



Investigating the school improvement needs and practices of London primary and secondary schools: Final report

Ceri Matthias- BMG Research

Introduction

In April 2012, BMG Research was commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA), supported by the Department for Education (DfE), to conduct a survey into the school improvement needs and practices of primary and secondary schools in London. This research brief reports final findings from the survey, conducted in May and June 2012.

The overarching aim of the study was to assess the need for pan-London facilitation of school improvement services; and how and where value could be added through the sharing of ideas, the building of networks, or other non-prescriptive approaches. Within this, the study aimed to:

- Identify the key sources of school improvement support and motivation for London schools, quantifying the importance of the main sourced identified.
- Reveal any variations in school improvement needs or practices between different groups of schools in London.
- Assess the extent to which the pattern of school improvement needs and practices varies between local authorities or clusters of local authorities in London, and to uncover any distinctive patterns of local provision that it is possible to identify using a sample survey methodology.
- Probe the priority, importance, or level of engagement with a range of school improvement practiced, and to reach a deeper understanding of how London schools are responding to increased autonomy.

Background

The Mayor's Education Inquiry has explored the critical challenges facing London's primary and secondary schools, with the aim of making recommendations for practical action with key partners including the boroughs, schools and policy-makers. One of the key themes of the Inquiry is educational standards and the quality of learning provision.

National policy on school improvement has changed significantly since the change of government in 2010. The Schools White Paper (The Importance of Teaching, p.73) stated that schools have responsibility for improvement and announced the end of an approach of trying to control improvement from the centre. This has marked the end of programmes such as City Challenge and School Improvement Partners.

There are many ways now for schools to improve, including making use of school-to-school networks such as the National College for School Leadership's National Leaders of Education (NLEs), Local Leaders of Education (LLEs) and Teaching Schools or Teaching School Alliances (TSAs). These initiatives are one part of the range of options that schools may be using or considering. This research investigates the full

range of school improvement practices and the gaps or challenges in accessing these specific to London schools.

Methodology

The school population interviewed included primary and secondary schools of maintained and academy status but excluded special schools, sixth-form only colleges and pupil referral units.

Structured telephone interviews were undertaken by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), averaging 32 minutes in duration, undertaken by BMG's in-house team of education-specialist interviewers. Refusals were low (approximately 10% on average) but availability during the survey period was limited by events including National Curriculum Tests; Diamond Jubilee celebrations; school visits/headship days; and general workload during a busy term.

A letter was emailed to schools before fieldwork began, informing them of the survey and its significance, which was re-sent as required during the fieldwork period. A reminder was administered to non-respondents following the spring half-term. Respondents were interviewed out of school hours and during half term where this was more convenient to them.

From a total of 2,201 eligible schools a final sample of 530 was achieved over the five weeks of fieldwork (24%). This is profiled as follows:

Phase: 469 primaries and 61 secondaries.

Status: 492 maintained schools and 38 academies.

Location: 344 in Outer London and 186 in Inner London.

Role: 366 heads and 164 deputies.

The sample achieved was monitored by a range of variables throughout fieldwork and was found to be highly representative against school population figures in terms of Ofsted grades, eligibility for free school meals (FSM), location (Inner/Outer London), number of pupils on roll, and faith character. Weights were applied to the data by phase and status to correct for lower response rates in the secondary maintained and secondary academy sectors (15% and 13% respectively) relative to the primary maintained and primary academy sectors (26% and 25%). The impact of weights applied was assessed and found not to reduce the wider representativeness of the sample by other variables, including FSM, location, and school size and faith character.

Key findings from the final research report

Where the challenge lies in school improvement

London primary and secondary schools are highly engaged in their school improvement and confident in their identification of school improvement priorities.

However, resourcing improvement is a particular challenge, and schools are not widely confident about evaluating value for money in school improvement measures taken. Schools are also hungry for more information on effective school improvement strategies, and to find out what has worked for other schools, reflecting a wider trend of increasing emphasis on peer-to-peer support in general.

The opportunity to spread knowledge and confidence via system leadership and Teaching School Alliances is reflected in higher proportions of NLEs and outstanding schools finding aspects of school improvement easy or very easy.

Challenge and support used by schools

When seeking to identify school improvement priorities, other schools are the first port of call for schools (76%), after internal processes (99%) and governors (92%). The local authority is less-used at this initial stage of the school improvement process (68%), but still more used than commercial services (42%).

At the stage of implementing school improvement, the local authority is currently the most important provider of support (used by 86%), followed by commercial services (72%) and other schools (70%).

Where external challenge to improve has been received, schools are generally positive about the impact this has had, even more so where this challenge has come from peers (95% positive) compared to the local authority (84% positive).

While 17% expect to use the local authority less in future (to implement school improvement support), 12% expect to use them more, and so the school improvement market is likely to evolve fairly gradually. Over time it is set to expand quite significantly, with schools widely expecting to use a range of providers 'more' in future, and already 98% of schools use at least one external party (aside from governors) to help set their school improvement priorities.

At various stages in the survey, phase, school status and Ofsted grades reflect differences in practices and needs. But where schools work with other schools on delivering school improvement, they are more interested in specific areas of expertise and experience, rather than exclusively seeking to work with schools that have a higher Ofsted grading. Some primaries in particular prefer to work exclusively within their phase, but generally there is an open approach to working with schools irrespective of phase and status, and across boroughs.

It is a common thread throughout the findings of this survey, that schools in a position to deliver school improvement support to others (via system leadership roles or teaching school alliances), also consider their own school improvement opportunities to be greater, perhaps as a result of the networks it gives them access to. For example, among respondents who were NLEs or LLEs, 67% stated that they used (other) NLEs/LLEs to identify school improvement priorities, compared to 21% of non NLEs/LLEs. While mutual benefits are clearly a positive, a worst-case scenario is that improvement is therefore focused on the best and the worst schools, leaving those in the middle (e.g. grade 2 Ofsted schools not using NLEs) less engaged in school improvement channels.

Current school improvement priorities and areas of focus

The top 3 school improvement priorities stated by London primary and secondary schools are as follows:

- Raising standards and participation in core subjects (85%)
- Raising teaching performance (84%)
- The underperformance of specific pupil groups or underperformance generally (80%).

Figures in brackets above denote percentages agreeing that this area was highly relevant to their current school improvement priorities.

Among schools focusing on core subjects, there is a higher focus on subjects where key stage performance is lower. However, on the whole, more schools focus on literacy/English (including basic reading and writing) than on numeracy.

Among schools who are focused on pupil underperformance in their school improvement, most look at general underperformance, followed by targeting pupils with SEN, and children judged to be vulnerable (with smaller percentages focusing on specific ethnic groups).

In curriculum design, a key focus is on developing a creative curriculum and cross-curricular links. For the primary sector in particular, curriculum enrichment/learning outside the classroom is a key priority.

One in five secondary schools mention issues relating to school buildings when asked to state any other school improvement priorities (not listed by questions in the survey), suggesting that the physical environment is a particular priority within school improvement planning this year.

Future needs, governor challenge, and pan-London support

Just under half of schools report having unmet needs or further information requirements in at least one of their school improvement priority areas. The most common requests related to curriculum design (e.g. more information on the new National Curriculum) and pupil underperformance (e.g. more information on requirements relating to Special Educational Needs). Both the National Curriculum and SEN are areas which are subject to current reviews of national policy, and so responses reflect schools' keenness to remain up-to-date with national policy.

Demand for peer-to-peer collaboration for school improvement (both formal and informal) is likely to grow substantially. Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) in particular are expected to be a more significant provider of school improvement support going forwards: Approximately half of schools already using TSAs anticipate wanting to use them more in future. Furthermore, half of non-users anticipate wanting to start using these in future. Projecting these figures onto the London school population as a whole, the survey indicates that 395 London schools are already using TSAs at least to some extent and of these 192 seek to use them more. Among the 1,806 schools not currently using TSAs as many as 834 anticipate wanting to use TSAs for school improvement in future.

Support to increase skills-levels in governing bodies is considered likely to boost to school improvement. More than nine in ten schools use their governors to help set priorities (92%) but only 52% rate 'input from the governing body or chair' as important when deciding on school improvement options i.e. how to implement improvements in the areas prioritised. On average, governors are rated 7.4 out of 10 by schools in terms of providing challenge and expertise to support school improvement.

After 'support to increase skills levels', next most valued would be an increase in the time that governors have available for school business. This aspect is particularly valued by school leaders in the primary sector.

Analysis by sub-groups here suggests that academies rate governor challenge and expertise more highly than other schools (8.1 out of 10) as do schools with lower levels of free school meal eligibility (7.8 out of 10), noting a correlation between these two subgroups.

Pan-London support as a whole appears to be largely sought-after and welcomed. There are small suggestions that Inner-London schools may be slightly more engaged in a potential London curriculum enrichment offer and that secondaries might be more likely to use online sign-posting and case study

provision, but generally there is little variation across school types compared to other measures in the survey.

Among secondaries, assistance engaging with universities and employers would be particularly valued (92%), and to a greater extent than London-focused teaching materials, although a large majority would also value these (83%).

All schools were asked to rate the usefulness of having a shared vision and ambition for schools in London, using a response scale from not at all to very useful. A large majority were positive about this vision, with 8 in 10 (79%) stating very useful or fairly useful, and only 5% stating 'not at all useful'.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from

Jo Hutchinson, 4th Floor, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT

Jo.HUTCHINSON@education.gsi.gov.uk

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