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## Evaluation of the City Challenge programme

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### ***Introduction***

This Research Brief sets out the findings of an evaluation of the City Challenge programme 2008-11, and a retrospective review of the London Challenge 2003-08. The aims of the evaluation were:

- to assess the City Challenge programme in relation to its key objectives;
- to establish the efficacy of different approaches to the improvement of school performance and schools systems in urban conurbations.

### ***Key findings about the programme in relation to its objectives***

- *To reduce the number of underperforming schools.* The number of schools below the floor target showed a significantly greater reduction than was the case in the rest of England. The programme to improve underperforming schools was successful; a regression-based analysis showed a positive impact on the proportions of pupils achieving expected levels<sup>1</sup>. A fair measure of impact is tracking year-on-year change in results relative to what is typical for schools with similar previous results. After the start of the intervention, secondary school performance on this measure was approximately two per cent better than it had been before intervention, and for primary, approximately five per cent better (over a shorter time period).
- *To increase the number of Good and Outstanding schools.* The number of such schools increased, despite changes to the Ofsted framework which made this target harder to achieve.
- *To improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children.* The attainment of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) increased by more than the national figure. However, attainment gaps between FSM pupils and their peers narrowed only for London primary and secondary pupils and Greater Manchester primary pupils.

Clearly a great many factors contributed to these improvements, including national policies and strategies and the considerable efforts of headteachers and staff. However, these factors apply everywhere in the country. The most plausible explanation for the greater improvement in Challenge areas is that the City

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<sup>1</sup> For secondary schools, the measure used was the percentage of pupils achieving five A\*-C grades at GCSE. For primary schools, it was a composite average of the percentage attaining Level 4 at KS2 English combined with percentage attaining Level 4 at KS2 Mathematics.

Challenge programme was responsible. The vast majority of stakeholders at all levels who contributed to this evaluation attributed the additional improvement (over and above improvement in other parts of the country) to the work of City Challenge.

### ***Key findings about effective approaches to school improvement in City Challenge***

- Working at area level meant that each area could use its local identity to try and unite all those concerned with education in raising aspirations. It also provided an opportunity for learning across Local Authority boundaries.
- City Challenge supported schools to become more outward looking, and created structures through which school staff were able to learn from practice in other schools.
- The expert roles created, Challenge Advisors and National and Local Leaders of Education, were extremely effective.
- The use of bespoke solutions enabled the specific issues facing each school to be tackled, and gave a sense of ownership to headteachers and staff.
- It was recognised that individuals and school communities tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged, and achievements are celebrated.

### ***The City Challenge programme***

City Challenge was launched in April 2008 by the DCSF, building on the success of the London Challenge 2003-08. It was designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and 'to crack the associated cycle of disadvantage and underachievement' in the Black Country, Greater Manchester and London (DfES, 2007: 1).

The programme was distinctive in a number of ways. It was underpinned by a belief that the educational problems facing urban areas should be addressed at area level, and that Local Authorities (LAs) and schools need to work together to do this. Thus it aimed to improve educational provision and school performance across broad geographical areas, not simply in a specific group of participating schools. It focused on all aspects of the education system, working strategically at area level and with LAs, community organisations, parents and pupils, and developing a range of specific school interventions which were closely focused on the intended outcomes of City Challenge. These included:

- Keys to Success<sup>2</sup>, which focused underperforming schools;
- interventions targeted at Satisfactory schools, and others to support Good schools in becoming Outstanding;
- programmes designed to support schools in narrowing attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers;
- the provision of Families of Schools data, and encouragement to schools to work with other schools in their Family (i.e. with similar intakes);
- capacity building work with Local Authorities;
- Leadership Strategies<sup>3</sup> led by the National College, including the designation of National and Local leaders of Education, and professional development programmes in teaching schools;
- various local interventions in each area.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Black Country, this intervention was called Pathways to Achievement.

<sup>3</sup> The NFER conducted an evaluation of the Leadership Strategies (Rudd et al., 2011).

There was no single view of what schools needed to do to improve; all the interventions involved local solutions with key stakeholders (including headteachers and LA officers) centrally involved in the decisions. The various activities and interventions were characterised by a belief that school-to-school collaboration has a central role to play in school improvement; a recognition of the importance of school leadership; and a data-rich approach to tackling issues and sharing learning. A key ambition of the programme in each area was to raise the aspirations of all those involved education. Building on the experience of the London Challenge (2003-08), the programme was underpinned by a belief that the best way to improve schools is to provide support and encouragement, and to celebrate success.

### ***The evaluation***

The mixed methods evaluation included four main strands of work:

- a literature review;
- analyses of documents and attainment data, including a regression-based analysis of the attainment of Keys to Success schools;
- a survey sent to schools receiving support through the City Challenge programme;
- qualitative research including school and LA case studies and stakeholder interviews.

### ***What can be learned from City Challenge?***

#### *The objectives for school improvement programmes*

The experience of City Challenge suggested that school improvement programmes need to have clear, achievable and focused objectives, and that making the objectives too wide may be a mistake. It also demonstrated that it is helpful to have a certain amount of flexibility in the objectives set, and being able to change these as the programme develops.

It was helpful that City Challenge had objectives relating to Good and Outstanding schools as well as to underperforming schools, as this reinforced the message that all schools need to work to improve.

Targets can have perverse effects, and there was some evidence of schools focusing on borderline pupils in order to raise school attainment in the short term, rather than focusing on sustainable improvement.

Changes in school floor targets and the Ofsted framework between 2008 and 2011 made it more difficult to assess progress. In a culture where schools have been encouraged to measure their achievements against targets, interviewees expressed concern that there was no way of recognising and celebrating the improvements that had taken place against the previous framework/targets.

Interviewees also argued that it was unfortunate that the overall objective of raising attainment for disadvantaged children was translated into a focus on narrowing/closing attainment gaps, because gaps do not necessarily reflect the level of attainment of the disadvantaged pupils.

#### *Geographic and time scales for school improvement initiatives*

Tackling school improvement at area level (rather than national or individual school level) has considerable benefits, particularly in encouraging school staff and LA officers to think more widely and exchange ideas and practices across LA boundaries. Each of the City Challenge areas had a specific identity; they were not randomly chosen groups of LAs. This meant that it was possible to try to unite schools, parents, community organisations and other stakeholders behind the idea of the Challenge.

There clearly has to be a balance between using solutions that are tried and tested, and securing local buy-in by encouraging local solutions to local problems. This is not easy to achieve, and there were tensions, particularly in the Black Country, resulting from the perception that City Challenge was a London programme.

It takes time to bring about sustainable improvement across an area, and three years was perhaps too short. While both Greater Manchester and the Black Country had many areas of success, a further two years could have enabled them to meet all their objectives and to ensure that improvement was sustainable.

### *Strategies for school improvement*

Different forms of support are effective in schools at different stages on their improvement journey.

- Inadequate and underperforming schools benefited from support from experts.
- Satisfactory schools from working with two or three other schools with similar intakes, led by a headteacher of a school that was further along its school improvement journey (but not necessarily Outstanding).
- Good and Outstanding schools benefited from a wide range of opportunities to share practice and learn from other schools with outstanding practice in specific areas. They also benefited from supporting weaker schools.

City Challenge emphasised the use of bespoke solutions; these are important both in tackling the specific issues faced in each school, and in giving school leaders and staff a sense of ownership, rather than 'being done to'.

### *The use of experts*

Drawing on the earlier London Challenge, City Challenge used two new expert roles: Challenge Advisors and National and Local Leaders of Education (NLEs and LLEs), who were headteachers who had been successful in bringing about school improvement in their own schools. They complemented support provided by LA officers and consultants. Both new expert roles were effective, because they had relevant experience and expertise of urban education and school improvement; they brought wider perspectives, and did not have preconceptions about the schools they worked in; and they were generally found to be responsive, approachable and supportive.

The evaluation suggested that it would be useful for a team of school improvement experts, based on the Challenge Advisors, both in working in the weakest schools, and in working with LAs at strategic level. It also demonstrated the importance of having structures through which Advisors, NLEs and LLEs can be effectively and rapidly deployed.

### *School-to-school working*

City Challenge arrangements that enabled school leaders and teachers to share effective practice proved to be extremely beneficial. These included conferences at which practice was shared; a stronger school supporting a weaker one; groups of three led by the headteacher of a more successful school; Families of Schools which had similar intakes; hub schools or knowledge centres; and the Improving and Outstanding Teacher Programmes. Leadership at area level was a key factor in brokering such arrangements, and could also be useful in ensuring that *all* schools are outward looking.

Both headteachers and teachers argued that they learned most effectively from seeing good practice or hearing about it from those who had undertaken it. The most effective strategies to improve teaching and learning took place in schools, and involved observing excellent teaching; opportunities to reflect with

colleagues; and coaching in the teacher's own classroom. It was argued that all teachers should spend at least a day a year in another school exploring different and/or better practice.

#### *Addressing weak leadership and teachers*

Weak leaders can be supported through coaching, mentoring and other development opportunities. However, in cases where the leader does not develop sufficiently, there is a need for a transparent and structured process to decide a way forward, and it is vital that where a headteacher leaves as a result of such a process, permanent arrangements are quickly made for the leadership of that school. Schools showed less improvement with unsatisfactory or interim leadership arrangements.

#### *The affective aspects of school improvement*

Perhaps the most effective aspect of City challenge was that it recognised that individuals and school communities tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged. The ethos of the programme, in which successes were celebrated, and it was recognised that if teachers are to inspire pupils they themselves need to be motivated and inspired, was a key factor in its success.

### **References**

DfES (2007) *City Challenge for World Class Education*, DfES.

Rudd, P. et al. (2011) *Evaluation of City Challenge Leadership Strategies: Overview Report*, Slough: NFER.

### **Additional Information**

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

Further information about this research can be obtained from  
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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.