



Department
for Education

School to School Support Project evaluation

**Bradford Opportunity Area Intervention
Level Evaluation Report**

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Government
Social Research

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Contents

List of tables	5
List of figures	6
Glossary of abbreviations	7
Executive summary	8
Key insights for future delivery	8
Introduction	8
Evaluation aims and methodology	9
Key findings	9
Implementation and delivery	9
Benefits, outcomes and impacts	10
Conclusion	12
1. Introduction	13
Key Terms	13
1.1. S2SS project	14
1.2. Logic model	15
1.3. Literature review	16
1.3.1. Enablers and barriers to effective collaboration	16
1.3.2. Outcomes and impacts of school improvement initiatives	17
1.4. Evaluation aims and objectives	19
1.5. Evaluation methodology	19
1.6. Report structure	20
2. Project implementation	21
2.1. Project timeline	21
2.2. Project funding	22
2.3. Key roles and responsibilities	23
2.4. Other school support	23
3. Findings: school selection and matching	26
3.1. School selection	26
3.2. Matching schools	28

4. Findings: IM workshops	29
5. Findings: Action plan development	31
5.1. Thematic areas for action	32
5.2. Progress monitoring	34
6. Findings: effective support	36
6.1. Approach to the system leader role	37
7. Findings: benefits, outcomes and impacts	39
7.1. Benefits	39
7.2. Outcomes	39
7.3. Changes in Ofsted grades	40
7.3.1. Estimated grades towards the end of the project	41
7.4. Thematic interventions	43
7.5. Sustainability	44
8. Conclusions and considerations for replication	46
8.1. Conclusions	46
8.2. Considerations for replication	47
Appendix A: S2SS Logic model	49
Appendix B: Evaluation questions	52
Appendix C: Methodology	53
Appendix D: Schools data analysis	54
Appendix E: Project delivery in schools	59

List of tables

Table 1: Facilitators of, and challenges to, effective collaboration	17
Table 2: Project funding	22
Table 3: Additional substantial DfE/Bradford OA support	24
Table 4: Case study school, areas of focus in action plans	33
Table 5: Prior and current S2SS school Ofsted grades	41
Table 6: Prior and estimated current Ofsted grades of wave 2 case study schools	42
Table 7: Evaluation methodology	53
Table 8: KS2 Progress Scores, 2018-19	57
Table 9: KS4 Progress 8 and Attainment 8, 2018-19	57

List of figures

Figure 1: Project timeline	21
Figure 2: Scatterplot of percentage IDACI by percentage Pupil Premium, 2019.	27
Figure 3: 2019 % BAME and % Pupil Premium and - S2SS and Bradford Schools	55
Figure 4: Scatterplot of percentage IDACI by percentage Pupil Premium, 2019	55
Figure 5: Scatterplot of GCSE 4-9 English & Maths (2017) by percentage Pupil Premium (2019)	56
Figure 6: Scatterplot of Expected Standard RWM (2017) by percentage Pupil Premium (2019)	56

Glossary of abbreviations

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.
CCG	Clinical Commissioning Group.
DfE	Department for Education.
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant.
FTE	Full time equivalent.
MHEW	Mental health and emotional wellbeing.
NEET	Not in education, employment or training.
PMHW	Primary Mental Health Worker.
PSHE	Personal, Social, Health and Economic.
RCADS	Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale.
RSHE	Relationships, Sex and Health Education.
SEN	Special Educational Needs.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator.
Triple P	Positive Parenting Programme.

Executive summary

Key insights for future delivery

The following key insights should be taken in consideration for future roll-out:

- **Successful relationships:** Headteachers and system leaders worked well together. Pairing schools with a similar culture and ethos, cohorts of pupils and in close proximity was conducive to creating successful partnerships between headteachers and system leaders.
- **Support role:** Working partnerships between system leaders and headteachers varied according to the headteachers' need. Flexibility in approach and the right mix of being supportive without being overbearing was valued. Challenge and support from an objective 'outsider' was key to identifying priorities and facilitating change.
- **Flexible delivery model:** The S2SS model enabled headteachers and system leaders to design bespoke action plans that targeted areas needing improvement in their schools.
- **Evidence-based workshop support:** Implementation Matters (IM) workshops supported headteachers and system leaders to use evidence-based practice to design action plans and target setting. These were particularly valued by headteachers, some of whom were less familiar with Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) style approaches. Based on participant feedback, a key lesson was to build in sufficient time for school leaders to reflect what they had learned in the workshop into action plans.
- **Period of support:** S2SS support took place over a sustained period of at least four terms. This allowed time to embed changes, foster collaborative working partnerships and instil cultural change.

Introduction

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the School-to-School Support (S2SS) project. S2SS was an initiative developed by the Bradford Opportunity Area (OA) in 2018 to improve schools serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the wider aim of supporting social mobility. S2SS was one of 5 OA projects evaluated as 'intervention level evaluations' by York Consulting on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE).

The S2SS project delivered the planned activity, despite some delays and disruptions due to Covid-19 restrictions. Initially, 26 Bradford OA schools were supported, with a

further 6 schools added at a later stage. Schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils that would benefit from extra support were paired with experienced system leaders, they attended 'Implementation Matters (IM)' workshops designed to guide the development and implementation of action plans, together developed an action plan, and delivered actions to address school improvement. Schools received support from the system leader including assisting in the development and implementation of action plans and wider tailored support on school improvement. The S2SS project was originally designed to take place over four school terms, but due to Covid-19 disruptions, took place over almost 2 years for the initial cohort.

Evaluation aims and methodology

The evaluation aimed to explore the delivery of the project, including whether it was implemented as planned and what worked well and not so well in the different elements of the project. It also planned to assess the impact of the project on school improvement as well as conducting a cost benefit analysis. Challenges with the selected target measures (including an aim of improving Ofsted grades), lack of a comparator group and the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on data availability, meant that the impact component of this evaluation and the cost benefit analysis was scaled back from the original design.

Evaluation fieldwork took place between May 2019 and April 2021 and involved qualitative interviews with headteachers, teachers, system leaders and strategic stakeholders, 8 in-depth school case studies, a survey of teachers and review of action plans. Quantitative data analysis included school management information, school performance data, and Ofsted inspection data.

Key findings

Implementation and delivery

Evidence based practice: IM workshops covered a range of areas related to implementation science including logic modelling, 'active ingredients', outcomes definition, monitoring fidelity, measuring progress, and building sustainability. Headteachers recognised the value of these workshops, helping them to gain a stronger understanding of why and how an intervention was intended to work. This helped with effective implementation and was believed to help achieve real improvement. Some headteachers reported they already had this knowledge and questioned why the workshops were compulsory. The timing of the workshops could have been better synchronised as some participants attended workshops after submitting action plans, meaning they were less able to feed learnings into action plans.

Bespoke school action plans: The review of action plans found that the development process typically resulted in a set of well-researched, clearly defined actions. Planned activities were tailored to the needs of individual schools, with headteachers and system leaders collaborating to design bespoke action plans. The most common areas of focus were pupil attainment, leadership and governance, teaching quality and curriculum and learning. Strategies were rooted in evidence, underpinned by EEF ‘active ingredients’ and other elements covered in the IM workshops. Action plans were adapted over time, as the headteacher and system leader developed their understanding of a particular issue and in response to COVID-19 challenges. There were some challenges in monitoring progress, for example because targets were not always clear, or progress reports not completed in sufficient detail.

Matching: Matching was based on school demographics and an overview of the needs of the school. Headteachers and system leaders were generally positive about the schools they were matched with. Relationships went beyond the direct relationship between the headteacher and system leader; other staff in supported schools were involved in joint working with experts from system leader schools. Having similar cohorts of pupils, being located within relatively close proximity to the other school and having a similar vision and ethos were important factors to facilitating successful relationships, according to headteachers.

Flexibility of Support: There was no ‘one size fits all’ approach to system leaders’ support. Some were more hands on and provided a formal ‘inspectoral’ type role, while others took on a more passive ‘listening’ role. Having the right mix of being supportive without being overbearing was valued. The support provided by system leaders covered: coaching and support for decision making with headteachers; establishing new or develop existing systems; and modelling good practice in many areas of school operation from preparation, teaching, monitoring and assessment. Interviewees believed that there was the need for flexibility and adapting strategies when initial approaches were unsuccessful and communication (particularly between the system leader and the headteacher) was identified as critical throughout.

Length of Support: The importance of the long-sustained period of support over at least four terms was emphasised by research participants as enabling relationships to grow and adapt and for change to embed. Many participants also expected to remain in contact once the formal project support period had ended.

Benefits, outcomes and impacts

Benefits: Headteachers described a range of benefits of the S2SS project:

- Access to independent expert advice and knowledge. In particular, the objective perspective of a system leader was important to help assess priorities.

- Having a strategic ally external to the school to provide support and challenge them and their team.
- Developing a collaborative approach to improving the school.
- Personal development for headteachers, by recognising development areas and challenging themselves to address these.
- Networking through relationships linked to their system leader's school, contact with other S2SS schools (via IM workshops) and through the Bradford teaching school hub.

System leaders also noted a variety of benefits for themselves and their school, including developing their own professional skills and knowledge, and giving their staff opportunities for development. Headteachers and system leaders reported benefits to pupils of improved teaching quality and better-focused programmes of learning.

School outcomes and impacts: An original aim of the project was for schools to improve by one Ofsted grade. There were challenges to using this measure to assess the project's impact due to differing timescales and inspection frameworks which were exacerbated by COVID-19 as inspections did not take place for a period. In addition, there was no feasible comparator group to enable assessment of impact.

During interviews for the 8 case study schools, headteachers and system leaders estimated their Ofsted grades before and after support, where actual grades did not exist. Through this method, 5 schools were graded as good after support, having progressed from a lower prior Ofsted grade, 2 others remained as 'requires improvement' and one was felt to have become inadequate. Headteacher and system leader views regarding the contribution of the S2SS project to Ofsted grade improvement were generally positive, although greater attribution was made by some than others. This finding should be treated with caution as it is a subjective judgement of their own schools.

Evaluation findings related to project level outcomes were limited due to lack of data and changes to plans as a result of Covid-19 disruption, which limited pre/post measurement. Headteachers, system leaders and teachers reported that improvements had been made as a result of the S2SS. There were also examples across the 8 case study schools where they documented improvement in areas targeted by the S2SS action plans. Attributes of the project that enabled these improvements were: implementation planning and preparation; effective joint working with a systems leader; use of evidence-based interventions which were monitored to ensure they were delivered with fidelity.

There were encouraging signs in some schools that changes and improvements would be sustained and embedded for the longer-term.

Conclusion

S2SS gave headteachers of schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils an opportunity to deliver a bespoke evidence-based action plan implemented in collaboration with an external system leader. The S2SS project was generally well received amongst participants, with all case study schools reporting that improvements had been achieved in most areas targeted by action plans. IM workshops, while not always best sequenced, helped to construct a robust evidence-based action plan. Working relationships between system leaders and headteachers varied according to the schools' need. This tailored and flexible approach helped build strong partnerships between system leaders and headteachers and their wider schools, which many aimed to continue once the formal period of support was completed.

1. Introduction

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the School-to-School Support (S2SS) project. S2SS was an initiative developed by the Bradford Opportunity Area (OA) to improve schools serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bradford OA used system leaders based in and around Bradford, to work with school leaders, to drive planning and oversee delivery of school improvement actions. Bradford OA was one of 12 areas, launched in 2017, identified as social mobility ‘cold spots’ where the Department for Education (DfE) prioritised resources and brought local and national partners together to break the link between background and destination, thereby improving social mobility for children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Originally intended as a three-year programme, it was extended for a fourth and fifth year covering 2020-22.

The Bradford S2SS intervention was one of 5 projects supported by OA funding and evaluated as ‘intervention level evaluations’ by York Consulting on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE).

This report describes the aims and methodology of the evaluation, explores implementation and delivery including what has worked well and not so well across the different elements of the project. It also explores benefits, outcomes and impacts and provides conclusions and advice for others trying to replicate this type of intervention.

The following key terms are used throughout the report.

Key Terms

The following terms are used in the report:

Active ingredients. The essential principles and practices that underpin an approach or intervention. Successful implementation depends on being “clear which features need to be adopted closely (that is, with fidelity) to get the intended outcomes” (EEF, 2018).

Implementation matters (IM) workshops. Series of 6 workshops delivered by the Bradford Research School, to headteachers and system leaders. This was based around the Education Endowment Foundation’s (EEF) implementation guidance (EEF, 2018).

Legacy schools. Schools involved from the beginning of the project which then received additional time or funding to complete their action plan.

Management team. Team responsible for managing the identification of schools, allocation of system leaders and monitoring of progress against action plans. Initially this consisted of DfE staff within the Bradford OA, then the role was contracted out to a team at the Exceed Academies Trust from September 2020.

School Improvement (SI) Offer. DfE national initiative to support RI schools through 3 days of NLE support and, in some cases, additional funding up to a maximum of £24,000.

School-to-School Support (S2SS) project. Funding in selected Bradford OA for schools, up to £60,000 per school. The funding was provided to deliver an action plan developed and agreed with a system leader. The action plan was a set of specific actions or strategies a school planned to undertake to improve by one Ofsted grade.

System leaders. Include National Leaders in Education (NLE), Specialist Leaders in Education (SLE) and National Leaders in Governance (NLG). Bradford's teaching school hub, NLEs, SLEs and NLGs acted as brokers of support for schools. These system leaders worked alongside headteachers to diagnose and respond to their needs.

1.1. S2SS project

The core aim of the project was to improve schools serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the wider aim of supporting social mobility. The project planned to improve participating schools on average by one Ofsted grade.

Schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils that would benefit from extra support were paired with experienced system leaders, they attended 'Implementation Matters (IM)' workshops designed to guide the development and implementation of action plans, together developed an action plan, and delivered actions to address school improvement. Schools received support from the system leader including assisting in the development and implementation of action plans and wider tailored support on school improvement. Support was originally designed to take place over four school terms, but due to Covid-19 disruptions, took place over almost 2 years for the initial cohort.

A summary of the key elements of the project is illustrated below, with further detail provided in later sections.

S2SS project - core elements

- **Matching of headteacher to system leader.** This was undertaken by the management team working with Bradford OA, the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) ¹ and local authority (LA).

¹ RSCs act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, intervening in maintained schools judged to be inadequate by Ofsted by providing them with support from a strong sponsor. www.gov.uk/government/organisations/regional-schools-commissioners/about

- **Action plan development.** School headteachers worked with a system leader to develop an action plan for approval by the management team. This was intended to improve the school by one Ofsted grade, mapping out support up to a value of £60,000 per school (for the initial cohorts of schools).
- **IM workshops.** In parallel to developing the action plan, the headteacher and system leader attended a series of 6 IM workshops to develop understanding of implementation methods.
- **Action plan delivery.** School improvement activity identified in the action plan was delivered by the headteacher and the system leader working with school staff. It was supported by staff from the system leader school and external experts (such as a phonics consultant).
- **Sequencing.** Schools started the project in a series of cohorts, including a first pilot phase: Cohort 1 (3 schools); Cohort 2 (13 schools); Cohort 3 (10 schools) and Cohort 4 (6 schools). The fourth cohort was added to the original 26 schools following the COVID-19 interruptions.

1.2. Logic model

The logic model describes the overall intended operation of the S2SS programme (Appendix A), with each school setting their own targets based on different priorities in their school, with the overarching aim of school improvement. The logic model explains how the inputs and activities lead to the outputs (for example, agreement of action plan, attending IM workshops and implementing action plans) and resulting outcomes (for example, progression against school action plan). These in turn have subsequent effects on the impacts (for example, sustained school improvement).

The project aimed to build on learning from other school-to-school support programmes such as the DfE School Improvement Offer. It built on the network of system leaders that have developed over the past few years and aimed to test the idea of intensive support provided to a recipient headteacher and supported school.

Key elements to note in relation to the original logic model:

- The IM workshops were not explicitly mentioned and have now been incorporated; this was an important active ingredient of the overall project implementation.
- The quality assurance of system leaders became more proactive when the Exceed Academies Trust took on the project management function. This included Exceed Academies staff attendance at individual school termly monitoring meetings, since September 2020.

The outcome measures remained relevant throughout the study and are discussed in the findings section of this report.

1.3. Literature review

Across England, there has been an increase in the level of inter-school collaborative improvement activity since 2000, with particularly strong growth involving schools engaging in both formal and informal arrangements (Armstrong, 2020). There is a broad consensus that this improvement activity can be effective, and the Government is committed to this approach as a way of improving school results and performance (Greany, 2018).

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) research (Anders et al, 2017) recognises that evaluating the impact of complex whole-school interventions is challenging. They cite evidence by Leithwood et al (2006), stating that what evidence there is, suggests that school leadership and other elements of whole-school contexts are important for pupils' attainment. They conclude that interventions aimed at improving school leadership have potential to drive up pupil outcomes.

1.3.1. Enablers and barriers to effective collaboration

Evidence indicates that successful collaboration needs time, effort and the presence of trust and capacity (Muijs, 2015a). Ensuring schools and NLEs are matched appropriately and that the relationship is based on one of mutual trust and understanding is key. Adequate capacity within the leadership of both schools and a willingness to engage and own their school-to-school support plan has also been proved to be essential (Woods, et al., 2013).

Table 1 summarises the research evidence around the main facilitators and challenges to effective collaboration (Armstrong 2015).

Table 1: Facilitators of, and challenges to, effective collaboration

Facilitators	Challenges
Strong relationships and trust (Rea et al., 2015)	Perceived threat to school autonomy (Chapman et al., 2009a)
Well-defined and robust structures and processes (Chapman et al., 2009a)	Perceived power imbalances between schools (Lindsay et al, 2007) Additional workload/lack of capacity (Aiston, 2002)
Shared vision and values (Hill et al., 2012)	Difficulties establishing shared objectives and goals (Woods et al., 2010)
Clear goals and aims (Lindsay et al., 2007)	Limited ownership and buy-in leading to questions over sustainability (Hayes and Lynch, 2013)
Sensitivity to contexts (Hutchings et al., 2012)	Concern among the NLE that their home school's capacity (and Ofsted) grade may be impacted negatively (Greany and Higham, 2018).

Source: from Armstrong (2015) and Greany and Higham (2018)

Effective matching and brokerage between schools is also an important initial stage in school-to-school support. Within the literature, it is noted that brokerage that crosses professional and social boundaries, whilst taking into account the social and cultural contexts of a local area/school, often leads to the most successful collaboration (Muijs, 2015b and Woods, Armstrong and Pearson, 2013). Having strong leaders who are capable of leading collaborative learning between schools is also an essential component of successful school improvement initiatives.

1.3.2. Outcomes and impacts of school improvement initiatives

There is generally regarded to be limited evidence surrounding the change process and the development or maintenance of relationships when schools enter into collaboration. Although the research base around this has been increasing in recent years. There is also little (if any) published evidence around the role and impacts of NLEs (Greany and Higham, 2018; Muijs, 2015a; NCSL, 2011; Hill and Matthews, 2010; Hill and Matthews, 2008).

The strongest evidence relating to school-to-school support is around the indirect impacts that inter-school collaboration can have. Many studies have reported improvements in areas such as (National College of Teaching and Leadership, 2015):

- Staff professional development and motivation to engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues.

- Sharing good practice and innovation.
- Organisational and financial efficiency.
- Curriculum developments.
- Stronger leadership and increased leadership capacity.

Evidence of the direct impacts of inter-school collaboration on pupil outcomes is even more limited, although there is some suggestion that school level performance improves with school-to-school support. For example, more Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) that received support in 2016-17 improved their Ofsted rating than those who did not receive support (Bernardinelli et al, 2018). There are also numerous case study examples where headteachers, senior leaders, teachers and governors talk about the benefits of the support received from NLEs - for example, a Staffordshire school noted more consistent and sustained improvements in their Ofsted rating (Clark, 2017). Schools have also reported 'soft' improvements from school-to-school support, including improvements in attendance and behaviour; clarity regarding curriculum; the expertise and confidence of middle leaders.

The London Challenge (2003-11) had similar ambitions and some similar methods to S2SS (although focused on secondary schools). Evidence of improvement in GCSE attainment was identified in schools following the London Challenge intervention (Kings Fund, 2021).

A recent Ofsted (2020) report concluded that it was possible for 'stuck' schools, facing challenging circumstances, to improve. The report stated that, "The leaders of these schools [which overcome being stuck to improve] focus on implementing an effective behaviour policy; ensuring high standards of teaching, sometimes at a cost to teacher retention levels; and getting the right support from their MAT." (Ofsted, 2020)

The School Improvement Offer (DfE, 2020) has strong similarities to the S2SS project. It is focused on requires improvement schools, matches NLEs with supported schools and involves delivery of agreed recommended actions (through evidence-based support programmes and high-quality system leader support). It was structured into 3 tiers:

- Tier 1: schools with a single requires improvement (RI) judgement are eligible for up to 3 days' NLE support to help leadership teams identify and implement improvements within the school.
- Tier 2: schools with 2 consecutive RI judgements can access up to 3 days of NLE support and up to £16,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE.

- Tier 3: schools with 3 consecutive RI judgements can access up to 3 days of NLE support and up to £24,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE.

Early School Improvement Offer evaluation evidence was positive about tier 1 schools but more challenging in respect to the more intensive support for tier 2 and 3 schools.

1.4. Evaluation aims and objectives

The core aims of the evaluation were to explore:

- How was the project implemented and delivered?
- What worked well and what were the key challenges of the different elements of the project?
- What were the benefits, outcomes and impacts the project on school improvement?

Underneath these were more specific research questions, which are included in Appendix B.

Due to challenges with target measures and data availability the impact component of the evaluation was scaled back (see methodology below for further information).

1.5. Evaluation methodology

The multi-method evaluation was designed to incorporate quantitative and qualitative methods.

The evaluation involved 2 waves of qualitative fieldwork (wave 1 in May 2019 to November 2019 and wave 2 in November 2020 to April 2021):

- The scope for the first wave of research was the 26 schools that participated in the first 3 cohorts of the project. The first wave involved: interviews with the early cohorts of schools (19 headteachers and 23 system leaders); strategic interviews with project delivery staff (4), analysis of action plans (23) and a survey of teachers (89 responses).
- Wave 2 focused on 8 of the early cohort schools (four primary and four secondary) to maximise chances of observing outcomes. This was because they had been involved in the S2SS project for the longest period of time. Wave 2 fieldwork involved: undertaking interviews with 7 headteachers, 8 system leaders, 6 strategic stakeholders and 15 teachers (teacher interviews were felt to be more effective as survey evidence indicated some misunderstanding of the intervention the

questionnaire was asking about). This method was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact achieved at the school level. Topic guides probed impact across the school action plan and focused on specific major interventions.

Key programme data that has been collected and analysed includes management team information about the involvement of participating schools, school performance data, unit costs, and Ofsted inspection data. Local programme management data reports from September 2018 to March 2021. Bradford OA level data, which included national published data, was used relating to school characteristics for school year September 2018 to July 2019 in this report.

It was also planned to assess the impact of the project on school improvement as well as conducting a Social Cost Benefit Analysis (SCBA). Challenges with the selected target measures (including an aim of improving Ofsted grades), lack of a comparator group (the original evaluation design involved comparing the group of schools participating in S2SS with a comparator group of schools outside of Bradford, with similar characteristics using a 'basket of indicators'²) and the impact of coronavirus (Covid -19) on data availability, meant that the impact component of this evaluation and the cost benefit analysis was scaled back from the original design.

1.6. Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured by overarching aims of the evaluation.

Chapters 2-6 explore implementation and delivery, including what works well and key challenges in the core elements of the project:

- Chapter 2: Implementation.
- Chapter 3: School selection and matching.
- Chapter 4: IM workshops.
- Chapter 5: Action plans.
- Chapter 6: Support.

Chapter 7 explores outcomes, impacts and sustainability. Chapter 8 is conclusions and considerations for replication.

² The <https://schoolslikeyours.ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/> web database was used with key variables including Total Pupils, Absence rate, Free school meals (FSM), English as an additional language (EAL), Progress 8 / RWM expected standard, Ofsted rating. Retrieved on 30/9/21.

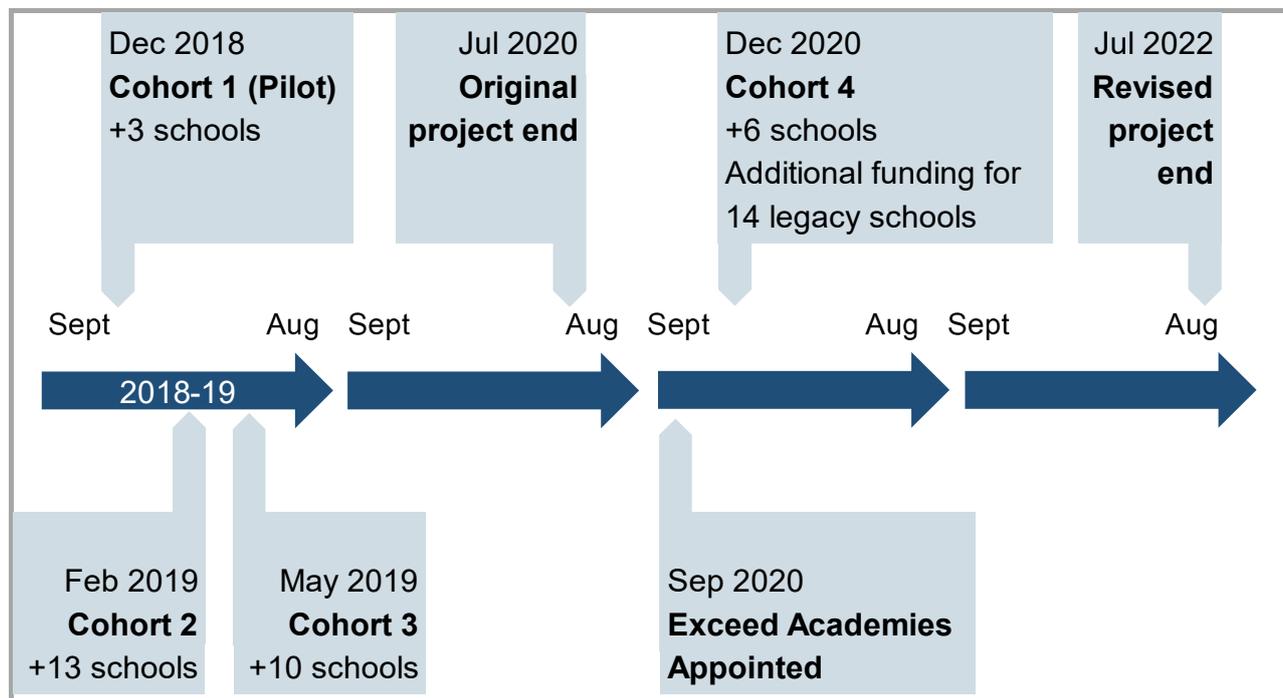
2. Project implementation

This section describes the key features of the S2SS project and considers the extent to which the project was delivered as originally intended. It covers the project timeline, project flow chart, school selection, nature of the system leader role, management team and IM workshops.

2.1. Project timeline

The original project timeline was from December 2018 to July 2020 in line with the originally planned three-year operation of the Bradford OA (the OA programme was extended to a fourth year in 2020 and fifth year in 2021). The operation of the project was extended into the fourth year of Bradford OA operations to allow for cohort 3 schools to have enough time to prepare and implement their action plan over 4 school terms. Originally the project was managed by the OA delivery team. In September 2020, Exceed Academies Trust was appointed to take on the brokerage and quality assurance role, with a focus on embedding improvement.³ Additional schools joined as a 4th cohort in December 2020.

Figure 1: Project timeline



³ 'Exceed Academies Trust is a MAT and runs the Bradford Teaching School Hub'.

The original planned period of support for a school was four school terms to embed changes and achieve sustainable lasting outcomes. The time required for delivery of IM sessions, development of the action plan and delivery of a significant school improvement project generally took longer than four school terms. For many of those that have finished, or are close to finishing, the support took nearly 2 school years. This was also due to COVID-19 interruptions.

For the fourth year of Bradford OA activity, projects such as S2SS were required to incorporate aspects of ‘twinning’ activity to share their learning with other local authorities. In this instance, the project worked with a group of schools from Knowsley. This involved IM sessions and delivery of an action plan targeted at school improvement, with support from system leaders in Bradford and Knowsley. This lay outside the scope of this evaluation.

2.2. Project funding

The estimated investment in the project was £1.57 million up to July 2020 (Table 2).⁴ A further £875,000 was planned for 2020-22. The majority of funding was used to support individual schools.

Table 2: Project funding

Stage	2018-2020 Funding (£)	2020-2022 Funding (£)
Cohort 1-3: 26 schools x c.£55,000	£1,500,000	-
Cohort 4: 14 legacy schools x c.£25,000	-	£325,000
Cohort 4 (new schools): 5 schools x £50,000	-	£250,000
Cohort 4 (challenge panel): 2 schools x £150,000 [1]	-	£300,000
Implementation training (actual)	£20,750	£19,250
Management (estimate based on DfE information)	£52,000	£150,000
Total	£1,572,750	£875,000

Source: DfE project staff (unpublished data).

Note: [1] This was delivered in a different way to other support funded through this project.

The funding received by Cohort 1-3 schools ranged from £30,000 to £60,100, with a mean of £54,556 per school.

⁴ For the purposes of assessing unit costs of the project later in the report we have not included various other economic costs (including time input from advisors on a pro bono basis) and venues (used for programme activities), as these were to be part of the SCBA work.

2.3. Key roles and responsibilities

The S2SS project was led strategically by the Priority 1 Working Group of the Bradford OA.⁵ Stakeholders on this group helped to design the intervention and monitor progress over time. The group is made up from experienced school improvement professionals from across Bradford.

Day-to-day management was through a management team. Up to July 2020 this was managed by 3 DfE staff working closely with Bradford OA system leader stakeholders. After September 2020 this was managed by staff at Exceed Academies Trust, including the Bradford Teaching School Hub, through a contract with DfE.⁶

The key roles and responsibilities for those involved in S2SS were:

- **Management team and DfE:** commissioning IM workshops; identifying schools; brokering partnerships between schools and system leaders; quality assuring action plans and action plan delivery.
- **System leaders:** attending IM workshops; supporting headteachers to develop an action plan; supporting implementation of the action plan; reporting on action plan delivery progress jointly with the headteacher.
- **Headteachers:** attending IM workshops; to develop an action plan working with the system leader; implementing the action plan to achieve school improvement; reporting on action plan delivery progress jointly with the system leader.

Changes introduced in September 2020 included:

- Flexibility with action plans but with robust termly reports and reviews involving experienced school-based professionals leading the brokerage and quality assurance of support.
- Greater emphasis on communication systems and processes to ensure transparency for both the system leader and headteacher of the supported school.

2.4. Other school support

This section considers other related interventions that are similar to S2SS and in some cases were delivered to the same schools.

⁵ One of four priority groups supporting Bradford OA delivery <https://bradfordopportunityarea.co.uk/our-priorities/>. Retrieved on 30/9/21.

⁶ All details about the subsequent operation of the project were included on the Teaching School Hub website <https://www.teachingschoolhub.co.uk/systemleaders>. Retrieved on 30/9/21.

All S2SS schools had received substantial support from the DfE or Bradford OA, in addition to being involved in the S2SS project.⁷ This included support from the School Improvement Offer, the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF) and the Teaching and Learning Improvement Fund (TLIF).^{8,9} These elements of support were provided both prior to and during a school's involvement in the S2SS project.

Table 3: Additional substantial DfE/Bradford OA support for S2SS schools

	SI 18/19	SI 19/20	SSIF	TLIF	Intensive English Hub support
No. of schools	3	11	10	19	1
Percentage	12%	42%	38%	73%	4%

Source: based on DfE data from S2SS spreadsheet supplied by programme team.

Base: Cohort 1-3 covering 26 S2SS schools.

In 2018-19, 3 of the S2SS schools also received the School Improvement Offer with a further 11 in 2019-20. However, limited evidence was collected through evaluation fieldwork to effectively compare the 2 interventions. Although, where it was mentioned, in qualitative interviews with headteachers, they referenced the shorter length of support from the School Improvement Offer compared with S2SS. DfE evaluation evidence from schools in receipt of the School Improvement Offer indicated that there were challenges motivating system leaders to support schools, due to the demands on their time (DfE, 2020). Just under three-quarters (73%) of school received TLIF support and just under two-fifths (38%) received SSIF support.

In addition to this substantial DfE and Bradford OA support, 17 schools (65%) received some form of small scale DfE support, including interventions such as Maths Hubs, the Raising Attainment Programme, mentoring and support with parental engagement. Seventeen schools (65%) also received additional support in the form of sponsorship by a multi-academy trust (MAT).

According to stakeholders, interviewed during wave 2 evaluation fieldwork, the key differences between S2SS and other similar initiatives were that in the S2SS:

- **Level of autonomy** given to headteachers was higher.

⁷ 'Substantial DfE support' defined by DfE MI spreadsheet as: StSS, Literacy, SI offer (either year), SSIF, Intensive English Hub, TLIF Type A.

⁸ SSIF was a grant fund that targeted resources at the schools most in need to improve school performance and pupil attainment, to help them use their resources most effectively and to deliver more good school places. Support started and finished between September 2017 and March 2019.

⁹ TLIF was a 3-year funding programme (September 2017 to March 2020) which supported high-quality professional development, for teachers and school leaders, in areas and schools in England that are facing the most challenges.

- **Intensity of challenge** was greater involving an independent professional system leader asking questions and scrutinising actions over an extended period of time.
- **Collaboration was greater** between a range of staff members at participating schools, rather than just senior leaders.
- **Amount of funding** which was typically higher.

3. Findings: school selection and matching

3.1. School selection

The overarching intention of the project design by the management team was to support school improvement in schools facing the greatest challenges and working with the most disadvantaged pupils.

In order to ensure the support was appropriately targeted, DfE staff undertook a detailed analysis of Bradford's 218 primary and secondary schools across a range of indicators from government data including Ofsted rating information, school characteristics (e.g. size, ethnicity, pupil premium numbers), pupil performance (e.g. Progress 8 and KS2 reading, writing and maths attainment) and engagement with wider DfE funded interventions (e.g. School Improvement, Strategic School Improvement Fund and Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund).

The management team then worked with the Priority 1 Working Group members and used this data to identify a priority group of primary and secondary schools (initially 50 and then expanded to 62). This represented around a quarter of Bradford schools, identified as most in need of support.

From this priority group, a subset of 26 schools was selected to participate in the planned S2SS project. This was based on a ranked, weighted score constructed by DfE staff using the following variables: Ofsted grade; time since last Ofsted visit; Pupil Premium numbers in school; Pupil Premium percentage in school; KS2/KS4 attainment; and, KS2/KS4 progression. When the analysis was undertaken by DfE staff, all 26 schools were assessed by DfE as having requires improvement, inadequate or did not have an Ofsted grade (because there had been no inspection since the school opened). Eight of these were flagged by DfE as 'stuck' schools, that is, in a cycle of low performance and in need of tailored support to improve.¹⁰

These 26 schools were engaged with the project between December 2018 and May 2019. They consisted of 17 primary schools, 8 secondary schools and one all-through school. These 26 became known as the 'legacy schools' by the project delivery team.¹¹

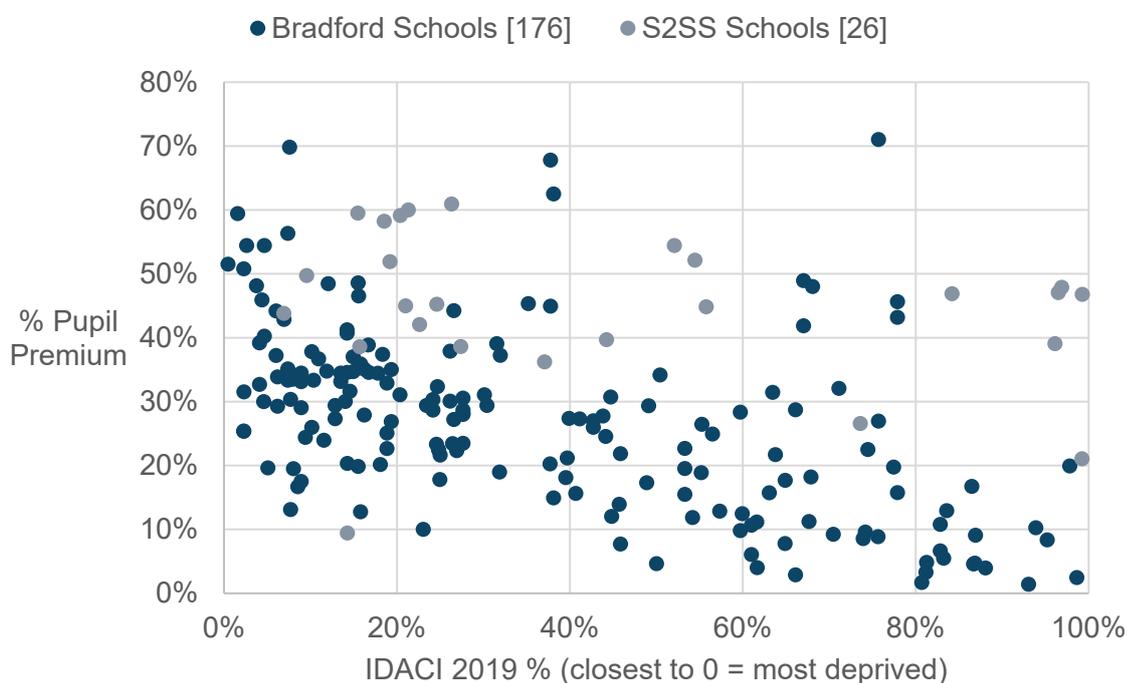
Analysis of the data confirms these schools typically had high levels of disadvantage (Figure 2). Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) and pupil premium are used as proxies for disadvantage. This compares with a Bradford pupil premium average of 31% based on 2019 data. This is supported by further analysis of the characteristics of

¹⁰ Ofsted defined stuck schools as those that have not been judged good or better since September 2006 and have had at least four full inspections during that time (Ofsted, 2020).

¹¹ An 'all-through' school covers primary to secondary aged pupils

participating schools (Appendix D).

Figure 2: Scatterplot of percentage IDACI by percentage Pupil Premium, 2019.¹²



Source: DfE S2SS analysis spreadsheet using school characteristics data (where available)

In September 2020, support was provided for some additional schools and there were variations to support for some legacy schools, as described below:

- Period of support was extended with no additional funding (7 legacy schools).
- Additional funding of £25,000 per school (14 legacy schools).
- Additional schools were brought into the project receiving funding of £50,000 each (5 new schools).
- Two schools were subject to an external scrutiny review of governance and participated in a challenge panel, each receiving £150,000 (one legacy school and one new school).
- Four legacy schools had completed their action plan implementation with no further participation in the project.

¹² IDACI – Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

3.2. Matching schools

The matching of system leaders with selected S2SS schools was undertaken by the DfE management team initially and then by the Exceed Academies Trust management team. The approach involved consulting with regional experts including the RSC, LA, teaching school hub and members of the Priority 1 Working Group.

Evidence indicated that the matches between headteachers and system leaders resulted in strong relationships and collaborative partnerships developing between headteachers, system leaders and their school staff.

Almost all headteachers and system leaders reported that they felt they had been matched to an appropriate school.

“[It was a] very appropriate match ... [the system leader] has good local knowledge, a genuine interest in helping our school and is able to identify what needs to be achieved and how we can get it done. I am very satisfied with the match.” *Secondary headteacher*

Headteachers and system leaders were generally positive about their match, citing having similar cohorts of pupils, being located within relatively close proximity to other school and having a similar vision and ethos as important.

A small number of headteachers and system leaders expressed having initial concerns about their match which were subsequently overcome. This was due to: differences in the socioeconomic contexts of the schools; initial perceptions by headteachers that system leaders were trying to convert them to an academy; and lack of information about the rationale and process for matches.

The management team undertaking the matching process recognised the importance of brokering an effective match and taking time to get this right. In particular, a member of the management team spoke of giving schools “ownership of the support to overcome negative experiences of past top-down support”. There was also evidence of the management team applying evidence-based decision-making to matches between schools. For example, recognising evidence (Ofsted 2020) that schools within trusts may be better supported by the trust rather than an external organisation.

4. Findings: IM workshops

The IM workshops aimed to familiarise participants with the EEF Implementation Guide (EEF, 2018) and to support the development of their action plans. They were delivered by the Head of the Teaching Institute at Dixons Academies.

The workshops were planned to be delivered at the same time as the development of the action plans but in practice most schools had submitted action plans before they completed the series of workshops. This was at the request of DfE who needed to allocate funding to schools which could only happen after action plans were submitted.

The programme consisted of 6 workshops covering a range of areas related to implementation science including logic modelling, active ingredients, outcomes definition, monitoring fidelity, measuring progress and building sustainability. All the schools participated in the workshops.

The approach to IM workshops evolved during the project. When conducted face-to-face, typically the headteacher and system leader attended the IM workshops in pairs. IM workshops lasted 2 to 3 hours, with between 8 and 16 participants in each workshop. IM workshops were varied for the fourth cohort of schools, as a result of COVID-19 disruptions, with a lighter programme of online sessions planned, in recognition of the following:

- Time pressure on headteachers given the demands of responding to COVID-19 disruptions.
- Difficulties in co-ordinating the headteacher and system leader for them to attend the same sessions.

One of the unintended benefits of the later online sessions, was that they involved some of the original schools and those just starting the project. This resulted in the sharing of good practice between established and more recent schools. Observation of sessions by evaluators demonstrated the engagement of participants and the challenges of planning this work in a COVID-19 environment. The challenge of social distancing was overcome using virtual meetings, although creating spontaneous interactive discussion with participants was more difficult via virtual meetings.

Future planned developments (not implemented during the period of the evaluation) were to design an approach for self-study with video recorded sessions to increase flexibility of delivery. These would run alongside the face-to-face or virtual workshops.

The role of the IM workshops in supporting the development and delivery of action plans was evidenced by research participants and many headteachers and system leaders described the way the implementation-based approach had informed their perspective on

school improvement. The language they used referenced active ingredients and research-informed solutions.

Many headteachers valued the approach to implementation planning and the encouragement to engage with validated research.

“The involvement we had with EEF implementation planning has been key for us ... transformed how we approach things in school. Giving people time to prepare ... has given us permission to slow down and not rush into quick fixes.” *Primary headteacher.*

“Working with [the Head of the Research School] has been brilliant, [they] introduced me to a variety of sources and theories about education and school improvement which have underpinned a lot of the actions outlined in our action plan” *Secondary headteacher.*

Headteachers and system leaders specifically also valued the time away from their school environment to work together as part of the workshop (prior to the COVID-19 restrictions). This included being able to “gain perspective” i.e., think things through away from the day-to-day pressures of school and the opportunity to “talk things through”, i.e., having time to debate and discuss ideas.

There were frustrations regarding the initial scheduling of action plan drafting and IM workshops. Some schools were asked to submit their action plan before completing the workshops which they felt challenged the premise of the training.

A few headteachers felt that the sessions were variously unnecessarily mandatory, too general, too long, dogmatic regarding the use of specific terminology (such as active ingredients and fidelity) and distracted from their focus on developing a tailored action plan.

“Some of it felt a little bit drawn out and when time is really precious compulsory attendance felt a little bit unnecessary”. *Secondary headteacher*

A few system leaders did not see why they needed to be present at the workshops. Some felt they already had a good insight into logic modelling, identifying active ingredients and action planning which they did not see value in repeating.

5. Findings: Action plan development

Schools created bespoke action plans. The action plans served a clear and successful purpose of guiding the planned intentions of the schools to address school improvement.

In the first year, DfE staff tried to ensure use of a consistent action plan format (based on EEF designs and emphasising active ingredients). However, in practice at least 3 different formats were submitted by headteachers (some following the EEF model closely and others based on existing school improvement plans). The need to follow a specific format frustrated some headteachers. Some schools already had school improvement plans which they felt highlighted their challenges and priorities. Headteachers welcomed greater flexibilities in action plan formats that emerged over time, which they saw as pragmatic. The challenge going forward is about ensuring clarity of why specific interventions were chosen and what was expected to make them work. Some school action plans did not make the active ingredients explicit. There remain differing views among all project stakeholders about the importance of the specific format of action plans.

In some cases, action plan delivery was ongoing for a period spanning 3 school years, compared with the originally envisaged four school terms which was due to COVID-19 interruptions. During this period, up to 3 amendments were made to some action plans (in recognition of changing priorities). Some headteachers described their action plans as becoming more detailed over time, in others, aspects were dropped as they were addressed or became less relevant. This shows adaptability to circumstance. For example, aspects of work linked to professional practice were paused during the COVID-19 interruptions because 'normal' classroom teaching was not taking place in the usual way.

Review by evaluators concluded that the action plan development process typically resulted in a set of well-researched, clearly defined actions. The actions demonstrated some understanding of active ingredients (often termed 'non-negotiables' in schools). The actions also helped to ensure fidelity of interventions (even if these were not always explicit). The action plans defined the focus of school improvement to support communication and assessment of progress. Stakeholders agreed that generally action plans were well-specified although they also noted that some misunderstanding of 'active ingredients' remained.

In some cases, more time than originally allocated was taken to get the action plan right, even though it delayed the school being able to start the school improvement work. This delay was not considered, by project stakeholders, as a negative outcome if it resulted in a better action plan.

Regular reviews by headteachers and system leaders was an important part of implementing the action plan, resulting in monitoring updates submitted to the management team. The introduction of the school leader members of the management team (September 2020) at review meetings was considered, by the new management team, to have added scrutiny to this process.

Headteachers identified the following lessons from action plan development and implementation:

- **Start the dialogue and interventions with staff, in their school, early.** Some headteachers felt that with hindsight they could have made faster progress if they had started planning with staff and undertaking training at an earlier stage.
- **Targeting of staff training activity.** Counter to the above point, one headteacher felt that they should have waited to re-organise staff, linked to their action plan, before undertaking training. The headteacher explained that re-organising staff roles sometimes results in some staff choosing to move on. In this case, when staff members left, the school had to repeat some of the training with additional associated costs.

5.1. Thematic areas for action

The main areas of actions identified in a review of all 23 available wave 1 action plans, in October 2019, were:¹³

- Pupil attainment – an improvement area for all school action plans across different subjects and year groups.
- Improving leadership and governance, teaching quality and curriculum and learning – improvement areas for 17 of the 23 action plans.

The key areas of focus in the 8 wave 2 case study school action plans followed a broadly similar pattern to wave 1 (Table 4), with some differences between primary and secondary schools. Case studies, involving review of the action plans and interviews with the headteacher, system leader and up to 3 teachers, identified between 2 and 6 areas of focus for each school. Primary schools had a strong focus on aspects of leadership and management (middle, subject and strategic) as this was seen to be an important driver of school improvement. In primary schools, more than one school also focused on early years, literacy, maths and memory and recall. For secondary schools, the pattern was

¹³ In October 2019 only 23 of the 26 action plans had been signed-off

more spread out with more than one of the four schools having a major focus on attendance, middle/subject leadership, governance and maths.

Some actions within action plans were focused on a whole school level and others were targeted at year groups or subsets of pupils (for example disadvantaged pupils). These differences were linked to the range of issues being faced by each school.

Table 4: Case study school, areas of focus in action plans

School	Primary/ Secondary	Attendance	Behaviour	Governance	Middle/subject leadership	Strategic leadership	Assessment	Parental in- volvement	Early years	Oracy	Literacy	Memory & recall	Maths	English	Science
A	S	X		X				X							
B	S	X	X		X		X				X	X			
C*	S			X									X		
F	S				X								X	X	
D	P				X					X			X		
E	P				X	X			X				X		X
G	P			X	X	X			X		X	X			
H	P				X			X			X	X			

Source: school case studies, 2020-21. Note: * Headteacher was not available for interview

The range of school improvement activities across the action plans was varied and tailored to the needs of individual schools. There was evidence that the strategies were rooted in evidence, underpinned by EEF ‘active ingredients’. Headteachers and system leaders described increased dialogue about evidence-based research while developing and implementing action plans. This was also evident in the action plans and was attributed by headteachers to the IM workshops.

“We looked at the neuro-sequential model and practical strategies to support children with attachment difficulties and the theories behind this.... [including] adverse childhood experiences and about how the brain works.... now our social emotional mental health materials are underpinned with all of this research.” *Secondary headteacher.*

A secondary headteacher described being introduced to new theories about education and school improvement which helped develop their leadership across the school. There remained some pockets of resistance to the language of implementation and EEF terminology. For example, one headteacher felt concepts of ‘implementation’ and ‘fidelity’ used in the original action plan and IM workshops were unhelpful and not relevant to their school.

There was also evidence of adaptation and development over time, as the headteacher and system leader developed their understanding of a particular issue (see inset below). Further examples are in Appendix E.

School case study: Memory and recall

One primary school had an initial action around meta-cognition but, on further research and dialogue with the system leader, the headteacher refined this to a focus on memory and recall. The headteacher and senior teachers felt that the broader area of meta-cognition would not achieve the intended impact on pupils' learning. Action plan funding was used to support 2 Teaching and Learning Roles (TLR), one dedicated to vulnerable children, and the other to memory and recall. The headteacher reflected that these roles helped initiate changes in teaching that provided opportunities for children to talk about their learning. For example, an active ingredient was that all lessons should begin with a review of prior knowledge from a previous lesson.

School context: primary school with just under 300 pupils and 45% pupil premium, that had been improving but was not yet good. It gained a requires improvement grade at the beginning of the S2SS project which initially disappointed staff but galvanised the headteacher to maintain the improvement trajectory.

School experience: As a result of delivering the action plan, the school had some quantitative evidence of improved key stage 2 writing from 27% of pupils reaching the expected standard in 2018 to 63% in 2020; just above their action plan target of 60%. Other indicators remained to be achieved. The headteacher self-assessed that the school was now operating at a good level.

“Results have been positive with children being more confident recalling basic knowledge, for example, naming the continents.” Headteacher

Some teachers in thematic areas covered by targeted actions were actively involved in support. For example, teachers were challenged by experienced school improvement professionals to adapt or change their working practices. In other cases, teachers were re-energised to use their existing skills to improve the chances of success for pupils.

5.2. Progress monitoring

Schools were expected to provide termly progress reports against their action plans. The management team experienced challenges gaining consistent and completed progress reports on action plan implementation. Although, this was perceived to have improved in Summer 2020 as the project became managed by senior teaching-experienced staff members within the management team from Exceed Academies Trust.

“As school leaders ourselves we were able to act as peers to headteachers and convince them of the need for detailed reporting”.

Management team member

The new management team found that flexibility over format encouraged ownership. Previously, schools annotated their action plans which created documents that were very hard to read. Two system leaders made specific reference to the burden of completing complex termly monitoring based on the detailed action plans, so this was a welcome development for system leaders.

There were some good examples of measuring progress in a quantified objective way. For example, one primary school had set a target of 60% of children reaching the expected standard of writing in their key stage 2 results from their initial level of 27% [in 2 years]. They surpassed this target with 63% of children meeting the expected standards [in 1 year]. In a secondary school, they achieved a large reduction in exclusions (90%) over 1 year as a result of establishing an in-school inclusion centre and improved protocols for managing behaviour and inclusion of pupils.

There were a few cases where action plans set targets but monitoring reports had not stated the current position against those targets. There were also cases where the target (or how it was measured) was unclear or changed over time. For example, a primary school had a target of all teachers being assessed as good (against Ofsted criteria). Their monitoring report stated that over 90% had achieved this, suggesting clear progress towards the target, although some staff on support plans were not included in this indicator which would have lowered the percentage.

The new management team created a handbook for system leaders setting out expectations for consistency and set up arrangements for management team staff to attend termly review meetings to quality assure the support provided.

6. Findings: effective support

Qualitative evidence confirmed the strength of S2SS relationships between headteachers and system leaders. Effective relationships between headteachers and system leaders were central to this project and enabled effective support to be provided to the school.

“They [the system leader] have developed a really positive relationship with myself and school staff, they have brought good ideas and a friendly ear to the school.” *Secondary headteacher*

The support provided by system leaders covered: coaching and support for decision making with headteachers; working with other senior leaders and middle leaders to establish new or develop existing systems; and modelling good practice in many areas of school operation from preparation, teaching, monitoring and assessment.

There was evidence from system leaders, headteachers and teachers that all levels of leadership improved within supported schools. This was particularly evident where headteachers were encouraged to delegate to emerging leaders who had started taking on greater responsibilities and influencing other teachers in the school.

“The system leader undertook an audit to identify gaps in leaders’ knowledge and confidence. They then supported these leaders to deliver CPD to other staff and helped them deal with conflict. In particular, how to get people on board through demonstrating the positive impact of strategies being employed.” *Primary headteacher*

Headteachers described a range of benefits of the S2SS project which helped them in their role and had resulting outcomes for staff, the school and pupils:

- **Access to expert advice and knowledge.** This occurred directly from the system leader or through signposting to wider expertise in the system leader’s school or the Bradford Teaching School Hub. In particular, the objective perspective of a system leader was important to help assess priorities. For example, to identify priorities that the schools had previously not considered, or to confirm what the headteacher already knew was a priority within their school.
- **Having a strategic ally providing support and challenge to themselves and their leadership team.** Some headteachers described this as providing an alternative voice to staff, even if the messages might have been the same.
- **Develop a collaborative approach to improving the school.** Relationships developed with partner schools (both system leader schools and other schools in a MAT or federation) were considered important. Headteachers recognised the value of building a confident learning culture, where staff were open to learn from peers. In

some cases, it included reciprocal activity with supported school staff developing the capability to support other schools. This was believed to instil confidence throughout a school and challenge resistance to change. In one case, a MAT adopted systems developed for a Bradford school more widely across the MAT.

- **Length of support.** The importance of the extended period of support, compared to the national offer, was mentioned by headteachers and system leaders. One system leader said the strength of their relationship grew over time and was different to other interventions (e.g., the School Improvement Offer) which might only involve a few days in a year. The importance of the long-sustained period of support over at least four terms was emphasised by research participants as enabling relationships to grow and adapt and for change to embed. Many participants also expected to remain in contact once the formal project support period had ended.
- **Personal development for headteachers.** Recognising development areas and challenging themselves to address these. For example, one headteacher explained their need to 'let go' of some responsibilities to give teaching staff opportunities to take responsibility.
- **Networking.** All headteachers mentioned the benefits of networking through relationships linked to their system leader's school, through contact with other S2SS schools (via IM workshops) and through contact with the teaching school hub.

6.1. Approach to the system leader role

System leaders undertook a range of different strategies when working with headteachers. System leaders described the balance that they tried to achieve between being actively involved in support but not being over-bearing.

The trust built up through joint working between system leaders and partner schools was evident. System leaders used a range of strategies to enable effective joint working; in some cases, taking a more passive role initially, in others playing a more inspectoral role.

There was strong agreement, by system leaders, on the need for flexibility and adapting strategies when initial approaches were unsuccessful. Communication (particularly between the system leader and the headteacher) was identified as critical throughout the support delivered. Without this, headteachers and system leaders, identified the potential to undermine good work if the headteacher was not kept up to date on developments.

System leaders talked about the importance of challenge leading to changes in teaching, in line with agreed strategies. In some cases, staff chose to leave as a result of being challenged. This was felt to be a necessary part of the school improvement process.

One system leader described their role as listening to the headteacher to develop solutions and not imposing what had previously worked for the system leader.

System leaders noted a variety of benefits for themselves, and their school, of undertaking the role. These included developing their own professional skills and knowledge and giving their staff opportunities for development.

7. Findings: benefits, outcomes and impacts

7.1. Benefits

As highlighted in Chapter 6, headteachers described a range of benefits of the S2SS project, including:

- Access to independent expert advice and knowledge. In particular, the objective perspective of a system leader was important to help assess priorities.
- Having a strategic ally external to the school to provide support and challenge them and their team.
- Developing a collaborative approach to improving the school.
- Personal development for headteachers, by recognising development areas and challenging themselves to address these.
- Networking through relationships linked to their system leader's school, contact with other S2SS schools (via IM workshops) and through the Bradford teaching school hub.

System leaders also noted a variety of benefits for themselves and their school, including developing their own professional skills and knowledge, and giving their staff opportunities for development. Headteachers and system leaders reported benefits to pupils of improved teaching quality and better-focused programmes of learning.

There were encouraging signs in some schools that changes and improvements would be sustained and embedded for the longer-term.

7.2. Outcomes

A range of outcomes, in different domains of school activity, was identified through this research. The challenge was collecting evidence about the resulting impact on pupil performance, which was constrained by the effects of the COVID-19 interruptions. Planned analysis of pupil performance data was not possible as the assessment mechanisms and subsequent collection of data by DfE changed during the COVID-19 interruptions.

In some cases, school-level data was collected on pupil assessment for a target group of pupils as part of an action plan, which evidenced improvement. For example, in one secondary school they improved their progress in year 7 maths pupils, with 86% of a target group meeting age-related expectations, who were not expected to, at the end of

the year compared with 84% at the beginning of the year. This was a greater level of improvement compared with the whole cohort.

The issue of schools actively monitoring quantitative data, for progress against the targets in their action plan, was identified in the review of wave 1 action plans. Often baseline data was included in the original action plans, but this was not always updated in a consistent way in their monitoring reports. In other cases, clear quantitative targets were not set, even where potential indicators might exist. This limited the objective assessment of action plan progress in a quantitative way in some schools. As mentioned earlier, attribution of any improvements to S2SS was not possible in relation to the action plan targets.

Focusing on the costs and involvement of schools in the first 3 cohorts of the S2SS project indicates that the estimated mean cost per school was approximately £60,490. This does not link outcomes to the costs, as outcomes vary by school action plan and no consistent measure was available across all supported schools.

The above unit cost was 2.5 times the cost of the £24,000 provided by the DfE School Improvement Offer to tier 3 schools. A more historical comparison, to give this context, was the London Challenge (2003-2011) which gave sums of between £1,487 and £89,238 to each secondary school (inflated to 2020 prices).

7.3. Changes in Ofsted grades

Data on Ofsted grades were reviewed as this was a key part of the original S2SS project design. It aimed to achieve a single grade improvement for each school. There were challenges to using this measure to assess the project's impact due to differing timescales and the changed inspection framework, which were exacerbated by COVID-19 as inspections did not take place for a period.¹⁴ In addition, there was no feasible comparator group to enable assessment of impact.

Analysis of the original 26 schools, indicated that prior to starting the project, the spread of Ofsted grades across all schools was very similar to the latest grades (Table 5).

However, this masked several problems with the data described below.

¹⁴ An updated Ofsted school inspection framework was introduced in September 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/whats-changing-at-ofsted-in-autumn-2019>. Retrieved on 30/9/21.

Table 5: Prior and current S2SS school Ofsted grades

Ofsted grade	Prior to S2SS*	Current grade**
4: Inadequate	6	5
3: Requires improvement	13	13
2: Good	7	8
1: Outstanding	0	0
Total	26	26

Source: DfE data spreadsheet, 2017 to 2021.

Note: *=some of these are based on the Ofsted grades of predecessor schools (which closed and then re-opened as the current school, they are thus subject to a separate inspection).

**=Current grade is the most recent grade assessed between 2017 and 2021

The absolute before and after data was highly inconclusive and includes 7 schools with a good rating prior to the S2SS project. Six of these received an Ofsted inspection between one and 8 months before starting on the project and one had not had an inspection for over 2 years. The good Ofsted grade of these schools was often not known when the management team first engaged with the school about the S2SS project. For some schools their current grades have not been updated with more recent inspections, since the prior grades, so they have remained the same. There may be some risk that supported schools had already achieved the good grade, without the need for support. However, inspection timings could not be controlled by the management team when selecting schools to participate in the S2SS project.

Overall, there was insufficient reliable information to conclude which schools have made a single grade improvement due to the S2SS project.

7.3.1. Estimated grades towards the end of the project

During Wave 2 interviews, headteachers and system leaders were asked to estimate the current grade for the supported school, based on experience or self-assessment (Table 6). This question was asked in interviews because, as explained above, consistent before and after Ofsted grades were not available. School headteachers are used to undertaking self-assessment against the Ofsted inspection framework to monitor their progress during periods between inspections. It was important to recognise that these current Ofsted grades were a subjective estimation and not based on a systematic methodology.

Table 6: Prior and estimated current Ofsted grades of wave 2 case study schools

School	Prior Ofsted grade	Estimated grade on starting S2SS (2017 to 2019)	Estimated current grade (2019 to 2021)
A	Inadequate*	Requires improvement	Requires improvement
B	Requires improvement	Requires improvement	Requires improvement
C	Requires improvement *	Inadequate	Inadequate
D	Requires improvement	Good	Good
E	Requires improvement	Good	Good
F	Inadequate*	Requires improvement	Good
G	Requires improvement	Requires improvement	Good
H	Inadequate*	Requires improvement	Good

Notes: 'estimated current grade' based on interviews with headteachers and system leaders.

Note: * = based on the Ofsted grades of predecessor schools (which closed and then re-opened as the current school, thus subject to a separate inspection)

Estimated Ofsted grades indicated a mixed picture across the 8 case study schools:

- Five were rated as good, having progressed from a lower prior Ofsted grade. Three of these had achieved a good grade in an Ofsted inspection just as the S2SS project started or within six-months of starting S2SS.
- Two were assessed as requires improvement. While some progress had been made, headteachers and system leaders did not feel they had quite reached the good threshold. In both cases they felt confident they were moving in the right direction and would achieve good within the next academic year, assuming no more interruptions. COVID-19 interruptions were significant for one school in delaying their progress.

“COVID-19 impacted on two major areas of our action plan. Both attendance and improving links between the school and local community were negatively affected which has stalled our improvement journey.” *Secondary headteacher*

- One was assessed as inadequate. The school had moved between MATs and there was ineffective communication - between the roles of system leader, headteacher and the MAT - affecting messaging across the school and implementation of action plan interventions.

Among the 8 case study schools, views regarding the contribution of the S2SS project to Ofsted grade improvement were generally positive although greater attribution was made by some than others. Of the 5 that progressed to good, 3 said it made an important contribution to the improvement, one said it accelerated the improvement that was already being made and one said it made a “massive contribution”. This provides qualitative evidence of the additionality that the S2SS project generated for these schools. Headteachers and system leaders in the other 3 schools felt that the S2SS project had made important contributions to their school improvement but that they had not yet reached the good threshold. Against the background of the COVID-19 interruptions, this represents an important achievement.

7.4. Thematic interventions

The following thematic interventions were identified as important actions in the case study school action plans. Focusing on these examples enabled insight into how the support was experienced and how it contributed to school improvement (more detail in Appendix E).

- **Improved leadership.** Addressing strategic leadership and developing middle leaders resulted in positive progress for all schools that included this in their action plan. Across the range of support received by schools, the key benefits were: improved strategic planning between the headteacher and senior leadership team; increased confidence in leadership skills among the senior and middle leaders; more effective decision making and distributed management across the school; recognition of the value of joined up working between senior leaders.
- **Literacy and reading.** A key area for improvement for 2 case study primary schools. The challenge for both schools was around encouraging consistency in staff approaches to teaching and supporting literacy development. Improvement was made in one school, the other felt that despite initial progress (interrupted by COVID-19) more improvement was possible.
- **Maths.** Improving maths teaching was a key action for some secondary and primary schools. Interventions included: catchup programmes for year 7 and year 8 students; upskilling through maths mastery approaches; using West Yorkshire White Rose Maths Hub materials. Most felt they had made good progress, while one thought that more time was required to see positive results

- **Curriculum and teaching practice.** Areas of focus included: producing high quality schemes of work; undertaking research to identify high quality teaching resources; tracking of progress through data; and subject-specific developments. All schools mentioning this as an important area assessed that they had improved.
- **Attendance and inclusion.** Attendance had been an issue for some primary and secondary schools. However, this was an example of an action that became a lower order priority during all the periods of COVID-19 restrictions. Generally, headteachers felt that progress to improve attendance stalled because of the COVID-19 restrictions. However, they thought on return to school the new approaches would have positive results.
- **Early years.** Positive progress was achieved in terms of staff confidence and competence to apply teaching strategies in early years settings. Modelling good practice, particularly around phonics delivery was a feature of the S2SS interventions around early years.

7.5. Sustainability

There were encouraging signs in some schools that changes and improvements would be sustained and embedded for the longer-term. One primary headteacher described how a middle leader had changed their approach which the headteacher felt would continue to improve the school.

“The ideas have definitely filtered through those middle leaders. For example, I have a staff member actively going and researching things and coming to me with ideas. They are taking ownership of that research.” *Primary headteacher.*

In other cases, teaching staff explained how their roles and their confidence had changed which was influencing the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

“Part of my role now includes being a ‘research champion’, this involves looking at research and implementation across schools ...and working out how we adapt it for our school.” *Primary teacher.*

“We have changed the way we do things. As a result of the support as a head of subject I gained a lot from the systems leader. I now feel a lot more confident about the long-term planning and rationale behind the curriculum. I also feel more confident articulating our curriculum intent to Ofsted inspectors.” *Secondary teacher.*

A secondary headteacher said that their school was investing over 3 times the sum they had received from S2SS with the aim of achieving sustained school improvement. In a

primary school they continued to employ a West Yorkshire White Rose Maths Hub consultant out of school funds, since S2SS ended, because of the improved results that were achieved.

In a couple of schools, there were concerns that a lack of ongoing funding may limit some continuation of improvement activities and they were looking for other additional funding sources. Most system leaders and headteachers felt that £60,000 was an adequate investment to support school improvement.

“When used efficiently and effectively, it is enough to create lasting change within schools.” *Primary system leader*

8. Conclusions and considerations for replication

8.1. Conclusions

S2SS gave headteachers of schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils an opportunity to deliver a bespoke evidence-based action plan implemented in collaboration with an external system leader. The S2SS project was generally well received amongst participants, with all case study schools reporting that improvements had been achieved in most areas targeted by action plans. IM workshops, while not always best sequenced, helped to construct a robust evidence-based action plan. Working relationships between system leaders and headteachers varied according to the schools' need. This tailored and flexible approach helped build strong partnerships between system leaders and headteachers and their wider schools, which many aimed to continue once the formal period of support was completed.

The S2SS project delivered the planned activity. Initially, supporting 26 Bradford OA schools, with further schools added at a later stage. All schools worked with experienced system leaders, attended IM workshops, developed an action plan, and delivered planned actions to address school improvement.

The IM workshops, and in some cases additional training from the research school, helped headteachers understand the importance of taking time to explain and embed new approaches or interventions with their staff. Headteachers recognised the value of understanding why and how an intervention was intended to work. This helped with effective implementation and achieved real improvement. There was some frustration that the scheduling of IM workshops occurred after action plans were submitted.

The matching process was broadly effective. Most relationships were effective over the lifetime of the support, with system leaders employing a range of strategies to ensure the right conditions for them to support improvement.

There were some delays to delivery due to COVID-19 interruptions. These led to the support period being extended in most cases from the planned four school terms to around 2 school years (6 school terms). Schools, system leaders and the management team were flexible in adapting the action plans in light of changes in school circumstances and COVID-19 interruptions. Action plans were generally developed with good fidelity to the EEF implementation guidance, although some did not monitor progress against their measurable targets. Schools used evidence-based interventions with recognition of 'non-negotiables' which are the active ingredients designed to achieve planned outcomes.

A range of qualitative evidence from headteachers, system leaders and teachers suggested that improvements had been made. In some cases, this improvement was

quicker than it would otherwise have been and in other cases improvements might not have been achieved without the S2SS project. There were clear examples of thematic areas across the 8 case study schools where improvement had occurred in primary and secondary schools. The key attributes of the project that enabled these improvements were: implementation planning and preparation; effective joint working with a systems leader; use of evidence-based interventions which were monitored to ensure they were delivered with fidelity. Some headteachers believed the S2SS project contributed to their school achieving the standard required for a good Ofsted grade (measured by Ofsted inspection or school self-assessment where inspections had not yet occurred).

There were examples of headteachers and system leaders taking corrective actions to ensure interventions were delivered in a consistent and effective way, for example, in school-wide approaches to reading. Research informed approaches were implemented such as White Rose Maths strategies, reading strategies and phonics interventions.

Evaluation findings were constrained by a lack of quantitative data in relation to school improvement. Therefore, it was necessary to place a greater reliance on qualitative evidence gained from interviews with strategic stakeholders, headteachers and system leaders.

It has not been possible to draw quantitative conclusions about the impact of the project because the SCBA methodology was not implemented as planned. The SCBA was predicated on consistent measurement of school performance (key stage 2 results and key stage 4 results). These were not available in a consistent format over the period of the project. The use of Ofsted grades as a basis to evaluate a project such as S2SS was not realistic (due to timings of inspections and changes in Ofsted inspection criteria).

8.2. Considerations for replication

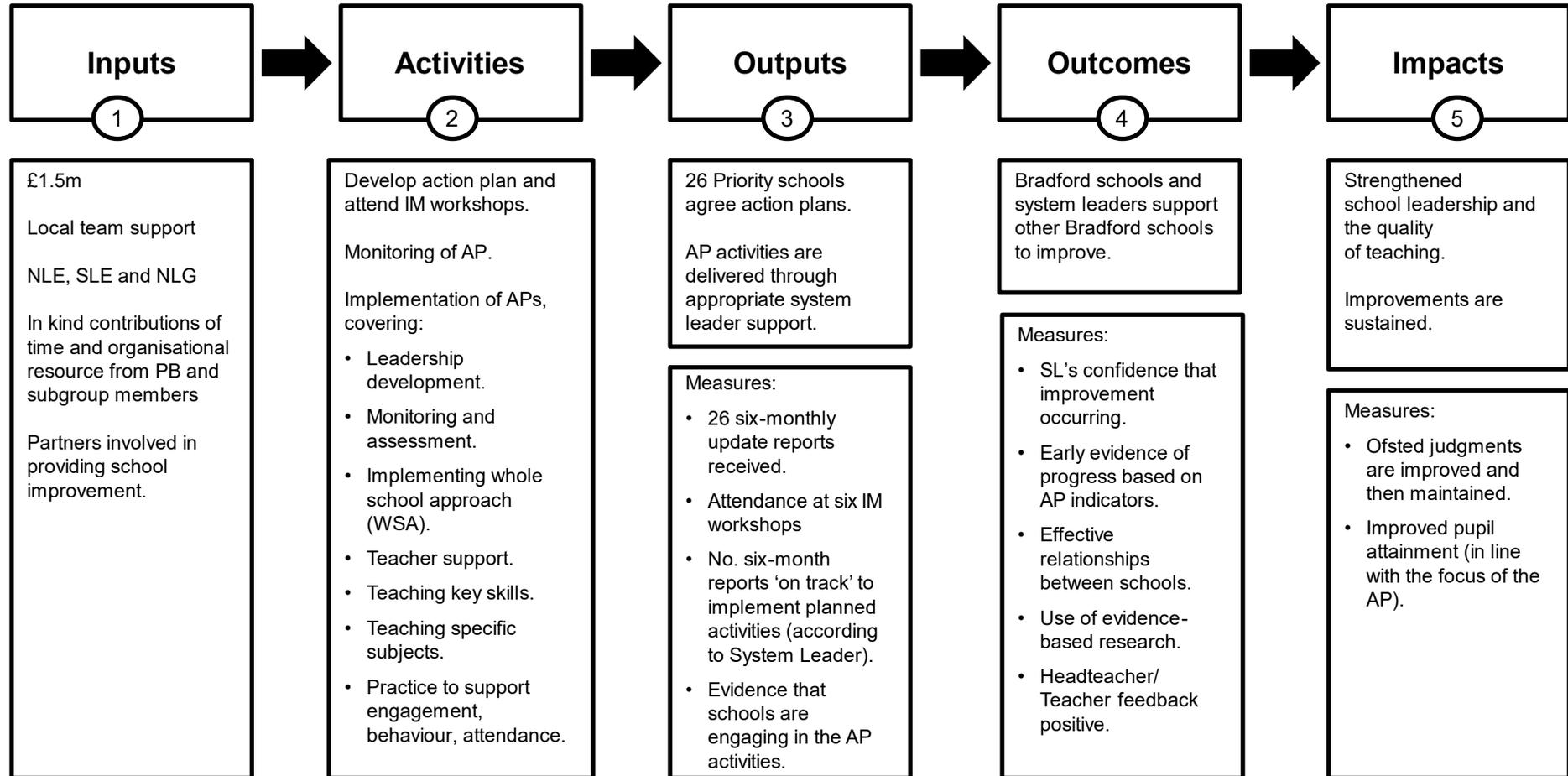
- **Additionality.** There remains a question about whether the resulting changes from involvement in S2SS, generated a level of improvement greater than would otherwise be achieved. Qualitative evidence from headteachers and system leaders indicated that some changes were wholly additional and that in other cases improvements may have been achieved earlier than would have otherwise been the case. This could be tested through a school level experimental approach perhaps comparing intervention activity with lower intensity interventions such as the School Improvement Offer or through a “stepped wedge design” (Anders et al, 2017) by delayed participation and collecting data from initially non-participating schools who would eventually become participating schools. This would require further research to identify and articulate outcomes to be measured. This should also be longitudinal in nature to bridge the lag in school performance data beyond the end of the intervention.

- **IM workshops.** While there was some critique of the IM workshops, the importance of understanding implementation science and concepts of active ingredients and fidelity emphasise the value of IM workshops. Expectations of system leaders in IM workshops should be clarified to ensure they are clearly understood.
- **Time for action plan development.** Scheduling time for action plan development and implementation training should be co-ordinated in any future delivery of similar support. This would avoid situations where schools submit action plans before they have undertaken the IM workshops.
- **Ensuring action plans include measurable targets.** Some early action plans did not associate targets with actions where quantitative data might exist. In other cases, baseline data was not updated in progress reports to measure change. Some schools did do this effectively and some were affected by availability of data during the COVID-19 interruptions.
- **Sharing experiences of S2SS.** The management team could facilitate headteachers and system leaders who have participated in the S2SS project sharing their experiences. They could share their school improvement journeys, with future recipient schools. In particular, this will help headteachers understand what is likely to occur and support buy-in to help with the development of relationships. This could be included in a planned learning celebration event.
- **Evidencing school improvement.** The management team could demonstrate how to measure school improvement for headteachers and system leaders. For example, this might involve guidance on how to do these measurements and which ones to avoid. This would help to confirm evidence of improvement. It could involve elements of objective measurement, self-assessment and assessment by external system leaders or education consultants.

Appendix A: S2SS Logic model

StSS | Bradford Logic Model

Summary: Investing to strengthen school leadership in Bradford, to build capacity and enable better teaching. Using National Leaders in Education (NLE), Specialist Leaders in Education (SLE) and National Leaders in Governance (NLG) based in and around Bradford, to work with school leaders, drive planning and oversee delivery, to make sure the right resources reach schools needing support, and ensure they are used effectively.



Logic model as text:

The inputs lead into the activities then outputs, outcomes and finally impacts.

Summary

Investing to strengthen school leadership in Bradford, to build capacity and enable better teaching. Using National Leaders in Education (NLE), Specialist Leaders in Education (SLE) and National Leaders in Governance (NLG) based in and around Bradford, to work with school leaders, drive planning and oversee delivery, to make sure the right resources reach schools needing support, and ensure they are used effectively.

1. Inputs

The inputs were:

- £1.5m
- Local team support
- NLE, SLE and NLG
- In kind contributions of time and organisational resource from PB and subgroup members
- Partners involved in providing school improvement.

2. Activities

The planned activities were:

- Develop action plan and attend IM workshops.
- Monitoring of AP.
- Implementation of APs, covering:
 - Leadership development.
 - Monitoring and assessment.
 - Implementing whole school approach (WSA).
 - Teacher support.
 - Teaching key skills.
 - Teaching specific subjects.
 - Practice to support engagement, behaviour, attendance.

3. Outputs

The outputs were:

- 26 Priority schools agree action plans.
- AP activities are delivered through appropriate system leader support.

The measures for the outputs were:

- 26 six-monthly update reports received.
- Attendance at six IM workshops
- No. six-month reports 'on track' to implement planned activities (according to System Leader).
- Evidence that schools are engaging in the AP activities.

4. Outcomes

The expected outcome was Bradford schools and system leaders support other Bradford schools to improve.

The measures for the outcomes were:

- SL's confidence that improvement occurring.
- Early evidence of progress based on AP indicators.
- Effective relationships between schools.
- Use of evidence-based research.
- Headteacher/ Teacher feedback positive.

5. Impacts

The desired impacts were:

- Strengthened school leadership and the quality of teaching.
- Improvements are sustained.

The measures for the outcomes were:

- Ofsted judgments are improved and then maintained.
- Improved pupil attainment (in line with the focus of the AP).

Appendix B: Evaluation questions

The evaluation questions were:

- What impact has the programme had for the participating schools?
- Has the programme contributed to an improved Ofsted judgement?
- Did the programme result in schools meeting their school improvement outcomes/goals, as set out by the activities/programmes identified in their plans?
- Did the programme result in different types or choices of school improvement activity taking place (compared to business as usual)?
- Did it work well? Which factors enabled the S2SS programme to work well?
- Which factors presented barriers to the S2SS programme working well?
- What is the impact of training on 'effective implementation', in particular:
 - On the selection and targeting of activities/programmes?
 - On the approach to and fidelity of implementation?
 - On the impact of activities/programmes?

Appendix C: Methodology

Table 7: Evaluation methodology

Evaluation element	Wave 1	Wave 2
Time period	May 2019 - Nov 2019	Nov 2020 – April 2021
Headteacher interviews	19	7
System leader interviews	23	8
Strategic interviews	4	6
Analysis of action plans	23	8
Teacher survey responses	89	-
Teacher interviews	-	15

Source: York consulting 2021.

Appendix D: Schools data analysis

State total number of schools in Bradford¹⁵ based on this analysis is: 215.

Key contextual data

Across the 26 schools involved in cohort 1 to 3 of the S2SS project, 17 were primary schools, 8 were secondary schools and one was an all-through school. As of February 2021, 5 of the schools were LA maintained and 21 had academy status.

Only 3 of the S2SS schools had a pupil premium percentage of less than 36%. Most were in the range of 40% to 60%. Over two-fifths (44%) of pupils at schools involved in the project were pupil premium funded, compared to 31% of pupils across all schools in Bradford.

The percentage of students at schools involved in the project who speak English as an additional language was 28%, slightly lower than the figure for all Bradford schools (34%).

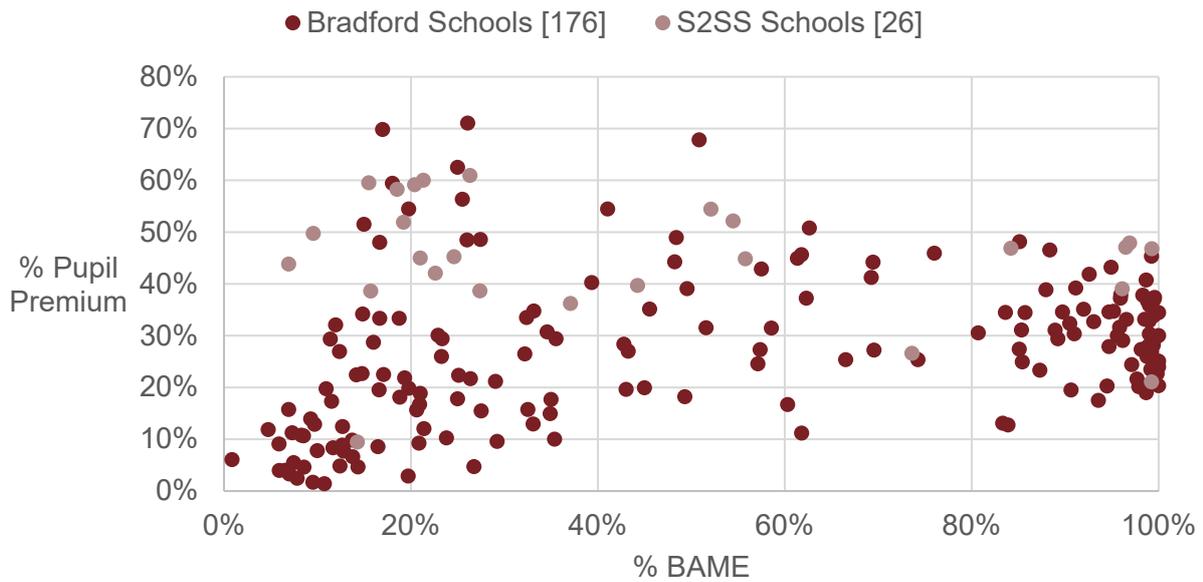
The percentage of white British pupils at schools involved in the project (56%) is slightly higher than across all Bradford schools (47%), whilst the percentage of Pakistani pupils (23%) is lower than across all Bradford schools (32%).

Further analysis of Bradford schools compared with all other schools in Bradford confirms that they tend to be the more disadvantaged schools, both for primaries and secondaries:

- S2SS schools tend to have higher proportions of pupil premium pupils (Figure 3 & 4).
- S2SS schools have a range of proportions of BAME/IDACI pupils from low to high.
- S2SS secondary schools tend to have more lower performing pupils (Figure 5).
- S2SS primary schools tend to have more lower performing pupils (Figure 6).

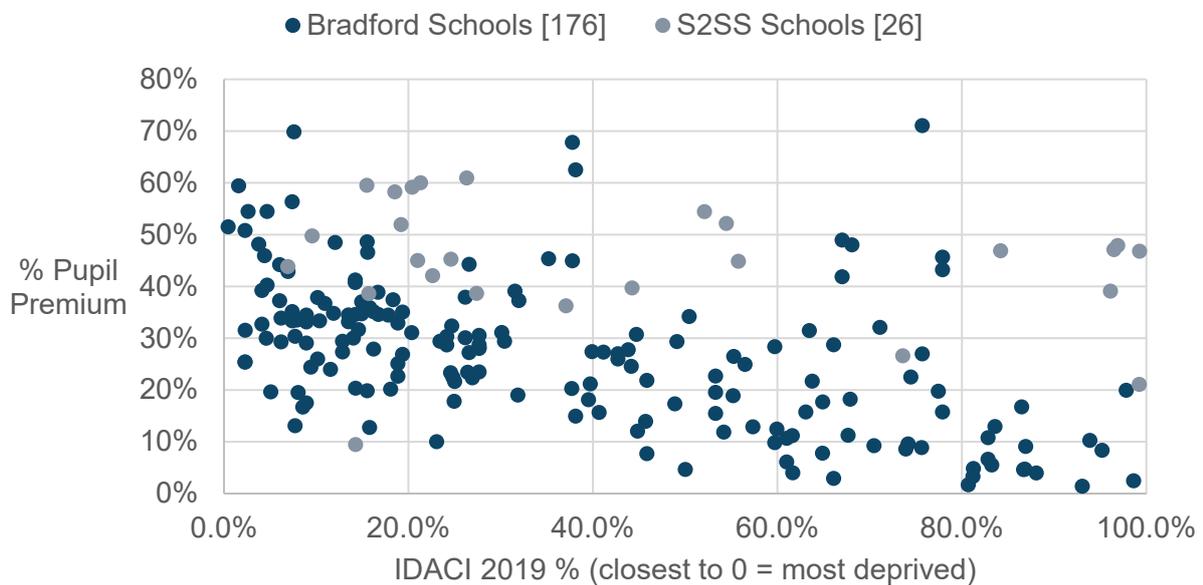
¹⁵ There are 13 providers (mostly nurseries and Sixth Form/colleges, but also 2 schools) that have 'NP' or 'no data' in most columns on the spreadsheet. This means they are not included in any of the analysis, and this is reflected in the base figures used in this analysis.

Figure 3: 2019 % BAME and % Pupil Premium in S2SS and Bradford Schools



Source: data from DfE S2SS analysis spreadsheet using school characteristics data (where data was available)

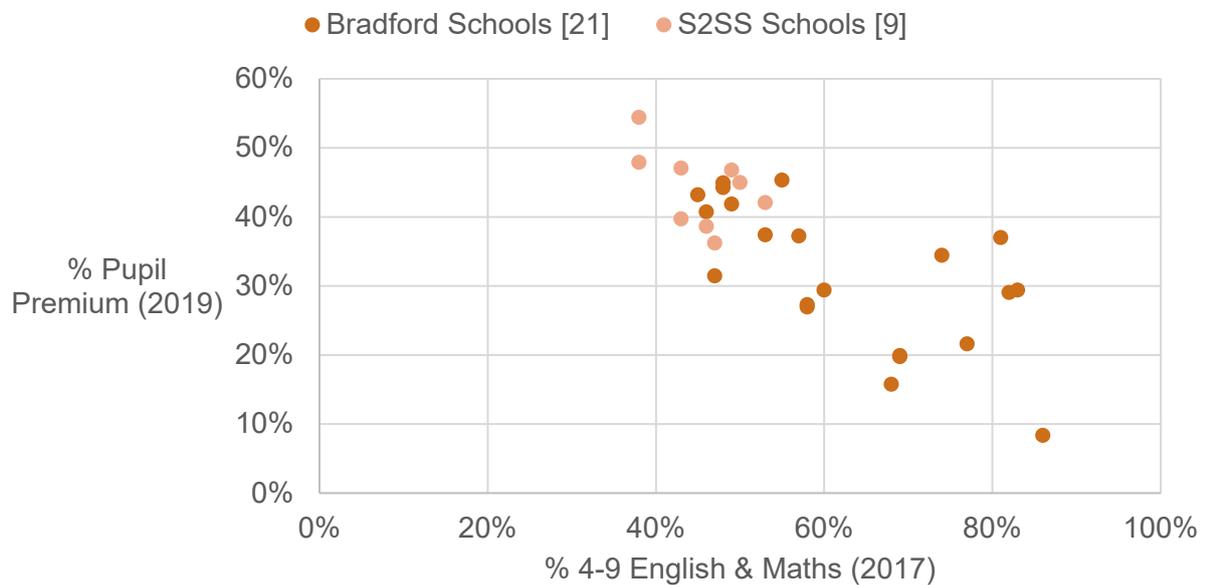
Figure 4: Scatterplot of percentage IDACI¹⁶ by percentage Pupil Premium, 2019



Source: data from DfE S2SS analysis spreadsheet using school characteristics data (where data was available)

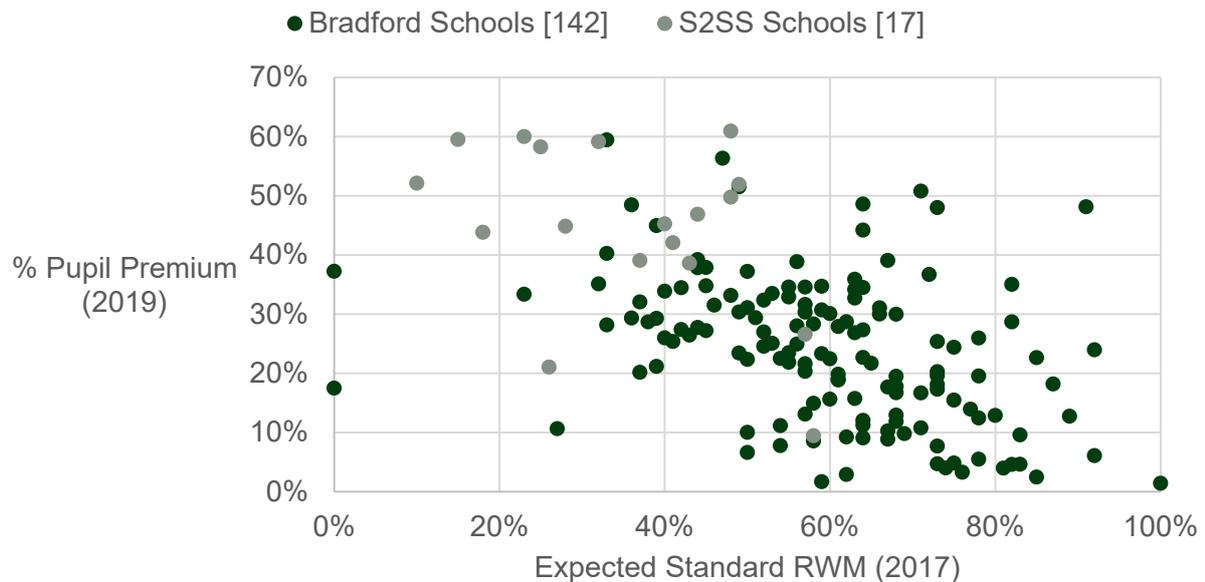
¹⁶ IDACI – Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

Figure 5: Scatterplot of GCSE 4-9 English & Maths (2017) by percentage Pupil Premium (2019)



Source: data from DfE S2SS analysis spreadsheet using secondary school performance and characteristics data (where data was available)

Figure 6: Scatterplot of Expected Standard RWM (2017) by percentage Pupil Premium (2019)



Source: data from DfE S2SS analysis spreadsheet using school performance and characteristics data (where data was available)

Performance indicators

The attainment scores in Table 8 show that on average, students at the primary schools involved in the S2SS project did worse than students across all Bradford schools.

Table 8: KS2 Progress Scores, 2018-19

Performance indicator	S2SS Schools	All Bradford Schools
Reading, Writing and Maths expected standard	48%	63%
Reading attainment	58%	71%
Writing attainment	68%	78%
Maths attainment	64%	78%
Average attainment in Reading and Writing	63%	74%
Good level of development	63%	69%

Source: based on DfE data from S2SS spreadsheet supplied by programme team. Base: 159 primary schools across Bradford (including 17 S2SS primary schools)

Progress 8¹⁷ (a measure of pupil progress from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school) scores indicated that on average, pupils at the secondary schools involved in the S2SS project did less well at KS4 than those with similar prior attainment nationally (Table 9), whereas scores for all schools in Bradford indicated that pupils on average did better at KS4 than those with similar prior attainment. Attainment 8 scores (measuring the achievement of a pupil across 8 qualifications at GCSE level) were also lower for the schools involved in the S2SS project, compared with all Bradford schools.

Table 9: KS4 Progress 8 and Attainment 8, 2018-19

Performance indicator	S2SS Schools	All Bradford Schools
Achievement 8	36.51	42.72
Average A8 Rank	23	17
Progress 8	-0.43	0.05

Source: based on DfE data from S2SS spreadsheet supplied by programme team. Base: 30 secondary schools across Bradford (including 9 S2SS secondary schools)

¹⁷ For more information see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561021/Progress_8_and_Attainment_8_how_measures_are_calculated.pdf

The percentage of secondary pupils gaining grades 4-9 in English and Maths GCSE was also lower amongst the S2SS schools (43%) than for all Bradford schools (54%).

Appendix E: Project delivery in schools

These are examples of interventions identified from the 8 school case studies.

Improving leadership

Addressing strategic leadership and developing middle leaders resulted in positive progress for all schools that included this in their action plan. Across the range of support received by schools the key benefits were:

- Improved strategic planning between the headteacher and senior leadership team.
- Increased confidence in leadership skills among the senior and middle leaders.
- More effective decision making and distributed management across the school.
- Recognition of the value of joined up working between senior leaders.

Some of these are featured in the case study example below. In this case a prior Ofsted judgement of requires improvement had hit staff morale but in the words of the headteacher, “gave us the opportunity to draw a line in the sand and move on from it”.

School case study: Strategic leadership and middle leader development

The headteacher felt there had been clear improvement against all aspects of this development area.

“Across the school there is evidence of more strategic planning, proactive use of research to underpin decision-making, an increase in teaching standards and levels of organisation across the teaching team.” Primary headteacher

School leaders, identified by the headteacher, who had received coaching were able, in turn, to support others. Staff had valued the dedicated time for coaching, facilitated by the financial support, to release them from teaching. The staff team were perceived by the headteacher to have grown in confidence and to be more solution oriented.

In one well-performing primary school the challenge was around continuous improvement and not just settling for good performance above the national average. In this instance the system leader encouraged involvement in wider peer networks to develop an understanding of how the school can engage with other schools more widely.

A key outcome of the support described by teachers, particularly in primary schools, was leadership development. Middle leaders strengthened their leadership skills. They felt more confident in speaking to staff about changes and in making suggestions to senior

leaders. Some primary and secondary middle leaders also described improved assessment processes and better use of data to inform decision making.

School case study: Middle leader development

Staff at the school had limited understanding of differentiated learning and did not use scaffolding, particularly when teaching English. Visits to the system leader's school introduced the middle leader to their systematic approach to scaffolding and differentiation. The middle leader then introduced this approach at the school, for example, colour coding of nouns and verbs. Student performance and attitudes to learning have subsequently improved.

Literacy and reading

Literacy and reading were key areas for improvement for 2 case study primary schools. The challenge for both schools was around encouraging consistency in staff approaches to teaching and support literacy development.

In one primary school an area of focus was establishing routines within their literacy programme due to inconsistent approaches between staff members. For example, one aim was to start a morning reading programme to ensure consistency across the school. Specialist Leaders in Education (SLEs) from the system leader school delivered training around comprehension, assessment and benchmarking to support skills development for teachers in the supported school. This was adapted over time after initial success was achieved. Positive progress was assessed, prior to COVID-19 restrictions, through listening to children read and book scrutinises. Children were better able to talk about their reading and answer comprehension questions. In addition, lesson observations, by senior leaders and the system leader, demonstrated improvements achieved through the focus on literacy improvement. This was both in direct teaching of reading and indirect teaching of reading during English lessons. Some changes were made to the focus of literacy work during the course of the project described below.

School case study: Literacy teaching developments

The morning reading programme implemented as part of the action plan was adapted as the headteacher and system leader monitored progress. Initially, because the KS2 children had such a wide range of ability, the morning reading programme focussed on each child's individual needs. However, tailoring reading activities to each individual child proved very challenging for teachers, generating mixed results for the children.

“Because the programme was able to get enough children to a broadly similar reading level, it was modified so each reading group would read one book together, with students

who require more individual level support given specialised interventions, such as one-to-one support.” Primary headteacher

Changing the programme in this way meant that teachers were able to plan high-quality activities, with more focused time, based around one text. The next steps related to a long-term plan around sequencing of lessons and SLEs have had planning meetings with each year group of teachers around this approach.

In one primary school the headteacher believed that outcomes for reading would be skewed due to children not being in school due to COVID-19 restrictions. Assessments made before Christmas 2021 were below pre-pandemic attainment and it was expected that assessment results once children were back in school would have fallen even further due to the length of time children had been away from the classroom. Therefore, this school was planning to implement strategies to ensure focus and consistency once pupils returned to school in March 2021.

In another primary school, the system leader identified that assessment data showed pupils were stronger at decoding than comprehension; in particular British born English as an Additional Language (EAL) students tended to use social language structures rather than academic language structures. They discussed the system leaders experience of strategies to teach children about tier 1, 2 and 3 language. The headteacher then implemented this approach through external training through Fisher Family Trust (FFT) and internal continuing professional development (CPD) with all staff about vocabulary and training on formal language structures. Despite COVID-19 interruptions the senior leadership team have been monitoring children’s progress which has continued to improve.

Maths

Improving maths teaching was a key action for secondary and primary schools. The examples below focus on implementation of improvement in maths teaching in secondary schools.

One secondary undertook catch-up programmes for year 7 and year 8 students. The focus was on upskilling staff through maths mastery approaches using White Rose maths materials. This was positive and led to a greater focus on staff CPD and lesson observations. Review of workbooks and feedback from staff and students confirmed good progress had been made.

Year 11 maths was the focus for another secondary school although planned improvements proved elusive during the period of support. An initial review of teaching as part of the action plan indicated that there were extensive failings within the maths department. The system leader attempted a number of strategies in collaboration with the

headteacher, however, a recent Ofsted inspection result of inadequate, evidenced that more work was required which the system leader and headteacher recognised.

School case study: Year 11 maths

The system leader undertook an Ofsted style inspection of the maths department (including learning walks and lesson observations) to inform recommendations for action. This revealed inadequate subject leadership and inadequate levels of teaching. Contributing factors included: frequent staff absence and substitute teachers (creating student disaffection); inconsistent teaching styles; lack of student recollection from one lesson to the next. After a first attempt to replace the head of maths through internal promotion failed, they brought in staff from the West Yorkshire Maths Hub. After a further failure to sustain another head of maths, the system leader overhauled the entire maths schemes of work for KS3, undertaking learning walks every 2 weeks to check progression.

Teachers spoke positively about S2SS, and the school improvements made because of the project. Sentiment ranged from teachers who felt that S2SS had supported significant, school wide changes to those who described improvements in specific areas. Teachers commented on the good relationships they developed with system leaders and the value of their, expertise and support.

School case study: Senior leader development

The school worked with the system leader to design a targeted catch-up intervention for Year 7 students. Students were taken off timetable for a week for specialised maths and English lessons, interspersed with fun activities like quizzes and baking. Deputy curriculum leaders in both subjects were involved, as it was felt they had the required experience and expertise without the time constraints of curriculum leaders. Pupil attendance over the week was high and the progress gap between the students who took part and the rest of the Year 7 cohort narrowed. Schemes of learning and teaching strategies used during the intervention were incorporated into mainstream maths and English lessons, which teachers felt had contributed to the school achieving good outcomes in certain areas (although the school was still self-assessed as requires improvement overall).

Curriculum and teaching practice

Areas of focus have included: producing high quality schemes of work; undertaking research to identify high quality teaching resources; tracking of progress through data; and subject-specific developments. For example, maths-related activities have covered:

observation of maths mastery in other schools; introducing strategies for developing weaker pupils more quickly; and engaging with West Yorkshire Maths Hub training.

Active use of pupil tracking data was recognised as a development area in several case studies. In some cases, data was already being collected, prior to S2SS, but was not being used to assess progress or spot pupils who might be going backwards.

Some evidence of improved pupil learning performance was reported by secondary headteachers although assembling secure data was difficult due to school closures (linked to COVID-19 outbreaks) and the inability to undertake school-based testing. Also there have been some challenges in undertaking teaching observations due to COVID-19 bubbles limiting the movement of staff.

Teachers found sharing practice from the system leader school very helpful. For example, teachers visited other schools to see how programmes such as the Ruth Miskin¹⁸ scheme was implemented or to learn about systemic approaches to scaffolding. In contrast, in some instances, the system leader school was felt to be very different in ethos and context to the teacher's school, meaning practice sharing felt less relevant to teachers. This shows the importance of careful school matching but also the importance of explaining how some techniques can be applied across contexts.

In some schools, there was an observation by teachers of initial reluctance from other teaching staff to adopt new approaches to teaching. They felt reluctant to change the schemes of work they had written. According to one middle leader such teachers, "*did not want to change their approach*". However, system leaders were able to support middle leaders to increase staff buy-in. At one secondary school where staff engagement was high from the start, teachers spoke of the highly collaborative nature of the relationship with the system leader.

School case study: Middle leader development

Middle leaders were finding it challenging to develop a KS3 history curriculum that was chronological yet still linked to KS4 learning. They therefore adopted the system leader's school history curriculum, including teaching resources. This initially only covered KS3 but has now been expanded to KS4 and includes restructuring lessons and making changes to assessment processes. The system leader also supported teachers in curriculum delivery through learning walks. The curriculum changes have led to improvements in KS3 attainment in history. Pupils were subsequently more engaged, for example, the Year 10s were enjoying learning about 1920s USA. Staff were very positive

¹⁸ Ruth Miskin Read Write Inc Phonics is a reading scheme where children are grouped according to their reading progress and re-assessed every half term – they learn sounds and practise reading every day at exactly the right level.

about the content and recognised that the curriculum now flows better. Teacher workload also reduced as a result.

Primary teachers described improvements in teaching practice, especially in phonics, and greater staff understanding of how children learn. The support also helped to introduce new teaching strategies across primary and secondary schools, as well as new approaches to inclusion and behaviour management.

The impact of these changes described by teachers included greater parental engagement and improved attainment, particularly in reading, English, and maths. In many cases, changes to teaching practice were felt to have resulted in greater student engagement, with children described as more confident and independent learners.

Teachers in all schools that responded, said, that one-to-one coaching and professional conversations between teachers and system leaders were felt to be helpful for developing leadership skills and improving teaching practice. In these instances, system leaders functioned as a 'sounding board' or 'critical friend'.

In some schools their action plan required a change in ethos with teachers adopting new approaches and strategies. Headteachers described how some teachers rose to the challenge, welcomed the changes and became more proactive. In other cases, teachers left during the period of the project. The overall effect, across supported schools, resulted in a more focused staff team motivated to address the recognised school priorities.

Some teachers describe an increase in confidence arising from the support delivered and feeling more certainty that their professional practice was having the desired effect. In one primary school, a member of staff started working as an SLE, supporting the system leader's school in specific areas. This professional confidence was referenced more widely in the supported school, reinforcing a sense that the whole school was on an upward trajectory.

Attendance and inclusion

Attendance had been an issue for some primary and secondary school action plans. However, this was an example of an action that became a lower order priority during the COVID-19 restrictions. Generally, headteachers felt that progress to improve attendance stalled because of the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, one secondary school had a focus on attendance and improving links with the parent community through a combination of a funded community liaison role and plans for parent prosecutions. The approach to attendance had to be abandoned due to COVID-19 school restrictions. In this instance the school's focus shifted from attendance to engagement with online learning.

School case study: Attendance

One secondary school had faced historic challenges in their relationships with their local community leading to a negative reputation for the school. This was believed to have fed into poor attendance rates affecting pupils' learning. The agreed action was to appoint a governor with responsibility for connecting the school and wider community; in particular, encouraging parents into the school. The aim was to improve attendance.

“Some early successes included: identifying barriers to parents sending their children to school such as a lack of school uniform; and expanding liaison work with other community hubs (church, youth groups and library).” Secondary headteacher

Despite training and dialogue, it proved difficult to calibrate the balance of this role between the school and the community. The challenge related to the definition of the job description and the person specification through the recruitment process. There were some initial positive results with attendance improving for about 30 percent of pupils noted in regular termly reports. The role became adapted during the period of COVID-19 restrictions, changing the focus of the role away from attendance and towards supporting pupils and families during the pandemic.

One secondary school had a focus on the implementation of a new on-site inclusion centre as part of their action plan. The school shifted the focus from addressing behaviour to addressing the underlying causes of behaviour through a greater focus on Social Emotional Mental Health and Special Educational Needs provision. This had been operating for under a year and resulted in reduced fixed-term and permanent exclusions, improved behaviour, and better pupil relationships with school staff, compared with the previous year.

Pupil behaviour improved outside of lessons in one secondary school which was addressing behaviour issues through its action plan. However, the creation of 5 bubbles across the school due to COVID-19 restrictions and minimisation of movement across the school led to a very positive effect on behaviour. This proved to be an accidental discovery of a better way to manage pupil behaviour. The school building was old with long corridors; during COVID-19 restrictions the headteacher created zones across the school building with separate entrances and exits to manage bubbles of students.

Parent contact improved, which school staff hoped might influence future engagement and attendance at school following the COVID-19 interruptions. There was evidence across many of the case studies indicating how relationships between school staff and parents had improved. This was particularly the case for some vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This resulted from an array of contacts including: school provision of teaching materials and food parcels; dialogue about learning strategies; and parental concern for their children.

Staff understanding of pupils' wider barriers improved as a result of providing remote learning support, delivering laptops, facilitating internet access, and delivering food parcels to families. This was expected to help with future contextual understanding and targeting additional support based on improved teacher awareness of pupils' circumstances.

Early years

Positive progress was achieved in terms of staff confidence and competence to apply teaching strategies in early years settings. Modelling good practice, particularly around phonics delivery has been a feature of the S2SS interventions around early years.

In one primary school the focus on early years combined with the system leader support has helped the early years lead to transform the provision. This has resulted in an improved reputation for the school and nursery such that demand for places has risen markedly.

School case study: Early years provision

The headteacher believes that teaching in early years is now good, and in particular areas is outstanding, because of the S2SS project. This has been achieved through coaching of the early years lead and opportunities to observe, reflect and learn about how to establish continuous improvement. There has been a focus on what is working well, what they need to keep and what they need to change. This has led to high expectations and increased pupil progress against where they need to be.

“[Early years] is going from strength to strength. My early years lead has been brilliant and early years has been transformed ... [in terms of] ... the environment and having really high expectations.” Primary headteacher

In another primary school, the improvement journey was less certain at the beginning as reception staff were initially reluctant to take on the advice of the SLE. The early years staff in the supported school were relatively inexperienced and were just starting to develop an understanding of the need to “take charge” through their role in the classroom. Work with this team involved support for the assistant head responsible for early years who helped the staff mature into their roles and become more willing to take on advice and act on what they were required to do. Impacts included better tracking of children's progress and increased opportunities for children to read, write and work with numbers in all areas of early years provision.



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