another school had joined a federation. Many felt they had valuable knowledge to share with their new partnerships based on their experience of partnering with other schools through the strategy (e.g. see Chapter 3 for schools' perspectives on the characteristics of an effective partnership). Outside of these more formalised school-to-school working relationships, opinions differed as to the extent to which case-study schools would continue to work with other schools. For example, one SIP argued that, without some form of external stimulus, many schools would be 'too busy' to manage a partnership:

The potential for school-to-school partnership is significant but the mechanisms of it working effectively are difficult. The reality is that left to their own devices schools are too busy to make sure enough partnership working happens.

However, the headteacher of a school (that was not part of a school chain) said she thought that working with other schools would become a more integral part of the new school improvement environment: 'School-to-school support is much important now...it's mutually beneficial, so it's the way we work. It's the future – a by schools for schools strategy'.

One headteacher viewed academisation and partnership working as two separate routes to improvement: 'There's a lot that can be achieved with partnership, I'd see it as an alternative route to improvement for some schools rather than taking on Academy status'. However, given that five of the case-study schools had joined Academy chains, other headteachers obviously felt that combining both approaches was beneficial.

There was widespread agreement that a continued focus on tracking pupil performance would continue to be relevant in the new school improvement environment, and perhaps more so given the anticipated decline in LA monitoring and support. One head remarked that while data tracking was not 'rocket science', 'without monitoring the intervention will always need to be bigger and more expensive'. Most, if not all of the case-study schools had reformed their data collection systems and processes to make data more available and accessible to a wider range of staff. This allowed staff to spend more time acting on the information collected rather than spending time trying to compile it and make sense of it, as a subject leader in one school explained:

I'm looking...at online tools that are going to allow us to identify underperformance at any point in the year...so we can have it all in one place...that's going to leave a bit more capacity to look for further intervention opportunities.

Given the central role played by many LAs as part of Gaining Ground (in providing support and services to schools), some interviewees speculated about the knock-on effects of the decline of LAs in the new school improvement environment. On the one-hand, there appeared to be some agreement that this would lead to a loss of 'valuable local knowledge and data' and that in the future this would make it difficult for central government to identify schools that needed to improve, and for schools to identify other schools to partner with. Yet, on the other hand, the Government's perceived move to a policy of localism - where in principle schools have the resources to acquire the support most suitable to their needs – appeared to be popular. Indeed, for many schools one of the appealing aspects of the strategy was that it has kick-started a strategy of 'self help', and from that perspective, Gaining Ground was viewed by most schools as a useful model for improvement.

6. Issues and challenges

Key findings

- The 'coasting' schools deficit label used in the early days of Gaining Ground was generally regarded as misapplied and unhelpful.
- Some headteachers were dissatisfied with the process of matching them to partner schools and others perceived the links to be too casual or lacking in support.
- Geography was also mentioned as a barrier to school-to-school partnerships, with schools needing to be within a reasonable travelling distance of one another for shared learning to take place.
- Resources to implement the ideas coming out of relationships with the SIPs and partner school were also described as pivotal, and for some headteachers, the continuation of some aspects of the strategy, such as study support, appeared to be contingent on identifying alternative sources of income.
- There was also a perception amongst some headteachers that some partner schools did not deliver adequate support, and a view that monitoring and evaluation arrangements could have been more rigorous.

This chapter explores interviewees' views on the issues or challenges associated with the strategy.

6.1 Issues and challenges

LA staff responding to the online survey were asked an open-ended question with regard to the negative impacts, if any, they thought Gaining Ground had had on participating schools in their area. Of the 14 respondents giving an answer to this question, half said they did not think there had been any negative effects. Where negative impacts were identified, these related to: 'stigma', potentially arising from schools' association with this initiative and the original label 'coasting schools'; the absorption of time; and the development of a dependent relationship (i.e. the supported school becoming over-reliant on the perceived expertise of their partner).

A minority of headteachers responding to the telephone survey identified what they perceived to be issues or challenge with the strategy. Some questioned the 'focus on the headteacher', problems with documentation ('the on-line evaluation documents were dreadful'), a perceived mismatch with the school's needs ('our key priority is the sixth form', 'I don't think it's a fault of the strategy, just that it didn't apply very well to the context of this school') and/or difficulties with the school-to-school partnership ('we had to broker our own').

Headteachers' comments suggest that, when the strategy operated as it should, its strengths were in the relationships to which schools gained access, and the ideas that came out of these. This was primarily relationships with SIPs and partner schools, both of which had provided a source of support, information and challenge

for many headteachers. However, some of the comments made by headteachers suggested that these were not equally fruitful for all schools. For some headteachers the relationship with the SIP was a difficult one and/or their role 'wasn't very clear'. For others, the relationship with the partner school had proved a disappointment. Headteachers emphasised that such a relationship could be a 'tremendous' asset, but was contingent on careful matching. Some considered the strategy of linking high achieving and 'weaker' schools as 'too simplistic', and argued that context and philosophy needed to be taken into account more fully. Others questioned the rather 'casual' structure of the partnerships, suggesting that in some instances partner schools had benefited financially while providing little support ('not seen value for money from the partner school'). Geography was also mentioned as a barrier to shared learning ('the school was too far away, so it was difficult to develop links'). Resources to implement the ideas coming out of relationships with the SIPs and partner school were also described as pivotal ('a relatively small amount of funding properly targeted has made a huge difference').

Several headteachers reported seeing their schools make measurable progress in terms of pupil achievement ('exam results have gone from 36 to 55 per cent for 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE') and Ofsted performance ('we've hit targets...we were in special measures', 'moved from barely satisfactory to good with outstanding features'). Though for many, the continuation of some aspects of the strategy, such as study support, appeared to be contingent on identifying alternative sources of income, several headteachers portrayed their schools as being on an upward trajectory, with the strategy having been instrumental in this. For example, one headteacher commented: 'I would like to applaud the people who devised [Gaining Ground], it has been successful here ... we have sustainable improvement underway'.

Issues and challenges: what the case studies showed

Like the majority of those responding to the surveys, most of the case-study interviewees thought the strategy was generally well conceived and implemented. However, a number of issues or challenges with the strategy were identified. This included widespread criticism of the term 'coasting' used early on in the strategy; the perception that some partner schools did not deliver adequate support; and a view that monitoring and evaluation arrangements could have been more rigorous.

Criticisms were also made around the use of the term 'coasting', particularly in the early days of Gaining Ground. At least ten of the case-study schools found the term derogatory and unhelpful, although there was widespread recognition that staff could not afford to become complacent, as one subject leader explained: 'People realised it was not acceptable to make excuses for poor results and that they needed to push their students from the start'.

The case studies revealed some minor challenges with school-to-school support. For example, one Gaining Ground school's first partner school had a change in headteacher and was paired with another school which 'refused access and the relationship was abandoned'. In another school, the headteacher admitted going through 'a very tumultuous time' and thus 'didn't spend enough time developing the relationship [with the partner school] to determine whether or not it was a quality relationship'. Distance was an issue for another partnership: 'It was difficult to form a strong working relationship with the partner school as it was over a 40 minute drive away and was a very different type of school'. However, others were positive about being paired with a different type of school. As one headteacher commented:

One of the interesting things about the partnership is that we're very different schools. It's great for both sets of staff to get into a very different setting...we're learning from each other.

While the school-to-school partnership strand was deliberately designed to be flexible and the monitoring arrangements light-touch, some interviewees felt that that this area of the strategy could have been 'tightened up'. For example, one SIP reported that 'some of the partner schools received money for essentially very little effort', and that there was 'minimal accountability and pressure to deliver'. On a related point, one partner school headteacher said he would have benefited from having 'some written terms of reference' detailing his responsibilities across the partnership. As a result of the absence of such a document, he felt he did not know the full extent of his remit/responsibility, although the same interviewee thought that overall the partnership worked well.

While the strategy was deliberately light-touch in terms of the level of monitoring and evaluation data participating schools were required to collect, there was a view, expressed by a minority, that the rigour of this data could have been improved. Several headteachers, and particularly those who had experience of the National Challenge strategy, felt that the accountability agenda for the strategy was very weak. For example one headteacher said: 'The reporting back was virtually non-existent and the monitoring and evaluation of the strategy was weak to say the least'. One of the effects of this was that many schools were unable to quantify how much of an impact the strategy had had, or to say what level of improvement would have been made in the absence of Gaining Ground. This made it difficult for schools to ascertain 'what works', and to know which activities were worth continuing to invest in. Another view, expressed by a small number of SIPs and headteachers, was that calling schools to account on a regular basis could have helped further strengthen and/or accelerate the rate of improvement.

7. NPD modelling

Key findings

- Analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) revealed that Gaining Ground consistently had a positive effect on pupil attainment and attendance. Specifically, we found that over the course of the strategy, compared to similar pupils at a comparison school, a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school:
 - made an additional 0.22 levels of progress in English and mathematics
 - was 13 percentage points more likely to achieve five GCSEs graded A*-C including mathematics and English
 - achieved an additional 21 points at Key Stage 4
 - experienced a reduction of 0.7 percentage points in the total number of lessons missed
 - experienced a reduction of 0.19 percentage points in the total number of lessons missed due to unauthorised absence.

This chapter presents the findings from an analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD). The NPD contains pupil-level data for the whole of England, and includes a wide range of outcomes and background characteristics. Through statistical modelling we explored the complex relationships between these variables and the impact of Gaining Ground on attendance and attainment outcomes.

7.1 Methodology

In addition to exploring the **perceived impacts** of the strategy, collected through the surveys and case-study visits, we explored the **measured impacts** collected through an analysis of the NPD data. Our analysis considered four years worth of data for Gaining Ground and comparison schools, covering the academic years 2007/08 – 2010/11 (from before the strategy began through to its final year). By taking into account a range of pupil and school characteristics, our objective was to identify whether pupil outcomes at Gaining Ground schools showed greater improvement than for similar pupils at similar comparison schools.

In order to achieve this, we used Multilevel Modelling (MLM). MLM is a development of linear regression analysis which explores the relationship between a variable of interest (such as pupil attainment) and a range of related measures (such as gender, eligibility for free school meals, etc.) MLM is also able to take account of data which is grouped into similar clusters at different levels, such as individual pupils grouped within schools, or outcomes measured at multiple time points (such as school performance). Incorporating this hierarchical structure into the analysis improves the accuracy of the findings, and avoids drawing false or misleading conclusions from the data.

We focussed on five main outcomes – three related to pupil attainment and two related to their attendance:

- progress in English and mathematics
- achieving five good GCSEs
- overall Key Stage 4 attainment
- total absence
- unauthorised absence.

Across the four academic years considered, we analysed data for eight cohorts of pupils in total. This is illustrated in the figures below. For the attainment modelling we considered Key Stage 4 outcomes for four successive cohorts of Year 11s, as illustrated in Figure 7.1. However for attendance modelling we considered data for Years 7-11, enabling us to explore attendance for successive cohorts of each year group (Figure 7.2) and to also track individual pupil's attendance through the school (Figure 7.3). In each case our models sought to identify a step change improvement at Gaining Ground schools in the period after the strategy was introduced, i.e. a significant difference between Gaining Ground schools and comparison schools that was not present before the strategy commenced.

Figure 7.1 Attainment modelling

Cohort	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
C1	Y11			
C2	Y10	Y11		
C3	Y9	Y10	Y11	
C4	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
C5	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10
C6		Y7	Y8	Y9
C7			Y7	Y8
C8				Y7

Gaining Ground start

Figure 7.2 Attendance modelling (comparing successive cohorts)

Cohort	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
C1	Y11			
C2	Y10	Y11		
C3	Y9	Y10	Y11	
C4	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
C5	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10
C6		Y7	Y8	Y9
C7			Y7	Y8
C8				Y7

Gaining Ground start

Figure 7.3 Attendance modelling (tracking pupils through school)

Cohort	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
C1	Y11			
C2	Y10	Y11		
C3	Y9	Y10	Y11	
C4	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
C5	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10
C6		Y7	Y8	Y9
C7			Y7	Y8
C8				Y7

Gaining Ground start

We explored firstly whether, overall, outcomes were better at Gaining Ground schools relative to comparison schools (taking into account their characteristics and starting point prior to the strategy). We also explored the interaction between variables, particularly the 'Gaining Ground' variable and school or pupil characteristics such as eligibility for free school meals. This allowed us to test whether Gaining Ground had more or less of an impact for particular types of pupil or school. In the sections that follow, we therefore report overall impact for a base case or 'typical pupil'⁵, and then report where a significantly different impact was observed for particular pupil or school groups.

It is important to note the limitations of our approach. Whilst the data for analysis was based on outcomes for individual pupils, data was not available on whether particular pupil groups or individuals were targeted by Gaining Ground schools. As a result, our analysis considers the average impact per pupil across all Gaining Ground schools, and is not able to determine whether particular types of approaches adopted by Gaining Ground schools were more effective than others. Whilst we did collect some information on approaches through the surveys, this was not available for a sufficient number of schools.

Some care is also necessary in attributing a causal interpretation to our findings. Unless schools are randomly assigned to a 'treatment' group (those involved in the strategy) and to a 'control' group (those not involved) as would be the case in a randomised control trial (RCT), it remains possible that pre-existing differences between the two groups of schools are responsible for some or all of the effects observed. There are several ways in which this issue could have arisen in our evaluation of Gaining Ground:

- Gaining Ground schools were selected by LAs based on a wide range of characteristics, many for which we did not have data available (such as levels of parental support). It is therefore possible that our comparison group of schools differed from Gaining Ground schools in some important respects. The evaluation commenced after the strategy, and so it was not possible to collect any 'pre-strategy' data to test for such differences.
- School results will inevitably vary year on year, and some of this variation will be 'random' i.e. it is due to a large range of factors not captured by the data and not related to the school's underlying performance. For example, it may be due to the particular mix of pupils who happen to be in a given year group, one-off sickness by a subject teacher in the run-up to exams, or pupils being 'lucky' in the exam questions which come up. Because of the random nature of these events, schools that perform less well in one year are likely to do better in the following year (all else being equal). By focussing on those schools performing less well than expected, even in the absence of an intervention you would therefore expect them to 'bounce back' in subsequent years to some extent. This effect is known as 'regression to the mean'.

⁵ Defined as a boy, not eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), without Special Educational Needs (SEN), who is not classified as 'Gifted & Talented' (G&T) and who has average Key Stage 2 results and levels of deprivation.

- It is furthermore possible that LAs selected schools for the strategy which they perceived had a particular capacity to improve. For example, this could have been schools with headteachers that showed particular willingness to participate.

Nevertheless, through the use of a carefully selected comparison group; by comparing outcomes over multiple years; and having controlled for a wide range of school and pupil-level characteristics, our approach provides a highly rigorous assessment of impact. Even if some of the observed impact can be explained by the pre-existing differences described, it would seem unlikely that these are solely responsible given the magnitude of the effect and the consistency with which it is observed across the five outcomes considered.

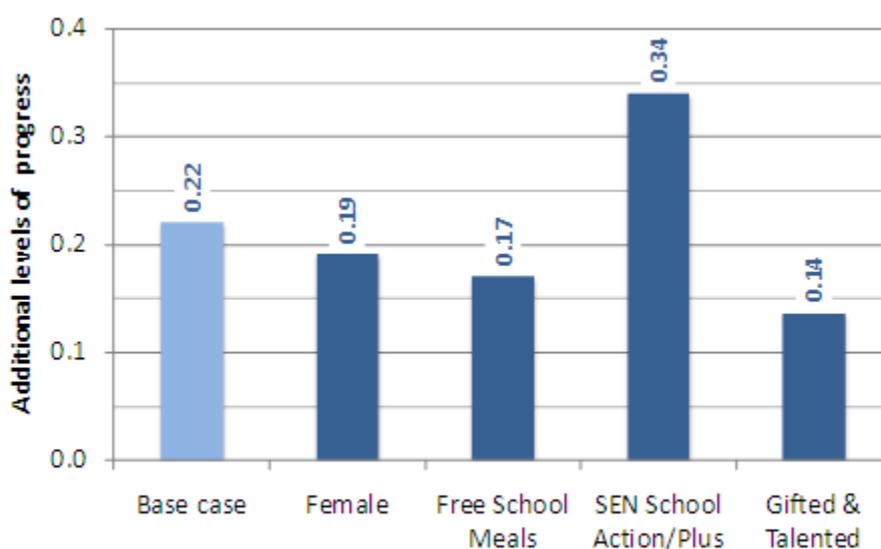
7.2 Findings

7.2.1 Progress in mathematics and English

The first attainment outcome we considered was the progress made by pupils between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, averaged across English and mathematics. Attainment at Key Stage 2 is measured in National Curriculum levels, and GCSE grades at Key Stage 4 can be converted into equivalent levels. Pupils are expected to make a least three levels of progress.

Over the course of the strategy, we found that a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school made an additional 0.22 levels of progress in English and mathematics compared to similar pupils at comparison schools. A positive impact was also found for all of the subgroups considered, although it varied in its extent. A lesser impact (yet still positive) was found for female (0.19 levels), FSM (0.17 levels) and G&T (0.14) pupils, whereas a greater impact was found for pupils on School Action or School Action Plus (0.34 levels). We observed no differential effect for pupils with a statement, i.e. the impact was the same as for the base case, the 'typical pupil' (0.22 levels). These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.4.

Figure 7.4: The impact of Gaining Ground on KS2-KS4 progress in English & mathematics



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

We also found that the impact of Gaining Ground varied according to pupils' Key Stage 2 performance and their IDACI score (a measure of deprivation). The greatest impact was on lower achieving pupils: a 0.26 level increase for a pupil achieving an average of level 3 at Key Stage 2, compared to just 0.14 levels for a pupil starting from level 5. It is possible that 'ceiling effects' are partially responsible, whereby the levels of progress possible for a higher performing pupil to make are limited by the fact that there's no grade higher than an A*. However, this is unlikely to explain all of the difference: a pupil can achieve a level 10 at KS4 (for a GCSE A*) which would translate into five levels of progress, well above the target of three. Gaining Ground also had the greatest impact on progress for the most deprived pupils, with impacts ranging from 0.14 levels to 0.32 levels depending on their IDACI score (a higher IDACI score indicates a greater level of deprivation). These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.5 and Figure 7.6.

Figure 7.5: The impact of Gaining Ground on KS2-KS4 progress in English & mathematics

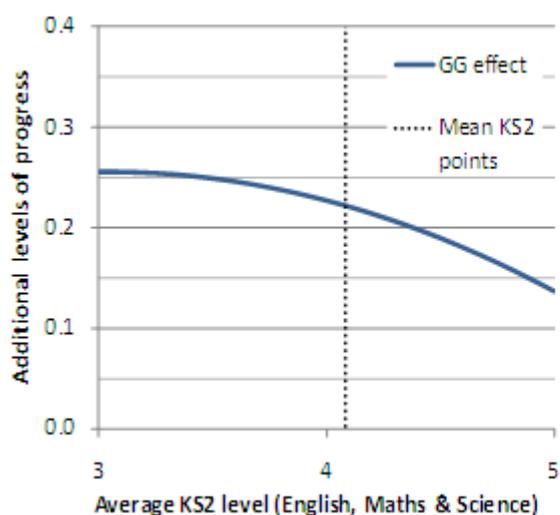
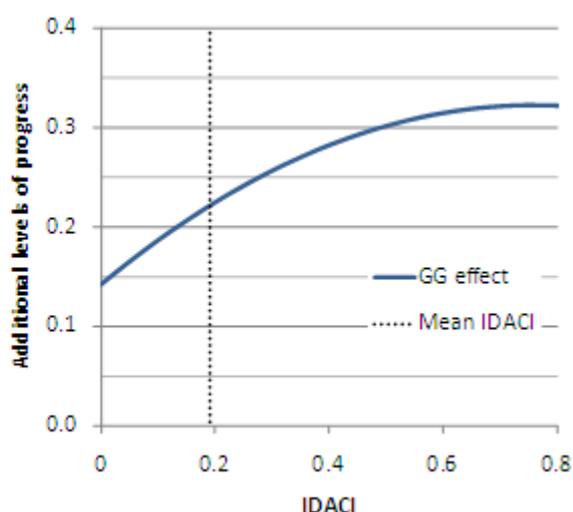


Figure 7.6: The impact of Gaining Ground on KS2-KS4 progress in English & mathematics



We were unable to find any school level characteristics significantly related to the impact of Gaining Ground, with the exception of a small 'Contextual Value Added' (CVA)⁶ effect. In order to capture schools' baseline performance we included their 2008 CVA scores in the models, and found that for each 54 point reduction in a school's CVA, the impact of the strategy on its pupils increased by 0.1 levels of progress. In other words, Gaining Ground had slightly more of an impact on schools where pupils have historically made less progress between KS2 and KS4.

These progress findings evaluate the average effect across the two years of the strategy. We also considered whether the impact in the second year differed to the first, and found a significant difference: progress in 2009/10 was 0.20 levels greater in Gaining Ground schools compared with comparison schools, whereas in 2010/11

⁶ Contextual Value Added is a school level measure of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, based on statistical models of its pupils' performance at Key Stage 4, controlling for prior attainment and a range of pupil characteristics. An average school CVA score is 1000. The CVA scores amongst the schools included in our models ranged from 956 to 1059.

this increased to 0.24 levels. This is unsurprising, given that the effects of such strategies often take time to bed in.

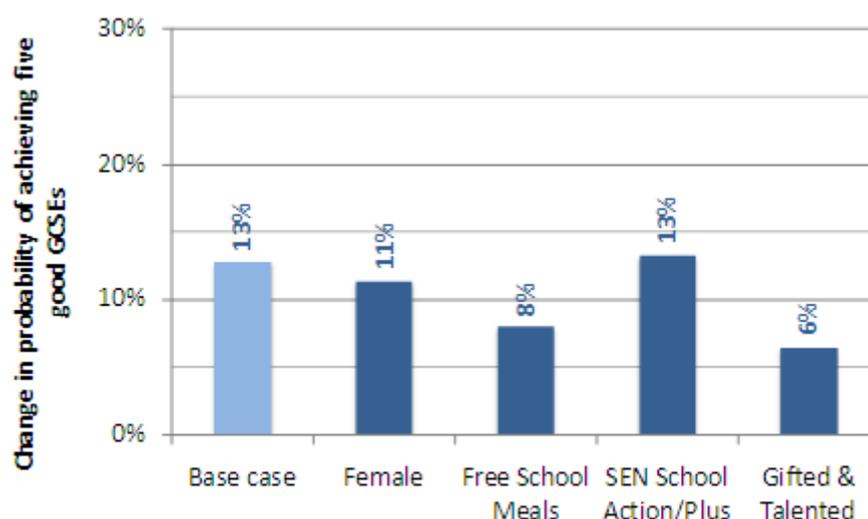
7.2.2 Achieving five good GCSEs

We next considered whether pupils succeeded in obtaining five good GCSEs, i.e. graded at A*-C and including English and mathematics. Whereas progress is a continuous measure, whereby a pupil could achieve any number of levels within a given range, achievement of five good GCSEs is dichotomous – either a pupil achieves this threshold or they do not. We therefore constructed logistic regression models designed for just such dichotomous outcomes, rather than the linear regression models used for the other outcomes.

As a result, we report findings in terms of changes in the probability of an individual pupil achieving five good GCSEs. Note that each of these reported changes is based on the assumption that a pupil is typical in every other respect. However, the nature of logistic models is such that the impact on a pupil's probability will vary according to their other characteristics.

Over the course of the strategy, we found that a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school was 13 percentage points more likely to achieve five good GCSEs compared to similar pupils at comparison schools. A positive impact was also found for all of the subgroups considered, although it varied in its extent. The impact was smaller for female (11 percentage points), FSM (eight percentage points) and G&T (six percentage points) pupils. A significantly greater impact was found for SEN pupils on School Action or School Action Plus, although this was offset by lower overall chances for these pupils. We found no differential effect for pupils with a statement of SEN. These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.7.

Figure 7.7: The impact of Gaining Ground on pupils' chances of achieving five GCSEs at A*-C including English and Mathematics



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

We also found that the impact of Gaining Ground varied according to pupils' Key Stage 2 performance and their IDACI score. The greatest impact was on pupils with average levels of prior attainment (level 4, 13 percentage point impact), with the least impact being on the highest (level 5, 3 percentage point effect) and lowest (level 3, 2 percentage point effect) achieving pupils. Gaining Ground had the greatest impact on chances of achieving five good GCSEs for the most deprived pupils, with impacts ranging from 9 percentage points to 21 percentage points depending on their IDACI score. The findings are illustrated in Figure 7.8 and Figure 7.9.

Figure 7.8 The impact of Gaining Ground on pupils' chances of achieving five good GCSEs (by KS2 level)

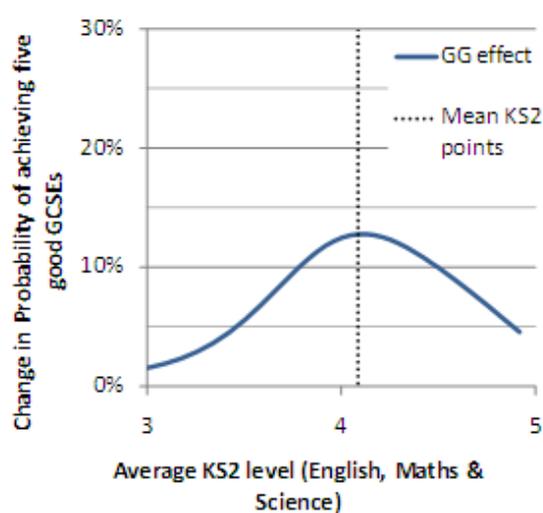
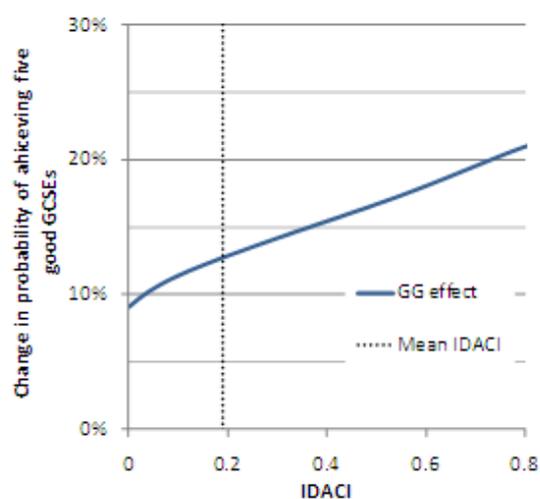


Figure 7.9 The impact of Gaining Ground on pupils' chances of achieving five good GCSEs (by IDACI score)



We found no school level characteristics that were significantly related to the impact of Gaining Ground. However, we did find that the impact of the strategy was greater in its second year (15 percentage points more likely to achieve 5 good GCSEs) compared to its first year (10 percentage points more likely).

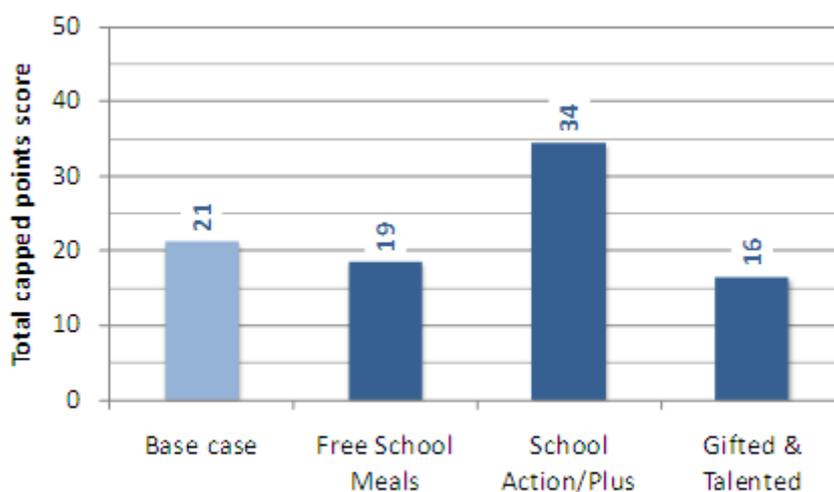
7.2.3 Overall KS4 performance

Next we considered pupils' overall Key Stage 4 performance, measured by their capped total points score in GCSEs and equivalent qualifications. The capped total points score is calculated based on their best combination of qualifications adding up to the equivalent of eight GCSEs. It is preferred to uncapped points score as it provides a measure of the overall quality of performance, without giving undue advantage to pupils with the opportunity to sit for a large number of subjects.

Over the course of the strategy, we found that a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school achieved an additional 21 points at Key Stage 4 compared to similar pupils at comparison schools. This is equivalent to three and half grades in total, or nearly half a grade on average for each subject in their top eight.

There was also a positive impact for all of the subgroups considered, although it varied in its extent. A lesser impact was found for FSM (19 points) and G&T (16 points) pupils, whereas a greater impact was found for pupils on School Action or School Action Plus (34 points – equivalent to nearly six additional grades). No differential effect was observed for other subgroups of pupils, i.e. the impact was the same as for the base case (21 points). These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.10.

Figure 7.10: The impact of Gaining Ground on total capped GSCE (and equivalents) points score



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

As with the other attainment measures, we also found that the impact of Gaining Ground varied according to pupils' Key Stage 2 performance and their IDACI score. The greatest impact was on lower achieving pupils: 36 additional Key Stage 4 points (6 grades) for a pupil achieving an average of level 3 at Key Stage 2, compared to just 4 points (less than one grade) for a pupil starting from level 5. This is unlikely to be due to 'ceiling effects'; indeed, the average Key Stage 4 points score for pupils achieving Level 5 at Key Stage 2 was about 370, well short of the 464 points achievable from eight A* grades.

Gaining Ground also had the greatest impact on progress for the most deprived pupils, with impacts ranging from 15 points to 31 points depending on their IDACI score. These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.11 and Figure 7.12.

Figure 7.11 The impact of Gaining Ground on KS4 total capped points score (by IDACI)

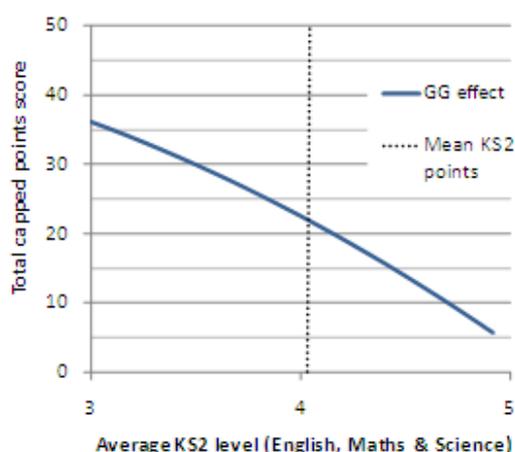
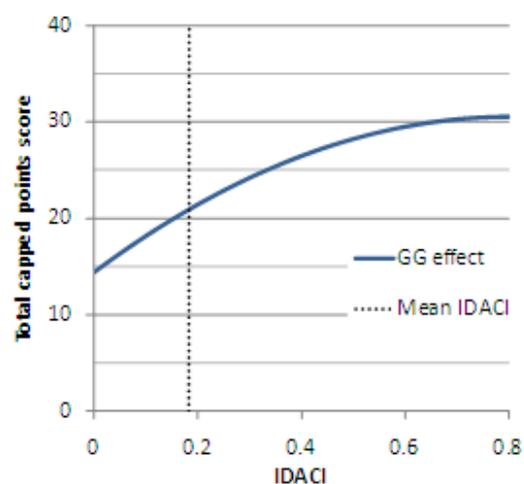


Figure 7.12 The impact of Gaining Ground on KS4 total capped points score (by KS2)



As with the progress models, we found that Gaining Ground had a greater impact at schools that had lower CVA scores prior to the start of the strategy. For each 16 point reduction in CVA, the impact of the strategy increased by a grade per pupil. These progress findings consider the average effect across the two years of the strategy. We also considered whether there the impact in the second year differed to the first, and found a significant difference: pupils achieved 17 additional points in 2009/10 and 25 additional points in 2010/11.

7.2.4 Total absence

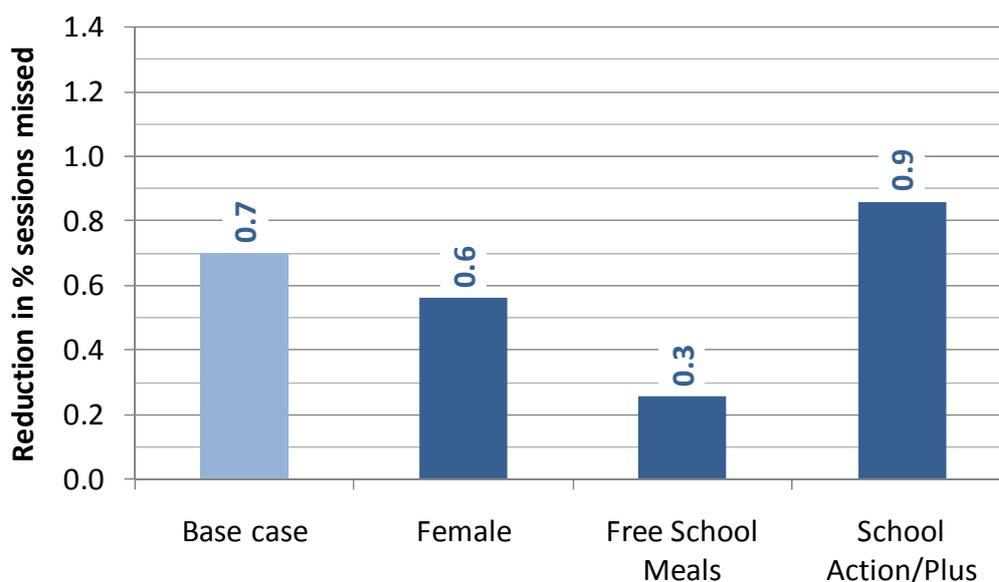
The first measure of attendance we considered was total levels of pupil absence, measured as the percentage of sessions missed during the Autumn and Spring terms of each year. A session is either a morning or an afternoon in school. We did not include Summer term in our analysis because when we undertook the analysis data was not yet available for Summer term 2010/11 and we needed outcomes to be comparable across all four years considered. We explored this outcome using multilevel linear regression models, and findings are presented as reductions in percentage of sessions missed at Gaining Ground compared to comparison schools (i.e. positive figures in the charts represent a positive impact rather than an increase in absence).

Over the course of the strategy, we found that there was a reduction of 0.7 percentage points in the total number of sessions missed by a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school compared to similar pupils at comparison schools. This compared to typical absence rates of around 5.6 percent. If we assume a similar effect applied to the Summer term, and that there are typically 380 available sessions in an academic year, this translates into pupils spending an average of around 1.3 additional days in school each year.

We also found a positive impact for all of the subgroups considered, although it varied in its extent. A lesser impact was found for female (0.6 percentage point

reduction) and FSM (0.3 percentage points) pupils, and there was a greater impact for pupils on School Action or School Action Plus (0.9 percentage points). No differential effect was observed for other pupil groups, i.e. the impact of Gaining Ground was the same as for the base case. These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.13.

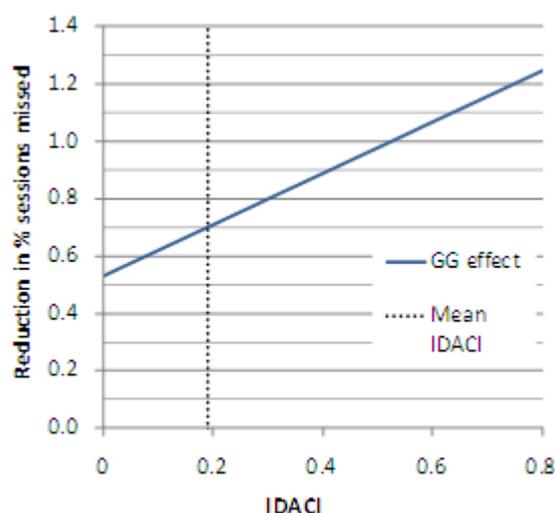
Figure 7.13 The impact of Gaining Ground on total absence (reduction in percentage of sessions missed)



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

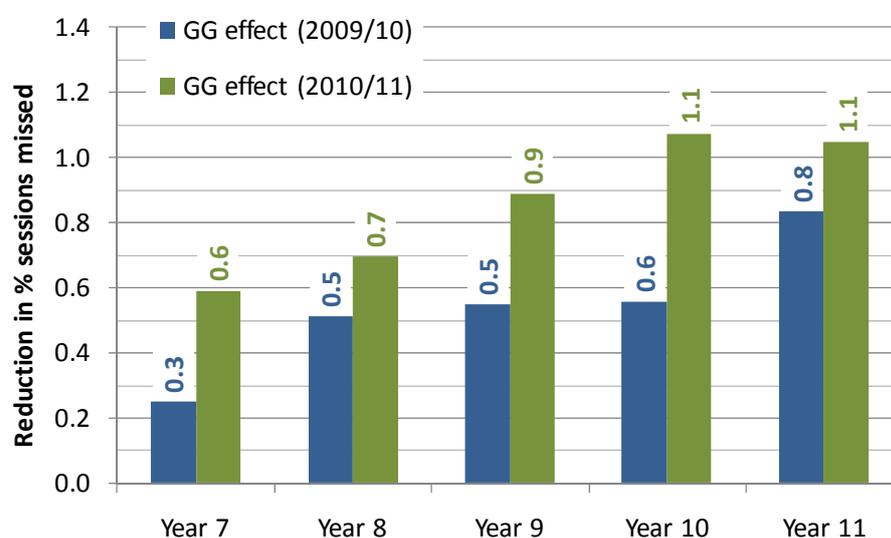
We also found that the impact of Gaining Ground varied according to pupils' IDACI score, with the greatest impact being on the most deprived pupils. The percentage point reduction in sessions missed ranged between 0.5 and 1.2. However, unlike for the attendance measures, we did not find a differential effect according to pupils' prior attainment. These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.14.

Figure 7.14 The impact of Gaining Ground on total absence (reduction in percentage of sessions missed)



In addition to considering the impact of Gaining Ground on pupils throughout the school, we also considered each year group and the first and second years of the strategy separately. In both cases, there were statistically significant differences in impact, and these are illustrated in Figure 7.15. The greatest percentage point reduction in absence was seen for Year 11 pupils and the least for Year 7 pupils (1.1 and 0.6 percentage points respectively in 2010/11). This may partly be because overall levels of absence increase with Year group (from 4.2 in Year 7 to 6.8 per cent of sessions missed in Year 11 for pupils at comparison schools), and so there is greater scope to make an impact. In all cases the second year of the strategy had more impact than the first, with this difference being particularly pronounced for Year 7 and Year 10 pupils.

Figure 7.15 The impact of Gaining Ground on total absence (reduction in percentage of sessions missed)



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

Of the school-level variables we included in our models, only two were statistically significant. Gaining Ground had less of an impact on schools with the lowest CVA scores at the start of the strategy, with each increase of 13 in a school's CVA points reducing the impact of the strategy on its pupils by 0.1 per cent of sessions. We also found that impact was greater (by 0.18 per cent of sessions) at smaller schools. These were defined as those in the smallest third of all Gaining Ground and comparison schools considered, and had 868 or fewer pupils.

7.2.5 Unauthorised absence

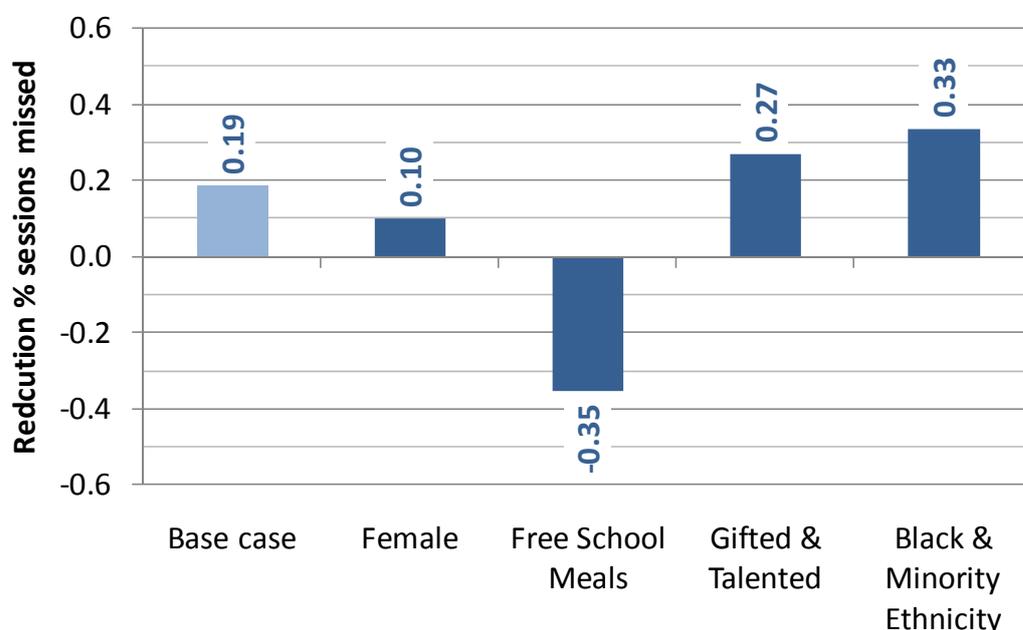
We also considered the impact of Gaining Ground on unauthorised absence. Overall unauthorised absence rates are generally very low (around 0.5 per cent of sessions missed on average), and so these results should be treated with some caution. Modelling outcomes which occur as infrequently as this are at the limit of the

circumstances where the underlying assumptions of the statistical modelling remain valid⁷.

Over the course of the strategy, we found that there was a reduction of 0.19 percentage points in the total unauthorised number of sessions missed by a typical pupil at a Gaining Ground school compared to similar pupils at comparison schools. If we assume a similar effect applied to the Summer term, this translates into pupils spending an average of around one third of an additional day in school each year. Note however that this effect is not additional to, but rather is a subset of, the 'total absence' effect reported above. So, in combination, both sets of findings imply that the strategy reduced total absence by about 1.3 days per year, around a quarter of which would have been unauthorised absence.

This effect varied by subgroup, with a greater impact being seen for G&T (0.27 per cent of sessions) and BME (0.33 per cent of sessions) pupils. For female pupils the impact was only 0.10 percent of sessions, and for Free School Meals we found that unauthorised absence rates were in fact higher at Gaining Ground schools compared to comparison schools (by 0.35 per cent of sessions). No differential effect was observed for other pupil groups, i.e. the impact of Gaining Ground was the same as for the base case. These findings are illustrated in Figure 7.16. We found no statistically significant relationship between the impact of the strategy and pupils' prior attainment or levels of deprivation.

Figure 7.16 The impact of Gaining Ground on unauthorised absence (reduction in percentage of sessions missed)



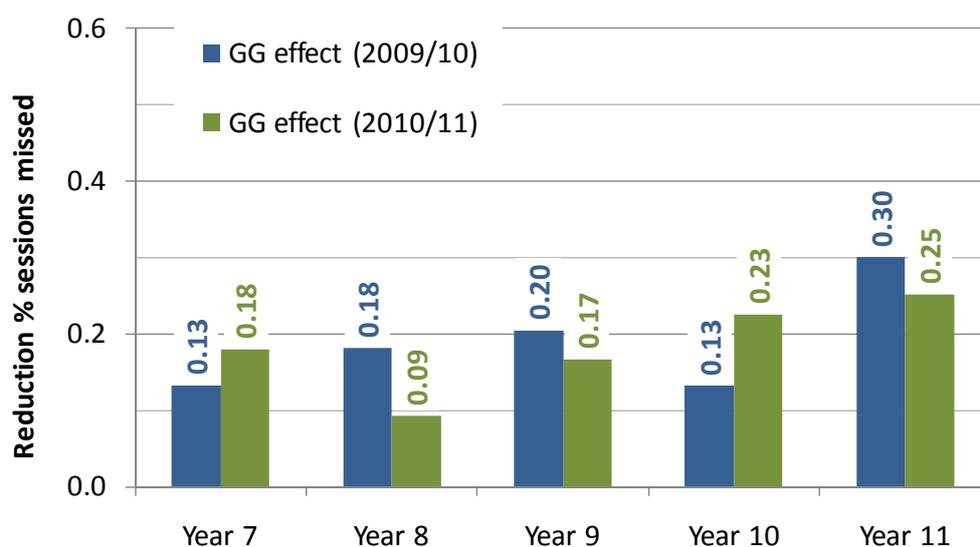
Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

In addition to considering the impact of Gaining Ground on pupils throughout the school, we also considered each year group and the first and second years of the strategy separately. In both cases, there were statistically significant differences in

⁷ In particular, approximating absence (a binomial outcome) as being normally distributed

impact, and these are illustrated in Figure 7.17. There was a general trend towards greater impact for older pupils, possibly reflecting their overall higher levels of unauthorised absence. However, there was no clear pattern between the first and second years of the strategy, with a greater impact observed in its second year only for pupils in Years 7 and 10.

Figure 7.17 The impact of Gaining Ground on unauthorised absence (percentage of sessions missed)



Note that each comparison is based on holding all other variables constant

We also found that Gaining Ground had less of an impact on schools that had the lowest CVA scores at the start of the strategy, with each increase of 15 in a school's CVA points reducing the impact of the strategy on its pupils by 0.1 per cent of sessions. We also found that impact was smaller (by 0.09 per cent of sessions) at larger schools. These were defined as those in the largest third of all Gaining Ground and comparison schools considered, and had 1,150 or more pupils. None of the other school-level variables were statistically significant.

7.3 Summary

Subject to the caveats described in the methodology (section 7.1), we have found that Gaining Ground consistently had a positive effect on pupil attainment and attendance. This was the case across all five outcome measures considered, and for a range of pupil subgroups.

Table 7.1 summarises these results, and shows the impact of Gaining Ground on each outcome as an effect size⁸. The table also indicates whether interaction terms in the model were positive or negative (i.e. whether the strategy had a greater or

⁸ An effect size is a standardised measure often reported to enable comparison across different outcomes and interventions. It is calculated here as the Gaining Ground effect divided by the standard deviation of the outcome variable amongst the population as a whole.

lesser positive impact on particular groups of pupils). This shows that **in the context of an overall positive effect for all outcomes considered**, the impact of the strategy was:

- Lower for girls compared to boys.
- Lower for Free School Meals pupils, to the extent that for the unauthorised absence outcome our modelling implied a negative impact. Note however that the results from this particular set of models should be treated with some caution.
- Greater for pupils with SEN on School Action or School Action Plus.
- Generally lower for G&T pupils
- Generally lower for pupils with higher prior attainment, although not in all cases
- Greater for more deprived pupils
- In the case of unauthorised absence, greater for Black & Minority Ethnic groups.

Table 7.1 Summary of results

	Effect size	Interactions with main effect						
		Female	FSM	SEN A/P	G&T	KS2	IDACI	BME
Progress in Maths & English	0.19	-	-	+	-	-	+	0
Achieving five good GCSEs	N/A*	-	-	+	-	+/-	+	0
Overall KS4 performance	0.24	0	-	+	-	-	+	0
Total absence	0.08	-	-	+	0	0	+	0
Unauthorised absence	0.04	-	-	0	+	0	0	+

Key: + greater effect; - lower effect; 0 no statistically significant difference from main effect; +/- mixed effect

** Not applicable for logistic regression model*

With the exception of unauthorised absence, we also found that the strategy had more of an impact in its second year compared to the first. Amongst the schools involved, impact was greatest in those with the lowest CVA score before the strategy began.

These observed effect sizes can be considered moderate in size for attainment, and low for attendance. To provide further context, we can compare the attainment effect sizes to those reported by the Sutton Trust (Higgins et al., 2011) for a range of other interventions. This converts effect sizes into 'years of progress', in which terms Gaining Ground resulted in 3 additional months progress being made by pupils, roughly in the middle of the range reported. It is equivalent to the impact reported for interventions such as Summer Schools, Assessment for Learning and reducing class sizes.

However, these comparisons should be considered in the context that Gaining Ground was a school-level intervention where outcomes were measured as an average across all pupils, many of whom may not have been directly targeted for support. The effect size for pupils specifically targeted is likely to have been even greater, and in these terms Gaining Ground compares favourably with other interventions.

8. Value for money

Key findings

Assessment of value for money

- The primary research provides evidence that the Gaining Ground Strategy has been very effective in meeting two of its original objectives (which related to enhancing strategic activities within the school) and less effective at meeting the two objectives relating to classroom practice.
- The cost-effectiveness ratios show that an average investment of £79 per pupil (or £88,194 per school over two years) was associated with a positive impact on outcomes relating to attainment, progression and attendance.
- In comparative terms, the outcomes noted for pupils would be deemed moderate (about three months of progress at Key Stage 4, for instance) from the relatively low cost per pupil investment of the strategy as a whole.
- At the same time, the evidence for Gaining Ground generating additional outputs was inconclusive (other than for a positive impact on improving systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance).

The views of research participants

- Most respondents felt the strategy represented good value for money, with headteachers mostly positive in this regard. When explaining why, all stakeholder groups reported that Gaining Ground facilitated work that would otherwise not have been possible. Other reasons cited included the strengths of a good school-to-school partnership and the ability to see how the funding was making an impact.
- Among those who felt the strategy was not good value for money, both SIPs and LAs commented that it provided nothing new and that its success was dependent on the willingness of the school to engage with the strategy. Some headteachers commented that the strategy was not tailored enough to their needs and that they were not matched well with their partner school.

This chapter presents the findings from the value for money analysis, together with survey and case-study respondents' views on whether the strategy offered good value for money.

8.1 Costs of the strategy

The Gaining Ground Strategy was set up as a light-touch accountability model in order to minimise the administrative burden on schools. While this approach was appreciated by the schools, it meant that there was no centralised collection of monitoring data and so no school-by-school collation of data (including expenditure) on activities and outputs. In order to obtain comparative information on the use of the funds, therefore, we have had to collect data from a number of different sources; some of this data is at an aggregate level (that obtained from then DCSF – now DfE - and other stakeholders, including SSAT (Special Schools and Academies Trust) and SIPs) and some is at school level (that obtained through self-completion surveys from schools).

The total cost of delivering the Gaining Ground Strategy over the two years was £35,101,200 (excluding evaluation costs).⁹ This is central funding and does not take into account other costs that will have been associated with school participation in the strategy, such as the costs (in teacher time) of taking part in training or supporting strategy activities. This **Error! Reference source not found.** is based on data obtained from the DfE and its partners and provides an overview of how the various partners estimated that the funding was disbursed.

Table 8.1: Costs of the strategy

Item	Year 1 (2009/10)	Year 2 (2010/11)	Total
Funding to Gaining Ground schools by:			
Academic focused study support	£7,960,000	£7,960,000	£15,920,000
Targeted delivery of AfL training	£3,980,000	£3,980,000	£7,960,000
Additional SIP days	£875,600	£875,600	£1,751,200
Partner schools	£3,240,000	£3,980,000	£7,220,000
National College	£281,250	£281,250	£562,500
SSAT	£843,750	£843,750	£1,687,500
TOTAL			£35,101,200

Source: Data obtained through SSAT, SIP survey and DfE

Just under half of the budget (45%) in both years was dedicated to out-of-hours activities (such as homework clubs) and strategies to support both individual pupils and groups, with a further one-fifth of the budget used to train teachers in the use of effective Assessment for Learning. While some of the budget was used to buy in specialist support or expertise (via the National College or SIP), just over one fifth was used in working with partner schools. In summary, the budget was used by Gaining Ground schools to support pupils, improve assessment, and share expertise in leadership, classroom practice and the use of data.

The challenge comes, however, in assessing the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of this use of the funds. Since central monitoring data is lacking, the only numerical data to which we have access for carrying out a statistical assessment of value for money is information on:

- the total number of schools supported through the Gaining Ground Strategy
- the total number of SSAT support days
- the total number of pupils *who may have been* supported by the strategy. Given the whole school nature of the strategy, it has had to be assumed that the Gaining Ground initiative supported every pupil in participating schools. We

⁹ Evaluation costs have been excluded from the calculations since they do not form part of the direct strategy delivery costs.

know, from survey and qualitative data, that in some schools, the resources may have been targeted more intensively at specific sub-groups of pupils. Without robust data to demonstrate this, however, we are not in a position to calculate the impact of the initiative on any targeted groups and so our estimates will be based on a consideration of average pupil-level impacts and school impacts across all Gaining Grounds schools.

8.2 Approach

There are a number of ways in which the assessment of value for money (VFM) can be approached, but in essence, assessing VFM is about comparing intervention costs with the benefits to the recipients, as well as considering the extent to which the intervention's objectives were met and whether the activities were delivered at minimum cost. Our approach to analysing the cost effectiveness of the strategy is to consider economy, efficiency and effectiveness measures, as set out in Table 8.2. These three broad measures have been calculated from administrative and monitoring data, as well as data gathered through the primary research activities of the evaluation. In effect, they analyse and test the relationship between different parts of the strategy's 'logic chain', which flows from the rationale and objectives, through spending, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. It is important to remember that the VFM ratios and the qualitative evidence need to be considered within the context of the wider evaluation of the strategy as a whole.

Table 8.2: Cost effectiveness measures

Measure	Description
Economy	Economy considers the extent to which activities were delivered at minimum cost, so requires the development of ratios between activities and inputs.
Efficiency	Efficiency considers the benefits or outcomes compared to the intervention costs, including comparing additional outputs with the inputs used to achieve them.
Effectiveness	Effectiveness involves considering whether an intervention's objectives have been met. This normally requires a judgement on the extent to which the achieved outcomes mean that objectives have been met. In some cases it may also be appropriate to consider achieved outputs against targets.

As we have seen, there is a lack of available monitoring data on disaggregated spend, activity and outputs. This means that it has been possible to generate only a limited number of VFM ratios. We have drawn on the cost data provided by DfE and its partners and on the statistical analysis of outcome data from the National Pupil Database to estimate a number of different ratios at school and pupil level, linked to attainment and attendance outcomes. The assessment of attainment outcomes is complicated by the fact that, since there are no national measures for attainment for

pupils in Years 7 to 10,¹⁰ we can only provide an estimate of VFM of the mean attainment outcomes for Year 11 pupils. While we can estimate a mean per pupil expenditure, we can only measure attainment at GCSE (or equivalent) and so the link between mean expenditure and mean pupil outcome should be read with this in mind. Estimates of the VFM in relation to pupil attendance are based on all pupils in Years 7 to 11, however, since data is available for each year group.

8.3 Assessment of value for money

Economy

In examining the economy of Gaining Ground (the extent to which activities were delivered at minimum cost), we have calculated the average cost of the different elements of the initiative for which we could obtain information on outlay. This means that we can estimate the economy of SSAT support for work with partner schools and the economy of different elements of SIP support, including brokerage, support provision, monitoring, evaluation and review, and administration. These ratios are presented in Table 8.3, which gives an overview of the extent to which Gaining Ground activity strands were delivered and taken up by schools. These figures have been calculated using monitoring data from the SSAT website and self-reported survey data from the 104 responses received to the SIP survey carried out at the end of the strategy (2011).

While we have monitoring data from both SSAT and SIPs to enable us to estimate the economy of the initiative, we are not able to provide a definitive input to activity ratio across the two full years of the study. This is primarily because, in the case of SSAT data, SSAT did not ask partner schools to record their used days in year 2, once SSAT's involvement with the strategy ended. While partner schools were asked to continue delivering support days as planned in Year 2, no data on such activity was monitored. The given number of partner school days, therefore, refer exclusively to days delivered during year one of the strategy. Similarly, SIP data only monitors activity up to March 2011, when the statutory requirement for SIP support came to an end. Some schools may have retained their SIP's support up to the end of the 2010/2011 academic year, and so additional days *may* have been used after March 2011.

For the purposes of this analysis, however, we can only report against the recorded data, which, as indicated in Table 8.3, suggested that:

- the estimated input: activity ratio is £418 per partner school support day. If partner schools continued to provide support as planned, this would suggest a *lower* average cost per day over the two year period of £209 per partner school support day. Without comparable baselines for interventions against which to assess this cost, we cannot be definitive about the economy of this element of Gaining Ground. This figure, however, may be a useful baseline against which to estimate any future support-based interventions.

¹⁰ Previous studies, such as Machin et al (2007), had access to published data at Key Stage 3 (Year 9 outcomes).

- the estimated mean cost per SIP day is £618. The survey data shows that schools used an average of 6.5 SIP days against a target of 8. Schools may have used more (unrecorded) days, suggesting that the average daily cost might have been less than this. Since no target costs are available against which to assess planned and actual expenditure, it is not clear from existing data whether SIP support was provided economically. We cannot be certain whether the lower number of recorded days led to savings or whether the average cost per day was simply higher than the intended rate.

Table 8.3: Ratio of Gaining Ground activity to inputs

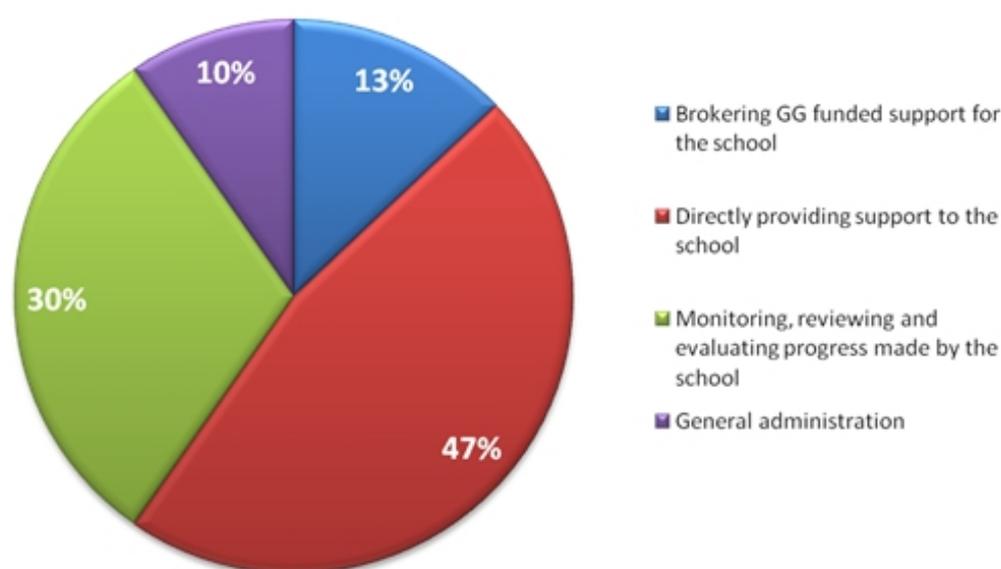
Strand of activity	Costs (inputs)	Gaining Ground activity	Ratio of Gaining Ground activity to input
Average number of partner school visits/days	£1,687,500 (cost for SSAT support)	4038 partner school support days recorded across 339 schools ¹¹ . This works out at an average of 11.9 partner school support days per school.	£418 per partner school support day
Average number of total SIP days used (target 8 over 2 years)	£1,751,200 (cost for Additional SIP days)	The SIP survey suggested schools had used an average of 6.5 days of SIP time over the two years. This equates to an estimated total of 2,571 SIP days across all 398 schools in the strategy over the two year period.	£681 per SIP day
Average breakdown of SIP days by task:	Time spent by SIP on brokering Gaining Ground funded support	The SIP survey suggested that SIPs spent an average of 0.8 days per school brokering Gaining Ground funded support. This equates to an estimated total of 318 days across all Gaining Ground schools.	Mean cost of £545 per school spent by SIP on brokering Gaining Ground funded support
	Time spent by SIP on directly providing support to the school	The SIP survey suggested that SIPs spent an average of 2.9 days per school directly providing support to the school. This equates to an estimated total of 1,154 days across all Gaining Ground schools.	Mean cost of £1,975 per school spent by SIP on directly providing support to the school
	Time spent by SIP monitoring, reviewing and evaluating	The SIP survey suggested that SIPs spent an average of 1.9 days per school monitoring, reviewing and evaluating. This equates to an estimated total of 756 days across all Gaining Ground schools.	Mean cost of £1,294 per school spent by SIP on monitoring, reviewing and evaluation
	Time spent by SIP on administration	The SIP survey suggested that SIPs spent an average of 0.6 days per school on administration. This equates to an estimated total of 239 days across all Gaining Ground schools.	Mean cost of £409 per school spent by SIP on administration

Source: Data obtained through SSAT, SIP survey and DfE

¹¹ This is SSAT provided support only. It does not include support provided by the National College.

Information from the SIP survey indicates that the largest proportion of SIP time was spent on providing support directly to the school. As can be inferred from Figure 8.1, for every £100 invested in SIP support, an average of £47 was spent on direct support to the school, while £31 was dedicated to monitoring, reviewing and evaluating progress. Administration activities accounted, on average, for £10 of every £100 investment in SIP support, whilst the remaining £13 out of every £100 was used in brokering Gaining Ground funding support. For every £1 spent on direct activity, therefore, 66 pence was spent on monitoring and evaluation, 26 pence on brokerage and 21 pence on administration.

Figure 8.1: Breakdown of expenditure on SIP activities



Efficiency

Efficiency, as outlined in Table 8.2, considers the benefits or outcomes compared to the intervention costs (expressed in the form of cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness ratios), including comparing additional outputs with the inputs used to achieve them (such as the average cost per pupil benefiting from Gaining Ground). Below, we look at costs in relation to outputs and outcomes:

- cost per pupil and per school supported by the strategy
- the extent to which the strategy generated specific (additional) outputs, given strategy inputs
- the impact on progression between KS2 and KS4
- the impact on attainment at GCSE level
- the impact on attendance in Years 7 to 11.

Cost per school and cost per pupil supported by the strategy

Gaining Ground supported 398 schools across the two years of the strategy, which works out at an average investment of £88,194 per school. Across the two academic years 2009/10 and 2010/11, the total number of pupils (Years 7-11) in these 398 Gaining Ground schools was estimated as 446,254. If the inputs were spread equally across all pupils in all years, this would mean that the average cost for each young person supported by the strategy (whether directly or indirectly) would be £79 per pupil.

Clearly, however, the actual spend per pupil would be different. We know from the qualitative data that some schools targeted particular groups of pupils, for example, and that, while some of the 446,254 pupils would have benefited from two years of the strategy, others (particularly those who were in Year 6 or in Year 11 in its first year) would only have benefited from one year of support. Given the lack of pupil level data (including whether or not they took part in study support activities, for example) and the whole-school nature of the strategy, it has had to be assumed (for this analysis) that the Gaining Ground activities led to similar support for all pupils in Years 7 to 11 in each school. Should there have been more specific targeting of Gaining Ground resources within schools, then the cost per young person supported would, of course, have been higher than £79.

To what extent did the strategy generate specific additional outputs?

As discussed in Chapter 4, 94 per cent of headteachers and 90 per cent of SIPs reported that Gaining Ground had enabled at least some new activities to take place. The extent to which the strategy generated specific outputs can be assessed using results from the endpoint headteacher survey¹² (2011). The limitations of this approach, of course, are that the assessment of additionality is based on a 'snapshot' of headteachers' views towards the end of the Gaining Ground Strategy. We had intended to use longitudinal data collected from both baseline and endpoint surveys to track changes in perception over time, but disappointing baseline survey returns meant that this was not possible. Thus, some caution is advised when interpreting these differences. It is possible, for example, that some comparison schools were further ahead of Gaining Ground schools when the strategy started, which would mean that the endpoint data does not give a wholly accurate impression of the additional outputs that have been generated. Nevertheless, the headteacher survey data is the best evidence we have upon which to make such an assessment. This evidence is summarised in Table 8.4

¹² This survey received 200 responses from Gaining Ground schools and 100 responses from comparison schools.

Table 8.4: Perceptions of the extent to which the strategy generated additional outputs

Specific output	Research evidence	Observed differences between Gaining Ground and comparison schools
Investment in training for Assessing Pupil Progress (APP)	As discussed in chapter 3 (Table 3.2), the results from both groups were very similar, with 79 per cent of Gaining Ground school headteachers and 82 per cent of comparison school headteachers reporting that they had invested in training for APP 'to some' or 'a great extent'. A slightly higher proportion of headteachers in the comparison schools (31 per cent) said that they had invested 'to a great extent' compared to headteachers in Gaining Ground schools (23 per cent). The case study evidence supported this view, with case study schools indicating that Gaining Ground largely complemented and accelerated existing APP activities rather than led to new ones.	No positive difference observed
Provision of study support to pupils out of school hours	Although there were examples in case-study schools of where Gaining Ground had supported the provision of study support to pupils out of school hours, the survey data provided little evidence to suggest that Gaining Ground had generated significant additional outputs in relation to provision of out-of-school-hours study support. Eighty three per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers and 89 per cent of comparison school headteachers reported that they had provided study support to pupils out of school hours 'to some' or 'a great extent'. Amongst Gaining Ground headteachers, the proportion reporting that they had offered out-of-school-hours support 'to a great extent' (51 per cent) was lower than amongst comparison schools (55 per cent).	No positive difference observed
Impact on ambitious target setting for individual pupils	Ninety six per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers stated that ambitious target-setting for individual pupils had been put in place 'to some' or 'to a great extent', compared to 99 per cent of headteachers in comparison schools.	No positive difference observed
Improvements to systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance	Eighty four per cent of headteachers reported that the strategy had impacted 'to some' or 'a great extent' on systems of monitoring and evaluation (50 per cent reported 'to a great extent'). Furthermore, 97 per cent of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools thought that whole-school systems for monitoring, tracking and evaluating pupil progress had been improved in the past two years, compared to 91 per cent for comparison school headteachers. This was supported by SIPs, 86 per cent of whom agreed or strongly agreed that there were such improvements resulting from Gaining Ground.	Marked positive difference observed
More consistent and effective use of Assessment for Learning	Ninety two per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers agreed or strongly agreed that there is now more consistent and effective use of AfL amongst teachers, compared to two years ago. This was in comparison to 95 per cent of headteachers in comparison schools.	No positive difference observed
Support strategies put in place	Eighty seven per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had put in place more effective support strategies for the most disadvantaged pupils over the past two years. This compared to 93 per cent amongst comparison school headteachers.	No positive difference observed

Source: Evaluation research

From the findings above, we can see that Gaining Ground and comparison headteachers reported undertaking broadly similar levels of activity (in some cases comparison headteachers actually reported greater levels), suggesting that the strategy has had no, or very little, impact on generating additional outputs in relation to investment in training for Assessing Pupil Progress (APP), provision of study support to pupils out of school hours, ambitious target setting for individual pupils, more consistent and effective use of Assessment for Learning or putting support strategies in place. The one output where Gaining Ground headteachers reported a greater level of activity than their counterparts in comparison schools was improvement to systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance. As indicated in Table 8.3, the cost associated with this SIP support activity was approximately £1,294 per school. These findings are supported by the view of some Gaining Ground headteachers (reported earlier) that the strategy was accelerating rather than initiating change as they already had school improvement plans and activities in place. Even so, there is evidence from the analysis of NPD data (see Chapter 7) that the Gaining Ground Strategy has gone on to generate positive outcomes. This suggests that the improvements in monitoring and evaluation may have led to more reflective and critical assessment of practice so that, whilst schools may not perceive that they are doing more than their peers, they are doing things more effectively, as evidenced by the positive improvements in pupil outcomes.

Cost-effectiveness ratios

Despite the different interpretations amongst headteachers and teachers of the extent to which Gaining Ground had generated additional outputs, the strategy nonetheless appears to have had a positive impact on outcomes amongst Gaining Ground pupils relative to those in comparison schools.

The total strategy cost (i.e. input) is £35,101,200 and a summary of the input to output/outcome ratios is shown in Table 8.5. We have presented these below as incremental cost effectiveness ratios. In doing so, we would caution that there are a number of caveats to be borne in mind.

- First, in order to be able to report the VFM measures in this manner, we have had to assume that the relationship between inputs and outputs/outcomes is a consistent one. In reality, it is likely that the marginal benefit associated with an additional level of investment will vary. These figures should not be read, therefore, as forecasts.
- Second, the impacts reported previously are average impacts for a 'typical' pupil and have been compared against average costs, which are based on the assumption that all pupils in a school were supported equally by the strategy. If the strategy in any school was targeted at a specific sub-group of pupils, the average cost per pupil would be greater than shown below.
- Third, the calculation of the outcome related to 'achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE' used a hierarchical logistic regression model, not a linear regression model. The impact on probability will vary across all students, therefore, and so it is not meaningful to calculate an overall average effect. This means that we have not been able to calculate the number of *additional* pupils that attained five A*-C GCSE grades (including English and mathematics) as a result of the Gaining Ground Strategy, even though we can calculate the increase in probability of

such attainment levels for a 'typical' pupil and for pupils with different characteristics and prior attainment (see Chapter 7).

Table 8.5: Cost-effectiveness ratios

Output/outcome per average investment of £79 per pupil	Incremental cost effectiveness ratios
One pupil	£79 was the average cost of the strategy per pupil.
N/A	Average cost of the strategy of £88,194 per school.
An improvement in average progression of 0.22 levels between KS2 and KS4	Average cost of £359 per additional pupil progressing an additional level between KS2 and KS4 in English and mathematics ¹³ .
An increase in average total score of 21 points per student	Average cost of £4 per pupil increasing their total capped GCSE score by 1 point.
A reduction in total absences of 2.7 half-days per student per academic year	Average cost of £29 per single session reduction in number of half-day sessions missed.
A reduction in total absences of 0.7 half-days per student per academic year	Average cost of £113 per single session reduction in number of half-day sessions missed due to unauthorised absences.
Average probability of a pupil attaining 5 A*-C GCSE grades increased by 13 percentage points	Ratio not meaningful; probability analysis used logistic modelling.

Source: NFER and SQW

As suggested above, an average investment of £79 per pupil was associated with an improvement in average progress of 0.22 levels between Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in English and mathematics, although the cost of enabling a pupil to make an additional entire level of progress (assuming a continuous relationship between inputs and outcomes) would be 4.5 times as high. At GCSE, Gaining Ground investment was associated with an average increase of 21 points; the equivalent (potentially) of raising a pupil's attainment from six grade Ds and two grade Cs, to three grade Ds and 5 grade Cs. How does this level of investment and outcome compare with other funded interventions in terms of cost-effectiveness? We explore this question in the following discussion.

¹³ Although the improvement in average progression outcome applies only to Year 11 students, the average cost has been calculated using the total cost for all pupils since, as discussed previously, it is not possible to disaggregate the spending to pupil sub-groups.

Comparative discussion of cost-effectiveness ratios

Previous research has shown that investment in providing activities that help to overcome barriers to learning, such as out-of-hours or out-of-school study support, or address specific teaching or learning needs, have led to improvements in attainment. While many studies present evidence around improved attainment, however, we found only a limited number of studies that sought to estimate the *cost-effectiveness* of interventions on pupil outcomes in England; most such studies have been conducted in the US and are based on targeted interventions with small numbers of pupils, rather than on whole-school interventions. There was also very little evidence available at a secondary school level. In the discussion that follows we focus on three recent analyses, by Machin et al (2007), by Tanner et al (2011) and by Torgerson et al (2010).

Research by Machin et al (2007) into resources and standards in urban schools found that an investment of £120 per pupil in the phased **Excellence in Cities** (EiC) strategy was associated with an average increase in attainment in mathematics by 0.01 levels at level KS3. It also found that there was an impact on attendance, with a reduction in absences of (on average) 0.59 of a percentage point.

Both EiC and Gaining Ground were established as whole-school interventions, although they were set up to address different issues. Gaining Ground schools were those that were identified as having reasonable-to-good GCSE examination results, but poor progression rates in English and mathematics. EiC was introduced in a phased way to identified disadvantaged inner-city areas to improve attainment in all subjects and was open to all schools in those areas, whatever their examination results. It specifically targeted underachieving pupils facing barriers to learning, as well as G&T pupils, and a range of pupil-based interventions (including learning mentors) and whole school or cross-area interventions were put in place to meet their needs. While Gaining Ground schools were also supported and worked with partner schools, any focus on sub-groups of pupil targeting was a decision made at school level.

As with EiC, the impact of Gaining Ground on attainment (though not on unauthorised absence – see Chapter 7) appeared greater for more deprived pupils. However, while Machin et al found no measurable impact (after two years) of EiC in schools that were less disadvantaged, we found improvements across all Gaining Ground schools, with greater improvements in those schools where the CVA scores had been low before. The investment of £79 per pupil in Gaining Ground was lower than the EiC investment of £120 per pupil and this initial comparison suggests that Gaining Ground was, therefore, relatively cost-effective. There are, however, a number of important caveats to take into account in assessing the relative cost-effectiveness of the two interventions:

- The analysis carried out by Machin et al. was based on propensity score matching at individual pupil level, while our study used a hierarchical modelling approach to identify outcomes (thus controlling for differences at

school and pupil level). Individual pupils were not matched between treatment and comparison schools in the Gaining Ground analysis.

- The analyses carried out by Machin et al. identified a difference in outcomes at Key Stage 3 for mathematics only. No such difference was identified for Key Stage 3 English, nor at GCSE, which was the focus of the Gaining Ground analysis. Since the likely impact of an increase in points in Key Stage 3 mathematics on overall attainment at GCSE was not estimated, this makes it difficult to assess the comparative impact of the different investments per pupil from EiC and from Gaining Ground.
- A comparative analysis on attendance is complicated by the fact that, at the time of the EiC study, individual pupil attendance data was not recorded on the National Pupil Database and so data on attendances was presented in terms of impact on total attendance at an aggregate school level (percentage points) rather than in terms of the number of half-day sessions per pupil.
- As Machin et al noted, 30 per cent of EiC schools within Phase 1 areas were also exposed to the Pupil Learning Credit (PLC) policy from 2001 onwards and the authors suggested that *'we should interpret the effect for EiC Phase 1 as the combined effect of EiC and PLC policy'*. It should also be noted, however, that all Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools were also exposed to Excellence Challenge (later Aimhigher) from 2001, further complicating attribution to EiC and suggesting that the effect noted should be regarded as the outcome of the combined investment from all three interventions. For Gaining Ground schools, there was no systematic difference in the range of interventions or policies in which they were involved, compared to non-Gaining Ground schools, though this means that we could not take into consideration the wide range of other initiatives in which schools may have been involved.

More recent studies have focused on the cost-effectiveness of interventions in primary schools. The evaluations of Every Child A Reader (Tanner et al, 2011) and Every Child Counts (Torgerson et al, 2010), for example, both estimated the costs of raising attainment amongst children in Key Stages 1 and 2. The former estimated the initial cost per additional child reaching the expected level of reading at Key Stage 1 as £18,600 and the cost per additional child reaching the expected level of writing at Key Stage 1 as £14,500. The latter found that the cost per extra child reaching the equivalent of Level 2c or above at Key Stage 1 mathematics as a result of the "Numbers Count" intervention was approximately £14,600.

For Gaining Ground, we can estimate the average cost for providing support to schools (£9,378 per school for SSAT and SIP support) and the average cost of the strategy per school (£88,194) over the two years, although we do not know the unrecorded costs for teacher time, for example. We can also calculate that those inputs were associated with measurable improvements in progression (both between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 and at GCSE – see Table 8.5), although different methodological approaches, mean that we are not in a position to estimate the cost *per additional pupil* achieving (for example) five GCSES at Grades A* to C. At a comparative level, however, there are some significant differences in the ways that

these studies were undertaken, not least of which was the establishment of a randomised control trial for the evaluation of Every Child Counts and the ability to collect data on in-school costs (such as teacher time) for Every Child a Reader.

More recently, the Sutton Trust (Higgins et al., 2011) produced a summary of some of the research evidence on improving learning and attainment, indicating the effect size of different interventions (such as feedback, tutoring and assessment for learning) on outcomes for children and young people in terms of potential gains in their performance over a year. These ranged from no identified impact (for performance-related pay for teachers or the use of classroom assistants)¹⁴ to an impact of nine months (in both primary and secondary schools) on outcomes in mathematics, English and (with less statistical strength) science though the use of effective feedback. Some of the interventions used by Gaining Ground were seen as having a moderate impact (of three months progress) or low impact (of two months progress) on pupil outcomes. The findings from the evaluation of Gaining Ground are in line with this analysis, in that the effect size of the strategy for GCSE total points score is 0.24 and for Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 progression is 0.19 – that is, about three months of progress per year (in Sutton Trust terms). The mean cost per pupil of Gaining Ground as a strategy is also low (in Sutton Trust terms), although it should be recognised that the cost of £79 is split across all pupils in the school, not just across the Year 11 pupils for whom the outcomes can be calculated.

In comparison with the findings of the three selected research studies that calculated cost-effectiveness and the meta-analysis of interventions carried out by Higgins et al., the relative cost of Gaining Ground appears low, given the outcomes noted. We would urge caution in reading and interpreting the results, however, not least because we have had to assume that the relationship between inputs and outputs/outcomes is a consistent one, whereas it is likely that the marginal benefit associated with an additional level of investment will vary.

¹⁴ The strength of evidence for the studies included in this area was weak

Effectiveness

Measuring effectiveness normally requires a judgement on the extent to which the achieved outcomes indicate that objectives have been met. In some cases, it may also be appropriate to consider achieved outputs against targets. As far as we understand, the objectives set for the Gaining Ground Strategy were qualitative ones and so it has not been possible to compare achievements against quantitative targets.

Table 8.6 provides a commentary on the extent to which Gaining Ground objectives have been met. This includes evidence from the case study visits and the following surveys:

- SIP survey (104 responses)
- Headteacher survey (200 Gaining Ground and 100 comparison school responses)
- LA survey (18 responses)
- Pupil Year 8 survey (2,050 responses from Gaining Ground schools and 1,275 from comparison schools)
- Pupil Year 11 survey (1,773 responses from Gaining Ground schools and 821 from comparison schools)¹⁵.

From the evidence in the table, we can see that the Gaining Ground Strategy has been effective at a strategic level, challenging the 'cautious ethos' of schools and strengthening governance. The research evidence shows that the strategy has encouraged Gaining Ground schools to identify areas of under-performance and potential changes that could be made. As discussed above, it has also led to improvements in systems for monitoring and evaluating school and pupil performance. As part of the whole-school improvement activities, the Gaining Ground Strategy enabled greater support and training to be given to governors, which appears to have strengthened their ability to challenge senior leadership teams. However, the strategy appears to have been less effective at a classroom level within the two year period. Whilst the case-study evidence showed that some improvements in classroom practice had taken place, this was not reflected in the wider survey data. Similarly, there was no evidence from the survey data that the strategy has provided more opportunities to inspire and challenge 'stuck pupils' in Gaining Ground schools, relative to pupils in comparison schools. The staff surveys were undertaken with staff working at a strategic level (headteachers, SIPs and LAs) and so they may not have had such an in-depth understanding of any changes that had taken place at a classroom level. Even so, there was no evidence from the pupil survey to suggest noticeable change at classroom level.

¹⁵ The responses reported are the results from all pupils (combined results of the year 8 and year 11 surveys).

Table 8.6: Gaining Ground objectives

Gaining Ground objective	Evidence from the evaluation research	Assessment of effectiveness
<p>Challenge the cautious ethos: to achieve change in eligible schools by exposing them to other schools that have achieved more with similar pupil intakes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ninety per cent of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools had worked with a partner school or NLE (National Leader of Education) to support their school improvement work, compared to 76 per cent of comparison schools • Ninety per cent of headteachers in Gaining Ground schools had worked with the SIP to some extent or to a great extent to identify areas of under-performance, compared to 84 per cent of comparison school headteachers. The proportion that had worked with the SIP to a great extent was also higher (67 per cent in Gaining Ground schools and 56 per cent in comparison schools), • 84 per cent of SIPs working with Gaining Ground schools reported that they were able to identify priorities for improvement to a great extent. • Eleven of the 18 local authorities responding to the LA survey thought that the SIPs' support for Gaining Ground schools had been very effective, and a further three thought it had been fairly effective • Case-study evidence suggested that the majority of case-study schools had found the partner school experience to be a valuable one 	<p>School-to-school partnership working was a key feature of the Gaining Ground Strategy and appears to have worked well. Relative to comparison schools, a higher proportion had worked with partner schools or National Leaders of Education and the case-study evidence suggested that most schools had benefited from this activity</p>
<p>Strengthen governance: to increase the level of challenge and accountability, thereby acting as a catalyst for school improvement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventy three per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers reported they had provided, to some extent or to a great extent, training and support to governors to enable them to better challenge and hold SLT to account (This compared to 67 per cent amongst comparison schools). The proportion of Gaining Ground schools providing a great extent of training was 30 per cent in comparison to 22 per cent amongst comparison schools. • The proportion of Gaining Ground headteachers who reported they had worked with the SIP to support governors to play their part in raising standards and accelerating progress was also higher (77 per cent in Gaining Ground Schools and 50 per cent in comparison schools). • 51 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers agreed to a great extent that they are effectively challenged by the school's governing body, compared to 45 per cent for comparison schools (although the proportion reporting to some extent or a great extent was 	<p>The evaluation evidence suggests that the Gaining Ground Strategy has helped to strengthen governance. The strategy increased the level of support and training given to governors to enhance their performance. However, the findings from the case studies suggest that governors could be doing more to challenge senior leadership teams effectively and to hold them to account. There was evidence of Gaining Ground improving the quality of data that governing bodies were able to access</p>

Gaining Ground objective	Evidence from the evaluation research	Assessment of effectiveness
	<p>slightly higher for comparison schools, 95 per cent compared to 93 per cent for Gaining Ground schools).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eighty per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers agreed or strongly agreed that the governing body is now more engaged and better able to hold the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to account, compared to 68 per cent of comparison school headteachers. • The case study evidence suggested that governors had become more aware of the issues faced by schools and were more able to engage due to better use of data. 	
<p>Improve classroom practice: by providing increased access to specialist support for eligible schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 62 per cent of Gaining Ground pupils stated that it was always or mostly true that teaching at their school is good (this compared to 66 per cent for comparison schools) • Forty two per cent of pupils in Gaining Ground schools agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching in their school had been getting better over the last two years (this compared with 44 per cent of pupils in comparison schools) • 89 per cent of headteachers reported that Gaining Ground had impacted on teaching and learning to some or to a great extent. • Evidence from the case studies also suggested that teaching had improved (as evidenced by OFSTED reports) and that pupils felt they had benefitted from increased access to specialist support. • 31 per cent of pupils in Gaining Ground schools reported that it was always or mostly true that they took part in after-school clubs/activities (this compared to 33 per cent of pupils in comparison schools) • 71 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers and 72 per cent of comparison schools headteachers reported that they had brought in additional specialist staff, to some or a great extent, to support pupils • 83 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers and 89 per cent of comparison school headteachers reported that they had provided study support to pupils out of school hours. 	<p>Whilst the case studies provided some good examples of where additional specialist support had been brought in to assist pupils, the headteacher survey suggested that the Gaining Ground Strategy had not resulted in an increased level of specialist support relative to comparison schools.</p> <p>Even though case study evidence indicated improvements in classroom practice, slightly lower proportions of pupils in Gaining Ground schools reported improvements in teaching over the last two years, compared to pupils in comparison schools</p>
<p>Provide opportunities to inspire and challenge ‘stuck pupils’.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94 per cent of Gaining Ground headteachers agreed or strongly agreed that all pupils were now better encouraged to achieve their best (compared to 96 per cent of comparison schools) 	<p>Whilst the case study research provided some examples of positive impacts, there was no evidence from the survey data that the strategy had</p>

Gaining Ground objective	Evidence from the evaluation research	Assessment of effectiveness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fifty four per cent of Gaining Ground pupils thought that it was always or mostly true that they are given all the help they need to achieve their best. This compared to 57 per cent of pupils in comparison schools • Fifty seven per cent of Gaining Ground pupils reported there is more support available now to help them improve, compared to two years ago (compared to 57 per cent of pupils in comparison schools) • Forty one per cent of Gaining Ground pupils reported that they enjoyed studying more than they used to (compared to 40 per cent of pupils in non-Gaining Ground schools). • 62 per cent of Gaining Ground pupils stated that it was always or mostly true that they were given work that stretched and challenged them (in comparison to 62 per cent of comparison school pupils) • Case study evidence provided some examples of how schools had been able to inspire and challenge 'stuck pupils' 	<p>provided more opportunities to inspire and challenge 'stuck pupils' in Gaining Ground schools, relative to pupils in comparison schools.</p>

Source: *Feedback from schools*

8.4 Conclusion

The primary research provides evidence that the Gaining Ground Strategy has been very effective in meeting two of its original objectives (which related to enhancing strategic activities within the school) and less effective at meeting the two objectives relating to classroom practice. Furthermore, the cost-effectiveness ratios show that an average investment of £79 per pupil is associated with a positive impact on outcomes relating to attainment, progression and absence. At the same time, the survey data suggests little difference between outputs at Gaining Ground schools compared to similar comparison schools (other than improving systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance). By contrast, when asked directly, most survey and case-study respondents' reported that the strategy had impacted on outputs (see Chapter 5) and offered good value for money, as explored in the section below.

8.5 The views of research participants

8.4.1 Headteachers' views on value for money

Headteachers were asked whether they thought Gaining Ground **represented good value for money** in terms of the outcomes achieved. The vast majority (92 per cent) said 'yes', and cited the following reasons:

- schools valued the access to new ideas and expertise (e.g. 'learning from other practitioners', 'proven strategies that could quite easily be transplanted', 'created a different culture amongst teachers', 'opened our eyes to possibilities')
- the dedicated funds enabled work to be done that could not otherwise have been attempted ('no way we would have been able to access the range of experiences without the funding', 'one-to-one tuition which we wouldn't have had the resources to offer otherwise', 'allowed us to target the most vulnerable', 'increase capacity to deliver additional enrichment activities')
- in some schools there had been considerable impacts on aspirations, achievement and student satisfaction ('improved attendance', 'a 14 per cent improvement in outcomes', 'our best GCSE results ever', 'outcomes have gone up from 48 to 64 per cent', 'our results were pretty outstanding', 'we've had a 10 point improvement in our CVA')
- some schools said the link between investment and impact was clear ('we can track where the money went, and track the impact').

The six per cent of headteachers who felt the strategy **did not represent good value for money** felt that:

- the strategy had not been appropriate to their circumstances ('very one-size-fits-all', 'needed something more intensive')
- they were poorly matched with their partner school ('there wasn't much choice', 'our partner school didn't offer what we needed')
- valuable resources had been wasted ('expensive lunches in London', 'the partner school got a lot of money without doing much').

Headteachers in the Gaining Ground schools were asked about **additional sources of funding and resources** that they had drawn on to support their school improvement work. Headteachers in the comparison schools provided the same information. The responses for both groups are shown in Table 8.7 below.

Table 8.7 Funding and resources drawn on by Gaining Ground and comparison schools to support school improvement work

Funding/resources	Headteachers Gaining Ground schools per cent			Headteachers Comparison schools per cent		
	Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know
Allocation from within existing school budget	65	33	3	91	6	3
Additional funding from local authority	41	56	3	58	43	0
Benefits in kind	11	87	3	33	67	0
Other	35	65	1	48	51	1

Source: NFER CATI survey of headteachers, 2011
 Headteachers (Gaining Ground schools) N=200
 Headteachers (Comparison schools) N=100

As the table shows, schools that did not take part in the Gaining Ground Strategy were more likely to draw on other sources of funding or resources. The most common additional source of funding among comparison schools was from their **existing school budget allocation** (91 per cent), followed by **additional LA funding** (58 per cent). One-third received **benefits in kind**, which could include things like support from employers. A substantial proportion of both Gaining Ground and comparison schools accessed funding from sources not listed (35 and 48 per cent, respectively). Further analysis revealed that these other sources most commonly included the National Challenge Strategy, the Specialist Schools Strategy and funding for one-to-one tuition.

8.5.2 SIPs' views on value for money

As in the headteacher survey, SIPs were asked their views on whether the Gaining Ground Strategy **represented good value for money**. More than three-quarters (79 per cent) said 'yes'. Their reasons included the focused nature of the strategy and the fact that it facilitated a different or broader range of school improvement activities. They also commented on the impact of the strategy and explained that this impact was:

- very significant given a relatively small amount of funding
- evident immediately
- measurable (e.g. targets met)
- maximised due to additional SIP time.

The minority of SIPs who thought that Gaining Ground **did not represent good value for money** (15 per cent) cited reasons that included the following:

- it did not provide anything that the school did not already have in place
- access to funding was regarded as an end in itself
- while the funding was helpful, it could not solve all the school's problems
- the school, or certain staff, failed to engage with the strategy
- monitoring of improvement was not rigorous enough
- there were issues regarding the effectiveness of the school-to-school partnership.

8.5.3 Local authority staffs' views on value for money

As in the surveys of headteachers and SIPs, LA staff were asked their opinion on Gaining Ground's value for money in terms of the outcomes achieved. Nine of the 17 who responded said they thought the strategy **represented good value for money**. Eight of these respondents gave an explanation, citing that:

- the strategy was based on good research
- it raised awareness of schools that were 'coasting'
- the additional funding enabled development and the provision of specific support that would not otherwise have been available
- school-to-school support was a powerful stimulus for improvement.

However, some caveats were added:

- achieving value for money depended on the willingness or ability of schools to truly engage
- strong – and in some cases, new – leaders were pivotal to the success of the strategy
- Gaining Ground worked as one of a *portfolio* of school improvement initiatives
- assessing value for money was complicated by the variation in improvement across schools.

Six LA staff stated that they did not know if Gaining Ground represented good value for money and three provided explanations. These largely mirrored the caveats reported above, for example, that Gaining Ground was one of a number of initiatives and it was difficult to isolate its specific impact. Two LA staff commented that value for money depended on the quality of school-to-school support and partnerships.

Only two LA respondents indicated that they felt the strategy **did not represent value for money**, and explained that Gaining Ground provided nothing new to schools in their authority and that the key to improvement was the employment of a good quality SIP.

The closing question in the survey offered LA staff a chance to share any other comments they had. Ten out of 18 respondents took this opportunity, in several cases reiterating points already made (about the value for money, or otherwise, of the strategy, and conditions of its success). A number of LA staff commented on how Gaining Ground worked alongside other school improvement work, but their views were mixed. Three respondents felt that the additional funding complemented or enhanced existing school improvement work. However, another three respondents commented that there was a lack of integration with other work and a lack of cooperation or communication from other sources of support, such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. In addition, two LA staff members compared the strategy unfavourably to the National Challenge initiative.

8.5.4 Value for money: what the case studies showed

The views of case-study interviewees closely echoed those of the teachers responding to the surveys. The majority of headteachers (17) agreed that the strategy had offered good value for money, with the remaining five unsure. Most based their answers on one or more of the following reasons:

- **the flexibility of Gaining Ground funding:** which allowed them to invest it where they thought it was most needed and would have the greatest impact. It also allowed innovative ideas/approaches to be tested 'risk-free'.
- **the timing of the strategy:** which allowed them to resource and take forward school improvement activities that they had already planned.
- **being able to invest in both staff (e.g. the creation of specific project posts and new professional development opportunities) and resources (e.g. data systems, learning resources):** that would ensure longer term impacts beyond the Gaining Ground funding period; and
- **the benefits that their school had accrued:** both in the second year of the strategy and those they anticipated in the future.

Moreover, most headteachers shared the view that while the Gaining Ground funding represented a relatively small amount of funding, it had made 'a significant impact' on their schools. It was also evident from the interviews that some schools had invested additional resources (staff time and money) into the strategy to support those activities 'kick-started' by Gaining Ground.

The only area in which schools were less sure about the value for money of the strategy was in the contribution made by the partner schools. The headteachers of six Gaining Ground schools felt that their partner school 'did not provide support to the value of ten thousand pounds'. By contrast, some of the comparison schools felt they had given more time to Gaining Ground than they had been paid for, as the Assistant Headteacher of one school explained:

The school got £10,000 for their support but gave much more than that. Once the relationship is there, it means you do things out of good will and because we also gain something from it.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The final chapter of this report draws conclusions from this evaluation of the Gaining Ground Strategy. The chapter then presents evidence from the endpoint surveys and case-study visits to schools to address each of the evaluation's eight underpinning research questions as set out earlier in Section 1.2. The report concludes by providing several recommendations for future school improvement policy.

9.1 Conclusions

The Gaining Ground Strategy made a valuable contribution to enhancing participating schools' strategies, plans and interventions for improving pupil attainment and progression. Empirical evidence from this evaluation indicates that Gaining Ground provided significant stimulus and resources which motivated and mobilized schools to accelerate and consolidate changes to their ways of working in order to strengthen leadership capacity and improve classroom practice, study support and the assessment of pupils' progress. Gaining Ground encouraged and enabled schools to take stock of their strengths and limitations and further develop their infrastructure to lead, manage, and coordinate improvements related to the performance of staff and pupils. Improvements also came through Gaining Ground helping to make schools more outward-looking and learn from the effective practice they observed in partner schools. There were indications that the progress and improvements made were becoming embedded in Gaining Ground schools.

The Gaining Ground model was effective in stimulating and supporting change. The combination of relatively modest funding allocated directly to schools and the expert support provided by SIPs and partner schools provided a set of resources which could be used by school leaders in a flexible and responsive way to meet the particular needs of their institution. Governors and headteachers valued this non-prescriptive, devolved approach which enabled them to target the resources based on their in-depth knowledge of their school, and their experience, expertise and needs. The suggestion that there was room for improvement and higher achievement proved a better motivator than the 'coasting' schools deficit label used in the early days of Gaining Ground which was generally regarded as misapplied and unhelpful. The evaluation findings revealed that Gaining Ground schools' expectations of what their involvement would achieve were largely fulfilled providing strong evidence and insights that this model works.

Key aspects of the Gaining Ground Strategy are in step with current thinking and developments in education policy. For example, the flexible and devolved Gaining Ground model resonates with the Government's aim of creating a school system which is more autonomous and effectively self-improving as outlined in the Schools White Paper (2011): 'We will make sure that schools are in control of their own improvement and make it easier for them to learn from one another' (p.74), adding that 'We will incentivize schools to work together to raise standards, especially for disadvantaged pupils' (p.76). The Schools White Paper (2011) indicates that schools

will be able to find suitable support through a new market of providers and services including NLEs and LLEs. The characteristics of successful Gaining Ground schools are also similar to the characteristics of schools which make rapid progress in raising pupils' achievement identified by Ofsted (2011). These characteristics include: senior leadership that is ambitious for all pupils to achieve; a governing body that challenges senior leaders to improve school performance; middle leaders who actively manage change; monitoring systems which identify areas of under-performance which have to be tackled; systems which provide tailor-made support for pupils; and a challenging but flexible curriculum. Furthermore, the school-to-school support which was at the core of Gaining Ground is reflected in the increasing role that successful schools play in supporting and working in partnership with less successful schools noted by Ofsted (2011) which highlighted National Support Schools and federations of schools as emerging sources of support. The partnership working and inclusion of middle leaders in implementing school improvement promoted by Gaining Ground correspond with effective leadership roles identified by the OECD (2012) which reports that 'an important role for school leaders is that of collaborating with other schools or communities around them ... leadership at the school level must be better distributed, so that deputy headteachers and leadership teams can assume some of the school leader's tasks when he or she is taking on larger roles' (p. 20).

9.2 Summary of findings on the evaluation questions

1. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy improved attainment in the targeted schools?

The Gaining Ground Strategy appears to have had a positive impact on attainment at GCSE level. Analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) revealed that the probability of a 'typical' Year 11 pupil attaining five A*-C GCSE grades (including English and mathematics) increased by an average of 13 percentage points, relative to comparable average pupils in comparison schools. The strategy also had a positive impact on capped total GCSE points score in all subjects achieved by Gaining Ground pupils. On average, a Gaining Ground pupil's total score increased by 21 points (this would be equivalent to a pupil moving from 8 D grades to 3 grade C and 5 grade Ds), relative to those in comparison schools.

2. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy improved progression in the targeted schools?

The Gaining Ground Strategy appears to have had a positive impact on average KS2-4 progress in English and mathematics amongst Gaining Ground pupils, relative to those in comparison schools. The modelling suggests that Year 11 pupils in Gaining Ground schools progressed an additional 0.22 levels on average between KS2 and KS4, compared to pupils in non-Gaining Ground schools.

3. To what extent has the Gaining Ground Strategy increased pupil positivity towards their school experience?

The evidence on whether the Gaining Ground Strategy improved pupils' attitudes towards their school experience, relative to those in comparison schools, was mixed. While the findings from the case-study visits suggested that Gaining Ground schools were developing more engaging, high-quality and effective teaching, the findings from the pupil surveys suggested that pupils' attitudes towards teaching and learning were similar across Gaining Ground and comparison schools. However, most pupils reported positive views of their school experience. For example, more than three-fifths of pupils said it was 'always' or 'mostly true' that: the teaching in their school was good; that teachers made it clear what pupils needed to do in lessons; and that they were given work that stretched and challenged them.

4. How beneficial have practitioners found the Gaining Ground Strategy?

The headteachers of Gaining Ground schools appear to be amongst those staff that have benefited most. Many reported they had gained confidence and had become more aware of the strategies deployed in more successful schools to improve attainment and progression. There was also evidence of impact on middle managers and their relationship with, and sometimes role on, senior leadership teams. There was particular impact on the headteachers of mathematics and English departments in terms of enhancing their performance in leading improvements. Governing bodies were reported to have access to better quality data. They had become more aware of issues faced by schools and were more able to engage due to better use of data. There was also evidence that Gaining Ground had benefitted the wider teaching staff through opportunities for collaborative dialogue with teachers in partner schools. In the best examples, this had stimulated them into reflecting on their own practice and supported teachers to identify next steps in their professional learning. Staff in partner schools also reported valuing the opportunities to reflect on and strengthen their own practice through working with Gaining Ground school staff. Headteachers in both schools reported valuing the opportunity to come together to share ideas.

5. What has been the impact and effectiveness of the overall strategy?

Headteachers appreciated the flexible and non-prescriptive approach to school improvement provided by Gaining Ground. By giving schools the autonomy to set their own priorities and to decide how best to meet them, they have been able to bring in the support required to meet local needs and priorities identified in discussion with their SIP, governing body and partner school. The allocation of funding, the support mechanisms provided and the way the strategy had been structured into complementary strands, allowed schools to undertake additional school improvement activities and/or to bring forward planned activities, appropriate to their needs. As a package of support, case-study interviewees generally thought the strategy worked well. Evidence from the surveys and case-studies has shown that the Gaining Ground model was effective in stimulating and supporting change, while the analysis of NPD data has revealed that the strategy was effective in improving pupil attainment and progression in the targeted schools. Overall the strategy should be considered a success.

6. What has been the impact and effectiveness of individual elements of the strategy?

Most of the Gaining Ground strands were considered beneficial, but particularly the additional funding for study support, school-to-school support and the additional SIP days. Additional funding for study support was valued for helping to develop capacity and provision, for allowing for creativity and experimentation, for encouraging targeting and allowing for intensive intervention. School-to-school support was considered beneficial due to the exposure to new ideas and approaches, for giving staff the opportunity to learn from a high-performing school's experiences and due to the perceived value of a mentoring-type relationship. Relationships were thought to be mutually beneficial for most partnerships. The additional four days of support from SIPs to help formulate, monitor and evaluate plans for improvement were generally valued by headteachers. The additional SIP days helped SIPs to give bespoke support and to be more deeply engaged and involved with schools. SIPs also served as brokers between schools, helping partners to maintain focus. Almost all schools reported more effective use of Assessment for Learning (AfL). In turn, there was reported impact on pupils' understanding of how to improve their performance.

7. What can be learnt from this policy to shape future school improvement policies?

Gaining Ground lends support to the argument that school-to-school support can be a particularly effective mechanism for improvement. It gives credence to the notion that schools can learn from more effective schools, but that these schools need to be carefully matched. While Gaining Ground is not the only strategy to draw on school-to-school support (it is also a key feature of City Challenge), the strategy does highlight what might be considered to be some of the active ingredients of effective school partnership working. These ingredients include regular communication and a structured plan for improvement. Schools also need to share: a commitment to working to support one another; similar intakes and ideals; and the ability to establish a strong mutual understanding between the SLTs of both schools about the challenges to be addressed. Gaining Ground demonstrates that by supporting schools with relatively modest levels of funding, and by allowing them to set their own school improvement priorities, schools can put together a package of support best suited to their needs.

8. Is the Gaining Ground Strategy delivering value for money?

The primary research provides evidence that the Gaining Ground Strategy has been very effective in meeting two of its original objectives (which related to enhancing strategic activities within the school) and less effective at meeting the two objectives relating to classroom practice. Whilst the survey data suggests little difference between outputs at Gaining Ground schools compared to similar comparison schools (other than improving systems for monitoring and evaluating school/pupil performance), there is evidence the strategy is linked with positive outcomes. The cost-effectiveness ratios show that an average investment of £79 per pupil (or £88,194 per school over two school years) is associated with a positive impact on outcomes relating to attainment, progression and attendance.

9.3 Recommendations

The report concludes by presenting the following policy recommendations for consideration.

‘Collaboration is the future’, Headteacher

Gaining Ground shows that school-to-school support can be a particularly effective mechanism for helping to implement school improvement. It demonstrates that schools can learn from more effective schools, but that these schools need to be carefully matched. To improve standards, the Government should continue to encourage and enable schools to work with, and learn from, each other, by sharing resources, experiences and ideas. The Government should consider how it can promote and facilitate the brokerage of school-to-school partnerships which includes assisting with the matching process and introducing schools to one another.

‘If it’s worth doing, it’s worth funding’, Headteacher

Government should be aware that targeted funding, alongside a specific challenge to schools, can catalyse action. Any future work with schools seeking to improve should consider their spending priorities and the financial incentives that might play a part in driving their improvement. These incentives could be used to purchase the resources and support they require from the new market of providers and services referred to in Section 8.1 above. Changes to the inspection framework, such as Ofsted’s plans to replace the ‘satisfactory’ judgment with ‘requires improvement’, will not, on their own, bring about the level of improvement required.

‘Focus on the ethos of improvement’, Head of Mathematics

Schools seeking to improve their performance should consider the following practical learning points identified by this evaluation which show that schools can improve by:

- developing a positive culture of expectations which continually raises the aspirations of governors, staff and pupils and challenges them to achieve more
- improving the use of existing systems for tracking and monitoring pupils’ progress to identify pupils’ individual development needs and shape the action to be taken – data is the tool for focusing improvement
- drawing on the experience and expertise of higher-performing schools which will provide innovative and effective practice examples for strengthening the management of change, the organisation and content of teaching and learning, and the provision of pupil support.

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