Department for Education

Effective practice in delivering 16 to 19 level 2 English and maths in further education

Ten themes – one goal

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Summary

This practice-informed guide identifies 10 key themes for improving 16 to 19 year old learner progress up to level 2 in English and maths. Each theme includes a set of suggested effective practice points, approaches, techniques and, where appropriate, learner insights for improving the delivery of level 2 English and maths to learners aged 16 to 19 in further education (FE).

The guide responds to persistent challenges in 16 to 19 English and maths provision, and shares the strategies used by those who systematically overcome those challenges. Identifying 10 themes for tackling these challenges, the guide draws on research, policy, and case studies from 20 colleges.

Success requires more than delivering qualifications - it starts with culture. Strong providers reframe English and maths as opportunities, embed them into study programmes, and create predictable routines that signal priority. Leadership is critical; high-performing institutions adopt whole-college strategies, integrating these subjects into governance, timetabling, and quality improvement cycles.

Pedagogy recognises that mastery approaches emerge as a central response to the gaps and missed milestones many learners carry from school. Other approaches included here similarly are focused on helping learners succeed, including when that requires a break from past school experiences. Appropriate use of contextualised teaching, metacognitive strategies, and mastery principles rebuild confidence, while retrieval practice and structured exam preparation strengthen outcomes. Innovations like adaptive digital tools and AI tutors extend learning beyond the classroom.

Support systems matter; specialist staff, pastoral teams, and vocational collaboration address attendance and anxiety. Strategic grouping and diagnostics ensure learners receive appropriately-pitched instruction, with selective use of resits based on readiness.

Professional development underpins improvement. Colleges invest in collaborative planning, examiner-informed CPD, and networks to spread evidence-based practice, while tackling recruitment and retention through internal pipelines and workload protection.

Ultimately, effective provision is systemic. When culture, curriculum, and operations align under strong leadership, colleges achieve higher attendance, better progress from grade 3 and below, and improved pass rates, even with large cohorts. The 10 themes, spanning strategy, leadership, engagement, assessment, teaching, and workforce, offer a roadmap for sustained improvement.

The guide brings together 10 themes with a single goal – to improve the progress made in English and maths for 16 to 19 year old learners.

Ten themes – one goal

The 10 interconnected themes link to the single goal of improving learner progress towards, and success in, level 2 English and maths. They include:

- Purpose, ambition, and strategy – defining clear objectives and long-term plans
- Leadership, governance, and shared accountability – ensuring strong leadership and clear responsibilities.
- Starting well – focus on transition, induction, and early teaching.
- Engagement, attendance, and learner motivation – encouraging consistent participation and motivation.
- Assessment, diagnostics, and progress from starting points – measuring and supporting learner growth.
- Timetabling – structuring time effectively for learning.
- Grouping, pathways, and exam entry decisions – organising learners for optimal outcomes.
- Teaching and learning – core instructional practices.
- Workforce capacity, staff expertise, and wellbeing – building and maintaining a skilled, healthy team.
- Sustaining improvement – emphasising evaluation and adaptation for continuous progress.

Introduction

English and maths remain pivotal for 16 to 19 year olds in FE, underpinning academic progression, employability, and life chances. Yet, more than half of learners enter general FE without a grade 4 in one or both subjects, making continued study both a compliance requirement and a critical opportunity to reduce inequality.

Delivering level 2 English and maths is complex. Learners often arrive with low confidence, negative past experiences, and a perception that these subjects are irrelevant to their vocational goals. Diverse prior attainment, attendance challenges, and resource constraints compound the difficulty, while high-stakes assessments heighten anxiety.

This guide responds to these realities. It offers practical, evidence-based strategies to strengthen teaching quality, improve learner progress, and integrate English and maths into vocational learning. Drawing on sector data and case studies from high-performing colleges, it highlights proven models and interventions that overcome barriers and deliver sustained improvement.

The report is structured around 10 key themes, from strategy and leadership to teaching practice and workforce development, providing a comprehensive roadmap for colleges to achieve better outcomes in English and maths.

A key element of the research has been to undertake a series of case studies from selected colleges with one or more of the following criteria:

- large numbers of 16 to 19 learners studying English and maths
- sustained (3 years) achievement rates in one or both subjects above national averages
- sustained good progress rates between grades 1 to 2, and/or 3 to 4 in one or both subjects
- geographically and demographically representative
- FE sector representative, primarily general FE, with land based and sixth form provision and a range of sizes

Key research questions

The research team have framed the research to address 4 key questions:

- What does good performance look like for both achievement and progression for 16 to 19 year old learners?
- Are there differences between effective practices that lead to good progress versus effective practice that leads to level 2 achievement?
- What are the key barriers to 16 to 19 year old students achieving their English and maths goals and how can they be overcome?
- What strategies, approaches and techniques in the management and delivery of English and maths have a positive impact on the performance of young people retaking GCSE English and maths?

Theme 1: purpose, ambition and strategy

Top takeaways:

- English and maths should be framed as an entitlement for all learners, not as remedial or corrective.
- Leadership purpose must be made visible through consistent messaging and alignment between strategy, systems and everyday practice.
- English and maths need to be embedded as a core strand of the study programme, with shared ownership beyond subject teams.

Research shows that learner identity, shaped by prior schooling, assessment experiences, and repeated success or failure, strongly influences engagement and outcomes in English and maths (Arnold, 2024; Crisp et. al, 2023; Lloyd, 2021). Many learners arrive with entrenched beliefs about their ability, often linked to repeated difficulties in these subjects. Emotional readiness, confidence, and a sense of belonging are essential for sustained participation.

Colleges highlight that leadership decisions around culture, support, and curriculum design significantly affect how learners experience English and maths. Environments that acknowledge students' previous experience of these subjects - which can include disrupted histories, assessment anxiety, and unmet special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) needs – but offer a reset that frames these subjects as a major life opportunity are critical. These factors impact attendance and persistence, requiring systems that rebuild confidence alongside teaching.

Effective practice point 1: New City College – senior leadership visibility and symbolic signals

Senior leaders deliberately position English and maths as a whole-college priority. The principal and executive team reinforce the importance of English and maths in welcome events, induction and ongoing communications. A small but visible example is the use of "grade 4 pens", given to learners for exams.

Improvement depends on how English and maths are positioned within the organisation. Stronger provisions frames these subjects as core skills essential for progression, employment, and adult life, not as compliance requirements. Leaders often link English and maths to fairness, opportunity and social mobility.

Effective practice point 2: Loughborough College – leading from the top

The CEO contributes to invigilation, and all visiting employers and speakers are asked to reaffirm the significance of English and maths to employability, earning power and fulfilling adult lives.

Effective practice point 3: Exeter College – framing resits as a 'best opportunity'

Senior leaders consistently describe GCSE resits as learners' "best opportunity", rather than their last chance. This language is used in principal briefings, open events and induction.

Learners reflect how English and maths is flagged as a priority, including protected lesson time, consistent messages from different staff and early follow-up when they miss sessions. Several learners told us that this consistency helps them feel that English and maths "matters" and are not optional, even when they find the subjects challenging.

Learner Insight

Learners at Runshaw College describe being allocated to a parallel class if their teacher is absent. At Loughborough College learners who miss a lesson are timetabled into an alternative class even if this means prioritising over vocational study.

Learners said this helps them take English and maths more seriously because it feels like something the college genuinely cares about.

Purpose and ambition must be communicated consistently and reinforced through organisational decisions. This includes prioritising English and maths in timetabling, investing in specialist staff, and maintaining senior visibility. Colleges also emphasise progress, confidence, and engagement as meaningful outcomes, rather than focusing on pass rates. Aligning strategic intent with operational practice, such as embedding English and maths within the study programme and ensuring shared accountability, creates conditions for improved engagement and learner success.

Effective practice point 4: Newcastle and Stafford Colleges group – consistent induction messaging through video

The Director of English and Maths provides a short induction video explaining the structure, purpose and expectations of continued study in English and maths.

Leaders stress that purpose and ambition needs to be sustained, not stated once. English and maths are discussed routinely in senior meetings, included in quality processes and reported to governors. This regular attention signals that English and maths are a continuing priority rather than a short-term improvement focus. Colleges where this is the case describe clearer expectations for staff and learners, and a stronger shared understanding of why English and maths matter.

English and maths as core to the study programme

Stronger provision depends on how English and maths are integrated into the study programme. Effective colleges treat these subjects as core components rather than add-ons, delivering them alongside vocational learning, tutorials, enrichment, and work preparation. This approach is supported by a clear, whole-college strategy, replacing isolated initiatives with shared ownership and collective accountability. Decisions on curriculum planning, accountability, and resource allocation consistently reinforce this priority.

Effective practice point 5: Newcastle and Stafford Colleges group – universal entitlement

The college positions English and maths as a universal entitlement rather than a remedial requirement. All level 2 learners, including those who already hold a grade 4, participate in weekly contextualised English and maths sessions. This removes stigma and reinforces the idea that literacy and numeracy are relevant to all learners' progression.

Many colleges plan English and maths first, before vocational delivery, to signal their non-negotiable status. While this section focuses on strategic intent, operational implications, such as timetabling and lesson organisation, are explored in Theme 5.

Aligning strategy with practice is essential to avoid mixed messages. Structural models vary, but the principle remains the same: clarity and consistency matter more than the model itself. Some colleges embed English and maths teachers within vocational faculties, sharing responsibility for attendance and outcomes. Others retain centralised teams but hold vocational leaders accountable for learners' progress. The effectiveness of any model depends on clear expectations and consistent application.

Effective practice point 6: East Lancashire Learning Group (ELLG) – subject integrity with contextualised upskilling for English and maths teachers in vocational workshops

Leaders describe ELLG as “powered by maths and English,” which are seen as high value academic subjects. Their view is that contextualisation risks confusing and distracting learners and that teaching knowledge-rich content is the best preparation for the exam. Contextualisation takes a different form, with GCSE teachers going “back to the floor” and spending time in vocational areas for industry upskilling.

Research findings suggest that when English and maths are integrated into the study programme, rather than treated as external requirements, learners are less likely to view them as a burden. Contextualisation can help in the sense of understanding how these subjects fit within vocational contexts, while not distracting from core English and maths subject integrity .

Effective practice point 7: Milton Keynes College - moving from a separate English and maths team to curriculum alignment

English and maths were previously organised as a separate team.Leaders restructured this: English and maths teachers now work alongside vocational teams, and responsibility for progress sits within the wider study programme. This change helps reduce separation, clarifies accountability and makes English and maths feel like a normal part of learners’ programmes.

Strategy is embedded through regular practice, not one-off messages. English and maths are integral to curriculum reviews, performance meetings, and quality assurance. Attendance, progress, and engagement in these subjects are considered alongside vocational outcomes to maintain consistency, momentum, and prevent drift.

Effective practice point 8: Activate Learning and Derby College Group- central direction with faculty-based delivery

At Activate Learning, English and maths are led by central strategy, but teaching is delivered within faculties. A Group Director of English and maths sets expectations across the organisation, but teachers are line-managed within curriculum areas.

The de-centralised model at Derby College Group features an English and maths academy in each of the faculties, working alongside vocational teachers, who provide “cast iron industry advice” on the importance of English and maths.

Treating English and maths as core to the study programme demands sustained leadership focus. It requires clear non-negotiables, staff support during change and

resolving tensions where vocational priorities compete for time and resources. Colleges that adopt this approach report stronger team alignment, clearer ownership, and more stable teaching conditions.

Positioning English and maths as central reinforces their status and relevance for learners, but this only endures through consistent leadership, governance, and shared accountability. The next section explores how colleges embed responsibility for these subjects across senior leadership, management, and governance structures.

Theme 2: Leadership, governance and shared accountability

Top takeaways

- Responsibility for English and maths must be visible at senior level and reinforced through governance, not left to subject teams alone
- Accountability for English and maths should be shared across curriculum leaders, managers and support staff, with consistent expectations, clear targets and regular progress review
- Sustained improvement depends on clear roles, systems, and continuous leadership scrutiny, rather than short-term initiatives or individual champions.

Colleges with stronger outcomes do not rely on individual champions or isolated teams. Instead, leadership of English and maths is visible at senior level, through governance, quality processes and routine management activity.

Senior leaders play a clear role in setting expectations and a positive culture that recognises these expectations as achievable, no matter how challenging. In many colleges, English and maths are considered a standing priority, regularly referenced in senior team meetings and performance discussions. This visibility matters: when English and maths are consistently discussed alongside vocational provision, they are more likely to be taken seriously across the organisation. In contrast, where responsibility sits only with specialist curriculum teams, English and maths are more vulnerable to being deprioritised.

Governance arrangements feature strongly in effective practice. Governors must receive regular, accessible information on English and maths performance, including progress as well as achievement. Some receive separate self-assessment reports or improvement plans for English and maths; others embed them clearly within whole-college quality processes. This level of scrutiny helps maintain ongoing focus and signals English and maths as a strategic concern, not a technical detail.

Effective practice point 9: Harrow, Richmond and Uxbridge Colleges (HRUC) - board-level oversight through simple dashboards

English and maths performance is reported routinely to governors using simple dashboards for progress, attendance and outcomes. This helps governors ask focused questions and reinforces the message that English and maths are a corporate priority rather than a specialist issue.

Effective practice point 10: Middlesbrough College – the board as a catalyst for change

Governors requested a strategic options review for English and maths. This early involvement from governors has ensured ongoing review, scrutiny and robust oversight at the top of the organisation. This has led to a strengthened understanding of the importance of English and maths at a corporate level.

A consistent finding is the importance of shared accountability. Colleges have moved away from models where English and maths outcomes are seen as the sole responsibility of specialist teams. Instead, curriculum leaders, heads of department and pastoral staff are expected to understand English and maths data, reinforce attendance expectations and contribute to improvement. In several colleges, English and maths features in every curriculum review or performance meeting, regardless of subject area.

As can be seen in Theme 1, leadership structures vary, but clarity matters more than the model. Some colleges operate with a senior leader holding direct responsibility for English and maths; others use cross-college coordinators or lead practitioners to support consistency. Where these roles are effective, leaders are clear about their remit: setting expectations, supporting practice and ensuring alignment, rather than managing provision in isolation.

Leaders also highlight the importance of consistency and patience. Improvement in provision is described as gradual and cumulative, requiring sustained leadership attention rather than short-term initiatives. Colleges that revisit expectations regularly, refresh messaging with staff and governors and use data to prompt timely intervention are better able to maintain momentum, even when staffing or structures change.

Overall, the evidence suggests that leadership and governance are most effective when English and maths are treated as a shared responsibility, reinforced through clear roles, regular scrutiny and routine discussion. Where accountability is distributed but expectations are aligned, colleges are better placed to sustain improvement and avoid English and maths becoming marginalised within complex organisations.

Theme 3: starting well – transition and induction

Top Takeaways

- Colleges should treat transition and induction as a critical phase for resetting learner identity, confidence and expectations in English and maths.
- Effective starts depend on proactive transition planning, clear induction messaging and early support, particularly where school to college information is incomplete.
- Starting well is a shared responsibility, requiring consistent messages and early action from English and maths staff, curriculum teams, tutors and senior leaders alike

Leaders describe the start of the learner journey as critical for learners who need to continue studying English and maths. Many arrive with negative prior experiences of these subjects, including failure, anxiety and low confidence. Colleges with stronger engagement and attendance recognise that these experiences shape how learners approach resits, and that early missteps can be difficult to reverse later in the year.

Effective colleges place deliberate emphasis on transition, induction and early teaching. Leaders describe this period as crucial to establishing expectations, and routines. Where colleges invest time and attention early on, they report stronger engagement and attendance in English and maths over time.

Transition

Several colleges describe transition as beginning well before enrolment and extending across multiple entry routes into college. Information from schools, including prior attainment, SEND details and contextual information about learners' circumstances, is used to plan early support. At Derby, Northampton, and Reaseheath, leaders describe close working between admissions, curriculum and support teams to ensure that learners arrive with fewer surprises and clearer expectations about English and maths.

Effective practice point 1: Salford City College – early transition model

A pre-enrolment summer programme for those at risk of becoming NEET provides a carousel of introductory vocational experiences embedded with English and maths. College data indicates a high level of success with the resulting enrolment, retention and maths and English success of this vulnerable group.

Effective practice point 12: Derby College Group - knowledge - rich early encounters

Strong information sharing with partner schools and specialist agencies provides valuable information and knowledge about each learner prior to enrolment. Learners who need to resit are invited to specific pre-enrolment sessions following GCSE results day. Learners value this immediate response and recall how their English and maths teachers visited vocational lessons during induction.

Transition from school is particularly important. Colleges report working with feeder schools to gather both formal data, such as GCSE grades and SEND documentation, and softer information about learners' experiences, confidence and barriers. In some colleges, English and maths staff engage in school liaison activities, open evenings or post-results events, enabling earlier conversations to set expectations regarding English and maths. Leaders note that this early engagement helps reduce shock or resistance when learners discover that English and maths will remain a core part of their 16 to 19 study programme.

Learner insight

Learners are keen to point out that the period before and immediately after starting college makes a significant difference as to how they feel about English and maths. Many describe arriving anxious, expecting the subjects to feel like school. Where colleges make early contact, explaining clearly what English and maths will involve and introduce them to staff and teaching spaces, learners said they feel calmer and more prepared. For example, at Loughborough College, learners valued an early engagement with English and maths teachers during enrolment. Learners at Runshaw College recalled how their English and maths teachers had formed part of their induction.

Several learners said that being eased in, rather than tested straight away, helps them feel that college is a fresh start and makes them more willing to engage.

Colleges also highlight the limits of existing school to college links. While relationships with individual schools are often positive, leaders describe transition arrangements as

inconsistent, particularly for learners needing to study English and maths. Information varies in quality and timeliness, often arriving too late to inform early support. Leaders cite this as a structural issue rather than a failure of schools, but one that requires colleges to take greater responsibility for identifying learners needs.

Effective practice point 13: Telford College – Transition and support

Students with EHCPs and High Needs are invited for an assessment before the start of the college year. Additional learning support teams consult with SENCOs in feeder schools and begin to organise access arrangements before the students attend college. There is a Learning Support Assistant who is attached to maths and English and is used like ‘Nanny McPhee’ to parachute in where needed most.

The college has two Transition Managers for students who are still in school and in danger of becoming NEET. These Transition Managers support a cohesive transition between school and college and work with the young person and their families. 90% of students who have worked with Transition Managers complete their study programmes.

Colleges describe proactive ‘safety nets’ during the early weeks. These include attendance and engagement checks, informal conversations with learners about confidence and anxiety, and rapid referral to support where concerns emerge. Colleges report that these safety nets are especially important for learners with SEND, care experience, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) backgrounds or disrupted schooling, where transition information is more likely to be incomplete.

Transition planning is not limited to learners coming directly from mainstream schools. Colleges also describe working with special schools, alternative provision, virtual schools, ESOL providers and internal progression routes to build a fuller picture of learners’ needs. This includes sharing information about prior GCSE experiences, learning behaviours, attendance patterns, and support requirements. Having this information early helps staff anticipate barriers and avoid learners having to repeat their story once they arrive in college.

Effective practice point 14: Milton Keynes College - current-year transition pilot using a youth worker approach

A transition pilot for 16 to 19 GCSE English and maths learners, focused on those with low prior attainment, poor attendance histories or negative experiences of school. The pilot uses a youth worker approach, with early contact, informal check-ins during induction and support alongside teaching in the first weeks of term. Early attendance in English and maths has improved, and staff have observed fewer early withdrawals and less resistance to the idea of resitting English and/or maths.

Continuity is considered particularly important for learners with SEND, high needs, ESOL backgrounds or previous experiences of disengagement. Colleges describe enhanced transition arrangements for these learners, including early contact with English and maths staff, familiarisation visits to teaching spaces, and coordinated communication with parents and carers. In some cases, learners meet support staff or English and maths teachers before formal induction.

Effective practice point 15: Trafford and Stockport College Group - ESOL to GCSE transition pathway

ESOL learners are assessed carefully to identify both language development and academic potential, rather than being held back by previous GCSE outcomes alone. GCSE maths is taught by ESOL specialists so that language support is integrated into subject teaching. This approach has enabled some ESOL learners to progress more quickly into GCSE study and, in turn, into Level 3 programmes, reducing the risk of learners having to repeat lower-level qualifications.

Leaders emphasise the importance of consistent messaging across teams. Where admissions, tutors, curriculum staff and English and maths teachers use shared language about expectations and support, learners are more likely to experience a clearer and more coherent start. This is seen as particularly important for learners entering college through non-traditional routes, including those returning to education or progressing internally from ESOL or foundation provision.

Induction

Induction is used deliberately to set the tone for English and maths. Colleges with particularly effective practice ensure that English and maths are an integral part of induction. Learners meet English and maths staff early, are shown teaching spaces, are provided with online platform logins, and receive clear messages about how English and maths fits within their study programme.

Leaders describe being purposeful about language during induction. English and maths are presented as part of a fresh start in college with an emphasis on support, progress, and opportunity.

Effective practice point 2: Exeter College - “blank slate” messaging at induction

Induction emphasises that learners are starting with a “blank slate” and focuses on engagement and reassurance rather than prior GCSE outcomes.

Effective practice point 17: Halesowen College - senior leader visibility during induction

Senior leaders take an active role in induction, delivering whole-college sessions that reinforce the idea of a single study programme rather than separate subjects. English and maths are referenced explicitly alongside vocational learning and employability skills. This helps learners understand from the outset that English and maths are part of “how college works”, not an optional extra.

Effective practice point 18: East Lancashire Learning Group - early exposure to English and maths culture

English and maths are positioned during induction as academic subjects with the same status as A levels. Learners are introduced early to enrichment activities linked to English and maths, such as debating or maths challenges. This early exposure helps shift perceptions for learners who associate resits with failure at school.

Effective practice point 19: Northampton College - induction framed around progression and work

Induction links English and maths directly to progression routes and employment. Leaders describe using clear, direct language about how literacy and numeracy support vocational success and earning potential. This approach establishes relevance early and challenges assumptions that English and maths are disconnected from learners’ career goals.

The first six weeks: routines, relationships and early engagement

The first 6 weeks of teaching are a critical window for establishing routines and expectations. Colleges with stronger outcomes are cautious about overwhelming learners during this period. Teachers focus on consistency, clear lesson structures and early success.

Attendance expectations are set early and reinforced consistently. At Northampton College, leaders describe attendance as part of professional behaviour from the first weeks of term. Leaders report that addressing attendance early reduced persistent absence later in the year.

Responsibility for starting well does not sit solely with English and maths teams. Personal tutors, teachers of technical subjects, support staff and senior leaders all play a role in reinforcing messages about the importance of English and maths.

Effective practice point 20: Stockport and Trafford College Group - shared responsibility in the early weeks

There is a “team around the learner” approach during the first six weeks. Personal tutors, vocational staff and English and maths teachers share information about attendance, engagement and early concerns. Consistent messages across teams reduces mixed signals and helps learners settle more quickly.

For the diagnostic approach that underpins early grouping and reviews, see Theme 5

It is widely understood that a strong start does not guarantee success, but a weak start makes improvement significantly harder. Colleges that invest in careful transition planning, purposeful induction, sensitive diagnostic assessment and structured early weeks report better engagement, teaching and progress in English and maths.

Theme 4: engagement, attendance and learner motivation

Top Takeaways

- Colleges should treat transition and induction as a critical phase for resetting learner identity, confidence and expectations in English and maths.
- Effective starts depend on proactive transition planning, clear induction messaging and early support, particularly where school to college information is incomplete.
- Starting well is a shared responsibility, requiring consistent messages and early action from English and maths staff, curriculum teams, tutors and senior leaders alike

A strong start creates the conditions for engagement, but colleges are clear that attendance and motivation must be actively sustained beyond induction and the early weeks. Learners' commitment to English and maths is often described as fragile, particularly for those with histories of repeated absence, anxiety or disengagement at school. Stronger provision practice acknowledges that engagement cannot be assumed, even where transition and induction are well planned.

A recurring message across the case studies is that belonging supports attainment (see Theme 3). When learners feel part of a community and connected to teachers, supported by pastoral teams and confident that staff understand their needs, they are more willing to commit to the work required for progress in English and maths. This aligns with research evidence that emotional safety, positive identity and trusting relationships underpin successful learning in high-stakes resit contexts (Arnold, 2024; Crisp et. al., 2023). Several colleges use explicit strategies to signal that learners deserve to succeed, drawing on relational practice, reassuring induction messages and visible staff commitment. Some deliberately postpone diagnostic assessment, instead preferring a slower process of 'diagnostic discovery' that prioritises relationship building between learner and teacher (see Theme 5).

Effective practice point 21: Trafford and Stockport College – relational practice

Relational practice is featured in ongoing CPD for all teachers, with additional training and development for English and maths teachers. The impact of this has been dramatic, with less time spend on punitive conversations and behaviour management, a dramatic reduction in sanctions and better teacher wellbeing.

Attendance as a foundation for learning

Attendance in English and maths is a leading indicator of progress, not simply a compliance measure. Stronger provision is associated with treating attendance as integral to learning and professional behaviour, rather than as a separate pastoral issue leading to sanctions. Attendance expectations are made explicit early and reinforced consistently, and English and maths attendance is monitored closely from the first weeks, with rapid follow-up where learners miss sessions. This is important for English and maths learners, where early absence often became habitual if not addressed.

Importantly, colleges emphasise that attendance strategies are most effective when they are also supportive rather than just punitive. Staff seek to understand the reasons behind absence and respond proportionately, particularly for learners who are displaying anxiety, those who are registered with SEND, or those who have complex personal circumstances.

Effective practice point 22: Northampton College - attendance as professional behaviour

Attendance to English and maths is framed as part of learners' professional identity, explicitly linking it to employability, progression and expectations in the workplace. Every vocational area has a 'skills wheel' visualiser illustrating the core skills in the vocational qualification including attendance and reliability.

Engagement through relevance and relationships

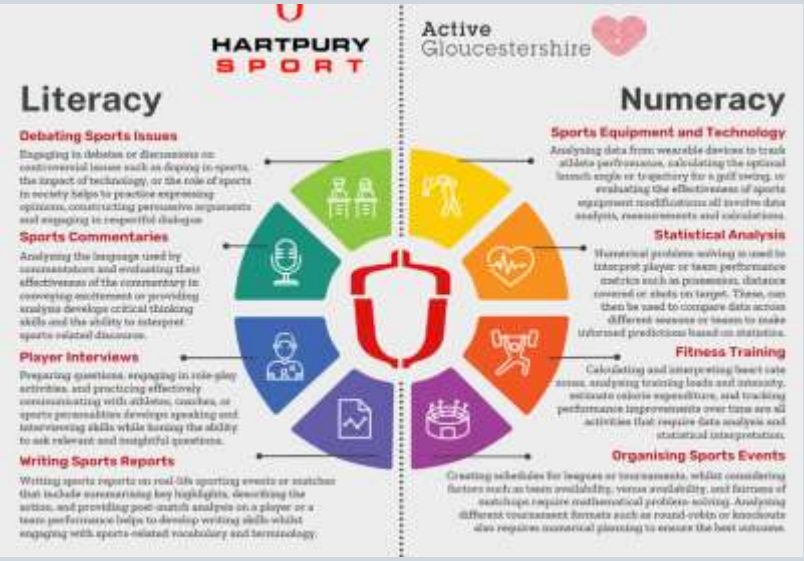
Leaders consistently emphasise that attendance is closely tied to learners' sense of purpose and belonging. Where learners understand why English and maths matters to their futures, and where they feel known and supported by staff, engagement is more likely to be sustained.

At Trafford and Stockport College Group, leaders frame GCSE English and maths explicitly as employability skills valued by local employers. This framing is reinforced through tutorial programmes and vocational staff, helping learners see English and maths as relevant rather than abstract requirements.

Effective practice point 23: Hartpury College – Employer Literacy and Numeracy Wheels

The value of maths and English is reinforced with ‘Employer Literacy and Numeracy Wheels’. These have been devised by employer advisory boards for every vocational area and students can see instantly where they will use these skills in their future career.

The following illustration is for sport.



Relationships are cited as equally important. Teachers, tutors and support staff all play a role in reinforcing engagement. At Derby College, leaders described a “team around the learner” approach, where concerns about engagement in English and maths are shared quickly and addressed collectively. Leaders explain that consistent messages from multiple tutors reduces mixed signals and supports persistence.

The Chichester College Group describe a network of formal and informal “touch points”, including personal tutors, learning support assistants, progress coaches, and pastoral staff, enabling concerns about attendance, confidence, or behaviour, in English and maths to be identified and addressed quickly.

Effective practice point 24: Chichester College Group - combining exam preparation with real-world application

Maths sessions are structured to balance exam preparation with applied, real-life problem solving. Learners complete a focused session on exam skills and question types, followed by an extended project-based activity that applies the same knowledge in a practical context. Examples include analysing bank statements alongside GCSE-style questions before comparing best-value supermarket purchases, and budgeting for car ownership, including insurance factors and journey costs using speed, distance, time and conversion skills.

Enrichment for thriving and belonging

Leaders recognise that many learners arrive in college carrying feelings of failure, embarrassment and anxiety, which can undermine both confidence and engagement. In response, colleges have developed intentional enrichment and personal development opportunities for learners, described by leaders as a “hidden curriculum” and, in some cases, a “secret weapon”. These activities are not treated as optional extras, but as deliberate strategies to support belonging, identity and inclusion within wider college life. Leaders emphasise that enrichment often had a dual benefit: helping learners feel valued and included, while also strengthening English and maths skills. Where enrichment was purposeful and inclusive, learners are less likely to be defined solely by their status as ‘failed’ English and maths learners, and more likely to see themselves as full members of the college community.

Effective practice point 20: Derby College Group - shared responsibility in the early weeks

Activities include a Debating Club, which learners reported had improved their persuasive writing, a student-led Green Assembly focused on environmental issues, and maths challenges previously associated with A level provision. Leaders described these activities as building confidence and raising aspirations.

Effective Practice Point 26: Runshaw College - belonging through creative and academic enrichment

There is a “team around the learner” approach during the first six weeks. Personal tutors, vocational staff and English and maths teachers share information about attendance, engagement and early concerns. Consistent messages across teams reduces mixed signals and helps learners settle more quickly.

Effective Practice Point 3: East Lancashire Learning Group - subject-specific enrichment

English and maths enrichment brings English and maths alive as it includes debating, national maths competitions and a poetry workshop led by a local writer. Learners talk about creating and publishing a poetry anthology, which leaders describe as supporting confidence, creativity and engagement with English.

Effective Practice Point 4: Loughborough College – enrichment linked to aspiration and outreach

Enrichment includes poetry workshops, national maths challenges and opportunities to support local schools through peer mentoring in maths. Leaders described this as reinforcing learners’ sense of purpose and capability.

Effective Practice Point 5: Derby College Group - re-framing revision as professional learning

Revision is presented through two annual revision conferences; one aimed at November resits and one at the summer series. Leaders deliberately frame these as conferences rather than revision sessions, with welcome packs, working breakfasts and a range of breakout activities, to reduce anxiety and build motivation.

Managing dips in motivation

Colleges are clear that motivation fluctuates over the year, particularly after initial enthusiasm fades or following assessments, particularly between resits and results. Strong providers anticipate these dips and plan for them, rather than treating disengagement as unexpected or exceptional.

Some colleges describe using short-term goals and milestones to maintain motivation, particularly for learners a long way from a Grade 4. Others emphasise celebrating progress, effort and improved attendance, not just exam outcomes. Leaders report that recognising small gains helps learners persist through periods where progress felt slow.

Sustaining engagement over time

Many leaders stress that engagement in English and maths is not sustained through a single strategy. Instead, it reflected alignment between expectations, relationships and learning experience. Where learners experience consistent routines, supportive challenge and clear purpose, attendance and motivation are more likely to hold over time.

It is also recognised that sustained engagement requires institutional commitment. Decisions about timetabling, class size, staffing and follow-up processes all shape learners' willingness to attend and participate. Where English and maths are protected in practice, not just in principle, leaders identified stronger engagement.

Theme 5: assessment, diagnostics and progress from starting points

Top Takeaways

- Diagnostic assessment should be treated as a process that builds understanding and confidence, not as an early test that risks re-creating failure.
- Progress in English and maths should be tracked from starting points, using in-grade and distance-travelled measures rather than relying solely on headline pass rates.
- Assessment and progress data only improve outcomes when they are used actively to inform teaching, support timely intervention and help learners see improvement as achievable.

Diagnostic assessment: understanding starting points without discouraging learners

Colleges adopt a range of approaches to diagnostic assessment, reflecting differences in learner cohorts, organisational structures and local priorities. While practice varies in timing, format and intensity, leaders are clear that how and when diagnostic assessment is used matters as much as the data itself. Effective provision distinguishes carefully between diagnosing learning needs and re-testing learners in ways that repeat negative school experiences. Leaders emphasise that poorly handled assessment can reinforce anxiety and disengagement, particularly for learners with a history of repeated GCSE failure and shape their approaches accordingly.

Some colleges delay formal diagnostic assessment until learners are more settled. Early weeks are used to gather information through observation, discussion and low-stakes activities. Leaders describe this as allowing teachers to understand learners' confidence, misconceptions and learning behaviours alongside academic starting points, rather than relying solely on test scores.

Diagnostic assessment is used as a vital part of the learning journey, rather than a single testing event. Practitioners combine conversation, short tasks, observation and low-stakes assessment to build a holistic picture of learners' starting points, including confidence, attitudes and learning behaviours as well as skills. While approaches vary, a common and effective model is the use of internal diagnostics alongside online platforms. Leaders describe this combination as enabling rapid identification of gaps, supporting independent and self-directed practice and tailoring learning to individual need both in and beyond lessons.

Colleges integrate diagnostic information with wider systems, including dashboards and review cycles, to inform grouping and, targeted support. Where used well, technology

supports pace, consistency and motivation, helping learners see progress and enabling staff to respond quickly, while avoiding early re-testing that could reinforce anxiety (see Theme 7).

In English, colleges often prioritise talking, reading and short writing tasks early on. Teachers use discussion, questioning and brief written responses to understand learners' confidence with language, ideas and expression. Several colleges delay extended writing assessments until relationships are established, recognising that confidence and voice are central to progress in English. This approach helps learners feel listened to rather than judged.

In maths, diagnostic assessment tends to focus more explicitly on identifying gaps in knowledge and skills. Colleges commonly use short tasks, quizzes or digital tools to pinpoint specific areas of weakness. However, leaders emphasise the importance of framing this information carefully. Diagnostics are described as tools for planning teaching, not labels of ability. In some colleges, maths diagnostics are shared with learners in ways that highlight what they can already do and what they will work on next, rather than emphasising weaknesses, grades or scores.

Effective practice point 30: Northampton College - extended diagnostic window

Diagnostic assessment is treated as a process rather than a single event. Learners are initially placed using prior attainment, but movement between groups remains possible over the first six weeks as teachers gather further evidence. This approach reduces early misplacement and enables accurate targeting of support.

Effective Practice Point 316: New City College - English diagnostics focused on confidence and voice

English teachers delay extended writing assessments during the early weeks. Instead, they use discussion, short reading activities and brief written responses to understand learners' confidence, ideas and use of language. This enables teachers to identify starting points without reinforcing anxiety, particularly for learners with negative prior experiences of GCSE English.

Effective Practice Point 32: Derby College Group – structured diagnostics to inform early decisions

Learners complete subject-specific diagnostic activities in the early weeks, including short assessments and review of prior exam performance where available. This information is used to confirm group placement, identify learners suitable for November entry and plan targeted support. Learners move between groups as confidence and progress develop.

Effective Practice Point 33: Exeter College - delaying diagnostics to rebuild confidence

Leaders deliberately avoid formal diagnostic testing in the first weeks of term. Early lessons focus on engagement, routines and rebuilding trust. Delaying assessment reduces anxiety linked to previous GCSE failure and helps learners experience early success before introducing more formal diagnostics.

Effective Practice Point 34: East Lancashire Learning Group - diagnostics combined with online platforms

Internal diagnostic assessment is combined with use of online platforms to build a detailed picture of learners' starting points. Diagnostic information feeds into live dashboards alongside attendance and engagement data, enabling rapid intervention. This supports early identification of need and responsive teaching.

Tracking progress and valuing distances travelled

Beyond initial diagnostics, colleges place increasing emphasis on tracking progress from starting points, rather than relying solely on headline grades. It is recognised that progress is often uneven and incremental, and that improvements in confidence, attendance and skill mastery may not be immediately visible in exam outcomes.

Many colleges use in-grade progress measures to understand whether learners are moving closer to a grade 4, even where a lower grade has not yet been achieved. These include measures such as "one-grade" progress, proximity to grade boundaries and value-added indicators. These measures as particularly important for maintaining learner motivation and supporting professional judgement.

Several colleges use dashboards and live data systems to bring together attendance, assessment and progress information. Teachers and leaders use these dashboards to identify emerging issues early and target support. Importantly, colleges with stronger practice are judicious about how data is used. Dashboards prioritise distance travelled and trends over time, rather than ranking learners or staff

Effective practice point 35: Trafford and Stockport College Group - proximity analysis to sustain motivation

Leaders use proximity analysis within GCSE grade boundaries to help learners understand how close they are to improvement. Teachers use this information in discussions with learners to identify specific skills or questions that will move them closer to a grade 4. Although the measure is not exact, it helps learners see progress and supports persistence, particularly for those who feel stuck just below a pass.

Practitioners stress that progress tracking is only effective when it leads to timely action. Data is used to prompt conversations, adjust teaching, target intervention and review decisions about grouping or exam entry. Where tracking systems become overly complex or disconnected from classroom practice, practitioners have found limited impact.

Colleges also emphasise the importance of review cycles, using progress data at regular intervals to reflect on what is working and where adjustments are needed. At Derby College, six-weekly review meetings following early diagnostic assessment are used to monitor progress and coordinate support. This enables an early response rather than reactive change later in the year.

Effective practice point 36: Halesowen College - tracking progress

Grade 3 GCSE resit learners are assessed using a 3A / 3B / 3C model, which reflects proximity to a grade 4 rather than fixed ability. Staff use the model to focus teaching, feedback and progress conversations on the specific marks or skills needed to move closer to a grade 4 pass. This approach helps learners see progress as incremental and achievable, reducing the sense of being “stuck” below a grade 4 and helps to sustain motivation across the year.

Theme 6: timetabling

Top Takeaways

- Timetabling English and maths should be treated as a strategic leadership decision because when and how lessons are organised strongly shapes attendance, engagement and learner perceptions of importance.
- There is no single 'right' lesson model, but timetabling choices must have a clear learner-centred rationale and be applied consistently to avoid instability and confusion.
- Sustaining engagement in English and maths requires deliberate operational compromises, including protected time held and managed at senior level rather than left to local negotiation.

The early engagement established through transition, induction and the first weeks of teaching can only be sustained when it is reinforced by stable and well-aligned systems. Leaders consistently emphasise that timetabling, staffing and organisation shape learners' everyday experience of English and maths as much as curriculum or pedagogy. Where systems are poorly aligned, early gains are often undermined by disruption, inconsistency or mixed messages.

College leaders describe treating timetabling and organisation as strategic decisions rather than technical exercises. Operational choices send powerful signals about what matters. Decisions about when English and maths are taught, how often, by whom and in what conditions are used deliberately to reinforce their status as core parts of the learner's study programme.

Timetabling English and maths as a priority

Effective practice includes planning English and maths first within the annual timetable, with the rest of the study programme built around these sessions. At New City College, leaders referred to this as a non-negotiable principle, ensuring that English and maths sat at the centre of every learner's week rather than being fitted around other demands. This approach reduces clashes, improves attendance and sets clearer expectations for both staff and learners. Even where local constraints differ, most case studies adopted similar principles.

At Derby College, English and maths sessions are protected within faculty timetables, with limited scope for local variation. This is considered as essential for consistency across campuses and curriculum areas, avoiding a potential risk of instability and confusion.

The timing of lessons also matters. Colleges cite that scheduling English and maths earlier in the day supports attendance and focus, particularly for learners who struggle with motivation or anxiety. These decisions are based on observation and experience rather than rigid rules but are applied consistently once agreed.

Effective practice point 37: Timetabling models

At Northampton College and New City College, English and maths are timetabled earlier in the day to support routine and habit formation for learners with attendance challenges, to reduce fragmentation, allow depth of learning, and signal the importance of English and maths as core subjects. This decision is based on observed attendance patterns, particularly for learners who struggle to attend later sessions.

At Reaseheath College, leaders describe careful sequencing of English and maths lessons, particularly for learners with SEND or high levels of anxiety. Lessons are planned to avoid overload in the early part of the programme, with shorter or less intensive sessions initially and a gradual build-up as learners settle. This approach helps learners manage concentration and reduces anxiety, supporting more stable attendance and engagement over time.

At Northampton College, a two-part lesson model combines teacher instruction with extended independent practice. Learners value the predictability of this structure and understand clearly what is expected of them in each phase of the lesson. Teachers note that this reduces low-level disruption and supports a shift towards learner responsibility.

At Exeter College lessons are delivered in 3 x1hour sessions. Although this is logistically challenging, it has resulted in higher attendance, higher engagement, and increased student progress. English and maths classes are timetabled during the day, and never at the beginning or the end of the day.

Lesson structure, frequency and continuity

Beyond placement on the timetable, colleges pay attention to lesson length and frequency. Balancing sufficient contact time to support progress with the need to avoid learner fatigue is a critical consideration. Some colleges prefer fewer, longer sessions to allow depth and continuity and reduced transition; others use shorter, more frequent lessons to support routine, familiarity, confidence and habit formation. What matters most is consistency. Where learners experience frequent changes in lesson patterns, attendance and engagement is harder to sustain.

Staffing continuity is also highlighted as critical. Colleges with stronger engagement work to minimise changes of teacher or room, particularly in the early weeks. In the most

effective colleges, leaders prioritise stable staffing for English and maths, recognising that frequent changes can unsettle learners who already lack confidence. Where staffing instability is unavoidable, leaders emphasise the importance of clear communication and rapid re-establishment of routines.

There is no single timetabling or lesson model that guarantees success in English and maths. Colleges adopt different approaches depending on their learner cohorts, local context and organisational constraints. What is important is not uniformity of structure, but clarity of rationale.

Managing operational pressures and compromises

The case studies have consistently identified that improving engagement in English and maths requires deliberate investment, prioritisation and compromises. Making conscious decisions about class sizes, staffing models, rooming and timetable priority is often a challenge in the context of wider financial and operational pressures.

Several colleges describe accepting smaller class sizes in English and maths than in other subjects, recognising that English and maths learners often require more individual support and closer relationships to remain engaged. Colleges link this directly to engagement and attendance, particularly for learners with low confidence, SEND or previous negative experiences of school. This can result in having to absorb higher staffing costs or reallocating resources from elsewhere in the college.

These decisions often require difficult conversations with curriculum teams. Protecting English and maths time can limit flexibility in course timetabling and create inefficiency by reducing access to specialist spaces. Colleges describe addressing these tensions openly and managing them centrally, rather than leaving local teams to negotiate informally.

Effective practice point 38: Halesowen College - targeted investment through a GCSE resit pilot

Leaders are piloting co-teaching between vocational teachers and subject specialists, accepting additional staffing costs for a defined cohort. The pilot focuses on learners with low prior attainment and poor engagement histories. This is a deliberate investment decision to secure attendance and participation. Early feedback from staff suggests improved engagement and more stable attendance compared with previous cohorts.

Effective practice point 39: New City College - planning English and maths first on the timetable

English and maths are planned first in the annual timetabling process, with other elements of the study programme built around them. This is a deliberate signal of priority as well as a practical step to reduce clashes and disruption. Staff highlight that this approach improves attendance and helps learners see English and maths as a core part of their programme rather than an add-on.

The research findings point to engagement in English and maths not being simply a pedagogical issue but a reflection of institutional choices about where to invest time, people and space. Colleges that are willing to acknowledge and balance these tensions appear better able to sustain engagement and avoid English and maths becoming marginalised in practice, even where pressures are significant.

Effective practice point 40: Derby College Group - protected English and maths slots within faculty timetables

English and maths are timetabled within faculty structures rather than as standalone sessions arranged separately from vocational provision. These protected timetable slots are used for English and maths across faculties, with limited local variation. This approach is intended to improve consistency, reduce clashes with vocational activity and reinforce the message that English and maths are part of each learner's core programme.

Finally, colleges emphasise that operational alignment is not a one-off exercise. Timetables, staffing models and systems require regular review to respond to changing cohorts, staffing availability and learner needs. Colleges that revisit these decisions annually, and adjust them in response to evidence, are better able to sustain engagement and progress over time. Timetabling and organisation are not neutral background conditions, they actively shape learner behaviour, staff practice and the status of English and maths within the college. Where operational decisions are aligned with stated priorities and applied consistently, colleges are better placed to maintain the engagement established in the early weeks and to support sustained progress in English and maths.

Theme 7: grouping, pathways and exam entry

Top Takeaways

- Grouping, pathway and exam decisions are strongest when they are treated as an ongoing strategic process, informed by diagnostic evidence and professional judgement rather than fixed thresholds.
- There is no single optimal model for grouping, pathways or November entry; effective colleges make different choices based on their learners, context and evidence.
- The decision itself matters less than the clarity of rationale, consistency, flexibility, and how decisions are explained to learners to protect confidence and motivation.

Grouping

Leaders are clear that grouping decisions matter both academically and emotionally. Appropriate group placement is considered central to learners' confidence, engagement and willingness to persist with resits. As a result, colleges with strong practice avoid rigid placement models. Initial grouping is usually informed by prior attainment and GCSE grades, but this is treated as a starting point rather than a final decision. Early diagnostic activity, classroom observation and attendance data are then used to confirm or adjust placements.

Several colleges describe flexibility during the early weeks. At Northampton College, learners can move between groups during the first half term as teachers gather a clearer picture of confidence and progress. Leaders said this reduces the risk of learners becoming stuck in inappropriate groups and facilitates more accurate targeting of teaching and support. At Derby College, structured diagnostics are used early to inform grouping, but leaders also emphasise professional judgement and review rather than fixed thresholds.

Organisations take different positions on pathways and qualifications, reflecting their learner profile. In many colleges, GCSE is described as the default route because of its value for progression and employment. At Trafford and Stockport College Group, leaders are explicit that GCSE English and maths are framed as employability skills and the preferred route for most learners, informed by employer feedback and local labour market expectations. However, GCSE is not the only qualification route available and colleges make decisions on clear criteria for alternative pathways where GCSE is not yet appropriate, including Functional Skills or staged approaches for learners with very low starting points or high anxiety.

Grouping and pathway decisions are also linked to progression beyond English and maths. Heads of English and maths consider that being transparent with learners about how English and maths outcomes relate to progression to Level 3, apprenticeships or employment as being critical to engagement.

Overall, the evidence suggests that effective colleges treat grouping, pathways and exam-entry decisions as a strategic process rather than an administrative task. When leaders articulate clear principles, allow flexibility and review decisions in the light of evidence, colleges are better able to support progress while protecting learner confidence.

Effective practice point 41: Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group - explaining grouping through skills focus and progression

Staff frame groups in terms of the skills learners are focusing on next and the support they will receive. Learners are told that groups reflect different starting points and priorities, not fixed potential, and that movement between groups is possible as progress is made. This approach is also designed to reduce stigma associated with previous school experiences of setting.

November exam entry

Policy guidance is clear that colleges should use November entry selectively, targeting learners who are close to a grade 4 and likely to benefit from early entry if supported by more intensive preparation. At New City College, leaders describe using progress measures, diagnostic information and teacher judgement to identify learners ready for November entry, while avoiding blanket approaches. For other learners, leaders are explicit that waiting until the summer allows more time to build confidence and secure foundations.

Effective practice point 427: Derby College Group - November entry linked to confidence and opportunity

Learners considered for November entry are those assessed as close to a grade 4 and demonstrating consistent engagement, positioning November entry as a chance to build momentum rather than as an expectation. For learners not entered in November, staff are explicit that this decision is about giving more time to strengthen foundations, not lowering ambition.

Many colleges have reviewed and refined their approach to November exam entry over time, leading to a move away from widespread entry where leaders feel it risks reinforcing failure for learners who are not yet ready. Across these examples, leaders are clear that early entry for learners without sufficient readiness risks damaging confidence.

Effective practice point 43: New City College - evidence-based selection for November entry

November GCSE entry is used selectively. Learners are identified using a combination of diagnostic assessment, in-grade progress, attendance and teacher judgement. Staff explain to learners that November entry reflects readiness rather than pressure to pass early. This approach helps learners see early entry as an opportunity, while protecting confidence for those better served by waiting.

Effective practice point 44: Trafford and Stockport College Group - broad November entry framed as familiarisation

Leaders describe a targeted approach to November entry. Learners within ten marks of grade 4 in English and within 15 marks of grade 4 in maths are entered in November. This amounts to between 7% and 10% of the cohort. This enables those already close to grade 4 a realistic chance of success, whilst providing the remainder of the cohort a longer improvement journey. The approach takes into account evidence indicating that this college's learners tend to perform better with a longer learning journey.

Effective practice point 45: Northampton College - cautious use of November entry to avoid repeated failure

Leaders have reviewed their approach to November entry after recognising that early entry was not beneficial for all learners. The college now takes a more cautious approach, focusing November entry on learners showing readiness through progress and attendance. Leaders feel that reducing premature entry helps avoid reinforcing failure for learners who need more time.

Decisions about grouping, pathways and exam entry shape learners' confidence and direction, but they rely on what happens next in the classroom. The following section turns to teaching and learning, examining how colleges adapt pedagogy, curriculum sequencing and classroom practice to rebuild confidence, secure mastery and support progress.

Theme 8: teaching and learning

Top takeaways

- A distinct strategy for teaching re-sit is a feature in high performing colleges; frequently derived from the whole-college teaching and learning framework, it often has specific adaptations to the learning needs of this cohort
- Leaders value metacognitive approaches because of their effectiveness in both outcomes and self-management
- Emotional wellbeing and belonging are at the heart of classroom practice and seen as a pre-requisite for learning. Specific practices for both teachers and learners support improved attendance and progress
- Teachers who hold positions with awarding bodies as examiners/principal examiners, moderators and team leaders contribute significantly in the re-sit learning journey and to learner success
- There is value in stripping back exam papers to foundational skills and teaching these at the outset, avoiding exam questions and supporting underlying understanding as is evidenced through mastery approaches.

Leaders and teachers are clear that improvement in English and maths ultimately depends on what happens in the classroom. While leadership, organisation and pathways shape the conditions for success, it is teaching and learning that determine whether learners rebuild confidence, develop secure skills and make progress over time.

Colleges describe learners as arriving with disrupted educational histories, low confidence and negative associations with English and maths shaped by earlier schooling. As a result, effective teaching approaches are rarely characterised by acceleration or pressure. Instead, they focus on rebuilding trust, establishing secure foundations and helping learners experience success before being tested.

Importantly, colleges do not describe a single pedagogical model but the case studies here have come about from Colleges having chosen a model from an evidential basis. Teaching approaches vary by subject, cohort and context. However, there is a shared recognition that English and maths demand different kinds of teaching, and that learners benefit from explicit attention to confidence, identity and learning behaviours alongside subject knowledge. The sections that follow explore how colleges translate these principles into classroom practice.

Rebuilding confidence and learner identity

Teachers and leaders describe confidence and learner identity as central to progress in English and maths. This reflects the research cited in the literature review, which highlights that many learners enter further education with low self-efficacy, negative academic identities and heightened anxiety linked to repeated failure in school

(Lancaster, 2021; Arnold, 2024). The evidence suggests that without addressing these factors, changes to curriculum or assessment alone are unlikely to lead to sustained improvement.

Research confirms that learners without a grade 2 in English and/or maths often arrive seeing English and maths as subjects they have already “failed”, rather than as skills they can continue to develop. Lancaster (2021) notes that repeated exposure to high-stakes assessment can lead learners to disengage emotionally from subjects, particularly where they associate them with embarrassment or low status. In response, teachers in the case studies describe deliberately reframing early classroom experiences to signal that college English and maths would be different from school.

Effective practice point 46: Brockenhurst College - practical engagement to reduce fear of failure

Teachers use practical, interactive activities, including quizzes and short tasks, to help learners experience early success in English and maths. These approaches reduce a fear of getting answers wrong and help learners re-engage with subjects they had previously associated with failure.

Teachers describe prioritising early success using low-stakes tasks, supportive feedback and clear routines to help learners re-engage without fear of being judged. This aligns with Arnold’s (2024) findings that psychologically safe learning environments are particularly important for English and maths learners, many of whom display behaviours linked to anxiety rather than lack of ability.

Effective practice point 47: Derby College Group - team building in maths lessons

Half-termly maths lessons are structured around team-building and collaborative problem-solving. Learners enjoy these sessions and say they help create a positive classroom culture and reduce anxiety about maths.

The case studies offer insights into subject-specific differences identified in the literature. In English, confidence is closely linked to learners’ sense of voice and identity. Teachers describe using discussion and short writing activities before moving to extended responses, reflecting research cited in the review which suggests that confidence in English develops through opportunities for expression and agency, rather than through early focus on exam writing (Lancaster, 2021). Several teachers note that “confidence cannot be drilled,” echoing this research emphasis.

In maths, confidence is more strongly associated with mastery of foundational knowledge. Teachers describe focusing on repetition and retrieval to help learners experience cumulative success. This approach aligns with existing research indicating that confidence in maths develops through secure understanding of basic concepts and

visible progress, rather than through premature exposure to complex problem-solving (Arnold, 2024).

Effective practice point 48: Runshaw College ‘Maths for life’ lessons

Regular “Maths for life” lessons focus on real-world applications such as financial education. Learners report that these sessions help them understand the relevance of maths to adult life and increased their engagement.

Across both subjects, relational practice is a consistent feature. Teachers describe responding to mistakes as part of learning, using calm, predictable routines and maintaining high expectations alongside reassurance. The literature review highlights the importance of strong teacher/learner relationships in supporting motivation and persistence for learners with disrupted educational histories (Lancaster, 2021), a finding that is reflected clearly across the case studies.

Taken together, the evidence from case studies and research suggests that effective teaching for begins with rebuilding confidence and identity. Colleges that align classroom practice with these research-informed principles create conditions in which learners are more willing to engage, practise and persevere, providing a stronger foundation for subsequent skill development and exam preparation.

Effective practice point 49: Salford City College - debating to build confidence and voice

Learners identified specific skills gained through debating, including confidence, planning and persuasion. Several learners also participate in college Question Time events, which leaders described as supporting oracy and engagement while reinforcing English skills.

Independent learning, skills development and learner responsibility

Colleges emphasise that supporting learners to become more independent is a deliberate and structured process. Many arrive with limited experience of independent study, often shaped by previous schooling where learning had been tightly directed or where repeated failure had undermined confidence. As a result, effective practice focuses on teaching learners how to learn, alongside subject content.

Rather than expecting learners to complete independent work without preparation, colleges with stronger practice sequence skills carefully and build in structured opportunities to practise and apply them. At Brockenhurst College, teachers describe a “slow but sure” approach, particularly in English, where learners develop confidence in core skills such as sentence construction, vocabulary and planning before working

independently. This approach helps learners experience success early and reduces avoidance of independent work.

Several colleges describe explicitly teaching learners how to manage independent study, including modelling how to break tasks down, and how to use feedback to improve. Independent work is often framed as guided practice, with clear expectations and support, rather than as homework set without explanation. This helps learners understand the purpose of independent learning and see its connection to progress.

Peer tutoring and peer-supported learning features as an additional strategy in some colleges. This high impact approach (Education Endowment Foundation, 2011) includes using peer tutoring to support confidence, reinforce understanding and normalise struggle. Evidence from the case studies suggests that peer tutoring is most effective where it is structured and supported by teachers.

Effective practice point 50: Middlesbrough College - peer-supported learning to reinforce understanding

Students on the BSc (Hons) in Sports Coaching with placement experience in schools and mental health settings are trained as classroom coaches. They work to the direction of the class teacher and are provided with ongoing CPD and support. They are allocated to small groups and individual learners working towards grade 2 and 3 to support practice and consolidation. This peer-supported approach complements teacher instruction and supports confidence and persistence, particularly for learners who are hesitant to ask questions in a larger group.

Effective practice point 51: Salford City College - the ‘Thrive initiative’ in English and maths

In English, practitioners work with the National Literacy Trust to train learners as Literacy Champions, who are then deployed in local schools to support younger pupils with reading. Through this work, resit learners practise scaffolding, pre-reading routines, and reading comprehension, while also developing confidence, communication and oracy.

This is described as a reciprocal model: learners support others while strengthening their own literacy skills and self-belief. The college also works with a local university to provide mentoring support, with undergraduate mentors delivering short, focused sessions that consolidate learning from lessons.

Colleges are careful to balance independence with support. Teachers emphasise that English and maths learners still need clear structure, predictable routines and regular feedback. Independence is developed gradually, with scaffolds adjusted over time as learners’ confidence and skills grow. Where independent learning is introduced in this

way, learners are more likely to take responsibility, attend consistently and persist with challenging work.

Effective practice point 52: Brockenhurst College - Skills Development support

Some learners receive skills development support alongside their GCSE English and maths. This support includes facilitation of exam access arrangements and bespoke one-to-one support or intervention, tailored to individual learner need. Leaders describe strong outcomes in both GCSE English and maths for this group.

Use of technology to support learning, independence and confidence

Technology is used most effectively as an enabler where it extends rather than replaces teaching. Colleges are clear that digital tools are not a solution, but can play a valuable role in supporting practice, consolidation and independence. This is particularly helpful for learners who are less confident in asking questions or who need additional time to process learning. In maths, technology is often used to reinforce core skills and support retrieval, while in English it supports reading, writing practice and exam familiarity.

Learner insight

The use of technology is most helpful to learners when it supports practice and understanding between lessons. Learners describe online platforms as useful because they can work at their own pace, fit it into their working day, revisit topics they do not understand. This makes their learning feel manageable, particularly in maths, and helps them take control of their progress.

The impact of technology is often dependent on how well it is integrated into teaching. Where online work feeds directly into lessons, teachers can build on what learners have practised and address misconceptions quickly. Where platforms are treated as optional or disconnected from classroom activity, engagement is weaker. Colleges with strong practice set clear expectations for use and ensure that learners understand how digital practice links to progress.

Effective practice point 538: East Lancashire Learning Group - online platforms integrated into daily practice

Online platforms are embedded as a mandatory part of GCSE English and maths. Learners complete a set amount of weekly online practice, which feeds directly into live dashboards alongside attendance and progress data. Teachers use this information to shape lessons and target support.

Technology is also described as supporting self-regulation and motivation. Learners can see what they have completed, what they need to work on and, and how their effort relates to progress. This process helps shift responsibility towards learners, supporting independence without removing teacher support.

Technology can be used more creatively to support engagement and understanding; for example, immersive digital environments can be used to stimulate ideas for creative writing in English, helping learners access language and context before formal tasks. These approaches are effective where they are clearly sequenced and purposeful, rather than used for novelty. Used well, digital tools can help learners practise more, understand their progress and feel more in control of their learning, while teachers retain responsibility for explanation, modelling and support.

Effective practice point 54: Activate Learning - an AI maths tutor for independent practice

An AI maths tutor supports learners between lessons. It prompts with hints and questions to help them to problem solve independently. This reduces the time learners spend ‘stuck’ and supports confidence for those reluctant to ask for help.

Classroom routines, consistency and behaviour for learning

Teachers and leaders emphasise the importance of calm, consistent classroom routines in supporting engagement and learning. Many learners arrive with fragile confidence, negative prior experiences of English and maths and, in some cases, low tolerance for uncertainty. Colleges with strong outcomes recognise that predictable routines and clear expectations are not about control, but about creating conditions in which learners feel safe to participate and persist.

Teachers often spend time in establishing consistent lesson structures, particularly in the early weeks. Lessons often follow a familiar pattern, for example beginning with retrieval or review, moving into modelling and guided practice, and ending with independent application. This predictability is seen as especially important for learners with SEND, anxiety or disrupted educational histories, who benefit from knowing what to expect.

Several colleges describe behaviour for learning as closely linked to pedagogy rather than separate from it. Teachers focus on designing lessons that keep learners actively engaged, reduce opportunities for low-level disruption and maintain momentum.

At New City College and Activate Learning, teachers use consistent language and routines across English and maths teams, so learners encounter similar expectations regardless of teacher. This includes shared approaches to starting lessons, handling mistakes and supporting learners who are struggling.

Relational practice was also central. Teachers describe responding to mistakes calmly, modelling persistence and treating errors as part of learning. This approach was particularly evident in maths, where fear of being wrong is a significant barrier for many learners. Teachers explain that normalising mistakes reduces reluctance to attempt problems and increases willingness to practise.

Lesson structure is also used to support independence and responsibility. At Northampton College, the two-part lesson combines teacher instruction with teacher-led time for extended independent practice. Learners value the predictability of this structure and understand clearly what is expected of them in each part of the lesson. Teachers note that this reduces low-level disruption and supports a shift towards learner responsibility.

Teachers believe that consistency matters more than strictness. Colleges that support teachers to apply shared routines and expectations calmly and consistently, report stronger engagement and fewer behavioural issues over time. Where learners experience frequent changes in approach or unclear expectations, teachers experience greater resistance and disengagement.

Effective practice point 55: Northampton College - behaviour supported through lesson structure

Classroom behaviour is supported through the clearly defined two-part lesson structure. The first phase focuses on teacher instruction, modelling and guided practice, followed by an extended period of independent work guided in the classroom by the teacher. Learners say that missing the first part of the lesson makes the second part more difficult, which creates a natural incentive to arrive on time and stay engaged. Teachers believe that this structure reduces low-level disruption and shifts responsibility towards learners, supporting a calmer and more purposeful classroom environment.

Effective practice point 56: Reaseheath College - calm, predictable classrooms for anxious learners

Teachers working with GCSE resit learners, particularly those with SEND or high anxiety, emphasise calm, predictable classroom environments. Lessons follow consistent routines, instructions are explicit and transitions are managed carefully. This approach reduces emotional escalation and supports learners to feel safe enough to participate.

Subject-specific pedagogy and metacognitive approaches

There is strong evidence across the case studies of leaders and teachers developing specific pedagogical approaches for English and maths learners, derived from whole

college teaching and learning models and adapted to reflect the needs of learners. Teachers note that many learners arrive without secure self-regulation, learning strategies or confidence, despite being 16 years or older.

A consistent feature across the case studies is the use of metacognitive approaches to support engagement and progress. Curriculum leaders frequently reference the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit, particularly its evidence on metacognition and self-regulated learning for disadvantaged learners. While it is acknowledged that this research is not tested specifically in further education, it is accepted that its focus on planning, monitoring and evaluating learning is particularly relevant for English and maths learners, many of whom lack these skills following disrupted or unsuccessful schooling.

In Salford City College, English and maths teachers model their thinking aloud, demonstrate how to approach problems step by step and prompt learners to make connections to prior learning. In maths, this includes guided practice, walking and talking through exam questions, spaced interleaving and adaptive teaching. Practitioners describe using mastery approaches, such as bar modelling, to help learners understand the structure of problems rather than memorising formulas they do not fully grasp.

Effective practice point 57: Middlesbrough College - using assessment wrappers to normalise reflection

Assessment wrappers are used routinely after tests and mock assessments to normalise reflection as part of learning. Learners are prompted to consider not only what went wrong, but how they approached the task and how effectively they used revision strategies.

Across many colleges, metacognition is operationalised through explicit support for learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their work. Teachers describe teaching learners how to break tasks down, check their understanding and reflect on outcomes, rather than assuming these skills are already embedded.

Effective practice point 589: Runshaw College - using VESPA-linked assessment wrappers to build self-regulation

Assessment wrappers are explicitly linked to the VESPA model, which focuses on five aspects of effective learning: Vision, Effort, Systems, Practice and Attitude.

Following assessed work in GCSE English and maths, learners complete structured reflection prompts that help them consider not only their performance, but how their learning behaviours contributed to it. Based on this reflection, they complete targeted follow-up tasks, for example, increasing practice in specific skills or addressing gaps in effort or focus.

At East Lancashire Learning Group, Middlesbrough College and Runshaw College, assessment wrappers commonly used in A level provision are adapted for GCSE. Learners are prompted to reflect on what has gone well, where marks are lost and what actions are needed next. Several colleges with established A level provision describe a conscious process of “borrowing from A level” pedagogy where leaders believed it had supported improved outcomes. This includes spaced retrieval, interleaving, explicit modelling and multiple assessment points followed by targeted intervention.

At Trafford and Stockport College Group, this approach was underpinned by what leaders described as “data rigour”. Their Delta system generates a weighted risk score for every learner, updated overnight, with English and maths disaggregated to enable rapid identification of need and action.

Subject-specific metacognition: English

In English, metacognitive practice is closely connected to confidence, voice and agency. Teachers describe many learners as arriving with entrenched beliefs that they were “not good at English”, shaped by previous experiences of formulaic teaching and repeated failure. As a result, effective practice focuses not only on developing skills, but on helping learners become more aware of how they generate ideas, shape responses and improve their own work.

Teachers describe using talk and structured discussion as a deliberate way of supporting learners to think aloud, test ideas and rehearse responses before writing. This dialogic approach is seen as helping learners clarify meaning, build confidence and reduce fear of getting it wrong. Rather than treating talk as preparatory or informal, teachers describe it as an essential metacognitive tool that supports planning and self-monitoring.

Scaffolding is used deliberately to support awareness of writing structure. Teachers describe using models, sentence starters and writing frames to make success criteria visible, particularly for learners who struggle with unfamiliar texts or lack the cultural reference points often assumed in GCSE English. Importantly, scaffolds are adjusted

rather than withdrawn abruptly, enabling learners to reflect on how structure supported meaning and how they could replicate it independently over time.

Colleges use content sequencing to manage cognitive load, for example, by delaying the introduction of 19th-century texts until learners have developed confidence in reading, language analysis and writing. Teachers describe this as enabling learners to approach challenging text with strategies already in place, rather than encountering difficulty before they have the tools to respond.

Effective practice point 59: Trafford and Stockport College Group - skills-first English to reduce anxiety

English schemes of work are stripped back to core reading, language and writing skills before introducing exam questions. Teachers deliberately avoid re-teaching analytical formulas that learners associate with failure at school. Delaying the 19th-century text until skills are secure reduces anxiety particularly for learners with low confidence or disrupted schooling.

Teachers emphasise that metacognitive practice in English is about making the writing process visible and manageable. By foregrounding talk, structure and reflection, teachers can help learners gain greater control over their thinking and expression, supporting independence and confidence in exam conditions.

Effective practice point 60: Loughborough College - metacognition through creative writing cycles

Preparation for the creative writing task is built around explicit planning, evaluation and redrafting. Learners design storylines, draft responses, and then critically evaluate their work against mark criteria with teacher support. They repeat this cycle until their work meets high mark-band standards. This approach helps learners understand how improvement happens and transfer these learning strategies to other writing tasks.

Subject-specific metacognition: Maths

Whilst metacognitive practice in English is centred on voice, confidence and expression, in maths it was more closely associated with structure, strategy and control. Teachers describe learners as arriving with fragile confidence and a history of memorising formulae without understanding when or how to use them. Consequently, effective maths pedagogy focuses on helping learners become more aware of their thinking and more deliberate in their approach to problem-solving.

Teachers describe placing strong emphasis on modelling and explicit strategy instruction, making their thinking visible as they work through problems. Learners are encouraged to articulate not just answers, but the reasoning behind chosen methods. This focus on explaining and justifying choices is intended to help learners recognise patterns, develop

flexibility and move away from reliance on rote methods that often broke down under exam pressure.

Metacognitive practice is also embedded through retrieval and reflection. Regular retrieval activities are used not only to strengthen memory but to prompt learners to consider what they remember securely and where gaps remain. Learners can revisit earlier content deliberately and reflect on progress over time, helping them see learning as cumulative rather than fragmented.

Effective practice point 61: Loughborough College - sequencing maths through knowledge stages

GCSE maths teaching is structured around a clear progression from declarative knowledge to procedural and then conditional knowledge. Learners first secure key facts and concepts, then practise methods, before being asked to decide when and how to apply them in exam-style problems.

Breaking maths content down into stages of understanding helps support learners to move from knowing facts, to applying methods, and selecting approaches independently. Teachers find that this sequencing helps learners understand when different strategies are useful, reducing panic when faced with unfamiliar problems. Rather than rushing towards exam questions, learners are supported to develop confidence in underlying structures first.

Interleaving is used as part of this metacognitive approach, with skills and question types revisited across lessons rather than taught sequentially. Teachers describe this as helping learners make connections between topics and recognise similarities across problems. For learners who have previously experienced maths as a series of disconnected rules, this approach supported a deeper understanding of how concepts relate.

Effective practice point 62 Runshaw College - interleaving to support reflection and retention

Teachers moved away from teaching skills sequentially to an interleaved approach, where learners connect skills to exam questions through shuttling between skills and problems.

Visual representations and structured problem models are also used to support metacognitive awareness. Using approaches such as bar modelling helps learners see the structure of problems, particularly in areas such as ratio, fractions and algebra. Learners are better able to monitor their understanding and adjust strategies when they encounter difficulty.

Metacognitive practice in maths is not about adding complexity, but about slowing thinking down so learners can gain control over their learning. By supporting learners to reflect on strategies, recognise patterns and understand underlying structures, teachers create conditions in which learners are better equipped to tackle unfamiliar questions with confidence, persistence and independence.

Mastery, practice and curriculum sequencing

Mastery approaches emerge as a central pedagogical response to the gaps and missed milestones many learners carry from school. Colleges describe moving away from rapid content coverage towards depth, repetition and secure understanding.

Several colleges adopt a skills-first curriculum, breaking awarding body specifications down into core skills and the knowledge underpinning them. This helps learners rebuild confidence and avoids cognitive overload. Skills are practised repeatedly, revisited over time and only applied to exam questions once learners demonstrate sufficient security.

At Loughborough College, this approach is applied systematically across the group. Specifications are broken down into core skills which learners practise and repeat before applying them in exam-style questions. Interleaving and spaced retrieval are used deliberately to strengthen long-term memory, supported by mandatory weekly practice using online platforms.

In maths, mastery is strongly associated with fluency resulting from practise, retrieval and interleaving. Teachers describe regular retrieval practice at the start and end of lessons, re-teaching of core number skills and explicit modelling. It is important to help learners understand the underlying structure of problems, using approaches such as bar modelling to support conceptual understanding rather than rote learning.

Interleaving is used by several colleges as part of a wider mastery approach. At Runshaw College, a common scheme of work based on interleaving has been introduced after leaders identified that consecutive teaching of discrete skills reduces motivation and attendance. Interleaving supports connectivity between skills, mitigates the impact of missed lessons and helps learners apply knowledge flexibly across exam questions.

Effective practice point 63: Milton Keynes College - spiral sequencing across the year

At Milton Keynes College, the curriculum is redesigned into a spiral structure across five terms, interleaving content from different exam papers. Teaching focuses on short, varied texts, explicit modelling and regular retrieval. In English, reading is used as the primary hook into learning, with strong emphasis on talk and articulation. In maths, careful sequencing ensures concepts are mastered before progression.

In English, mastery approaches include scaffolding, delayed introduction of complex texts and structured preparation for high-mark questions. At Brockenhurst College, teachers use contextualised scenarios and immersive technology, including virtual reality, to support creative writing. This helps learners generate ideas, overcome fear of writing and develop confidence before tackling exam demands.

Effective practice point 64: Brockenhurst College - “slow but sure” mastery of core skills

Teachers prioritise deep understanding of fundamental skills over rapid coverage of content. In maths, this includes repeated practice of core number skills before introducing more complex problem-solving. In English, learners build mastery of sentence structure, vocabulary and planning before tackling extended responses.

Teaching exam literacy without teaching to the test

The research has identified that post-16 English and maths learners often need explicit support to understand how exams work. Many learners arrive with limited exam literacy, including weak understanding of question types, mark schemes and how marks are awarded. However, leaders and teachers are clear that narrow teaching to the test is unlikely to support sustained progress or confidence. Instead, colleges describe a deliberate focus on teaching exam literacy as part of learning. This involves helping learners understand the structure, language and demands of exam papers, while continuing to prioritise skill development, understanding and confidence.

Learner insight

Learners find that exam preparation in college feels different from their experience at school. They describe being shown more clearly how exams work, including how questions are structured and how marks are awarded, rather than being expected to memorise techniques. They felt that is more manageable because teachers break exam tasks down, revisit them over time and explain why particular approaches work. This helps learners feel less overwhelmed by exams and more confident that preparation is about learning how to show what they knew, rather than being judged again on what they had already failed.

In both English and maths, teachers describe making the exam visible and familiar early on, but in low-stakes ways. Learners are introduced to question formats, command words and assessment objectives gradually, often alongside skills practice rather than after it. This helps to reduce fear and demystify the exam, particularly for learners who associate exams with failure.

Colleges found that sharing annotated exam scripts with learners, showing precisely where marks are gained or missed, is a powerful tool for building assessment literacy. Teachers note that when learners can see that a few additional points on a single question might have changed their overall outcome, they became more engaged in understanding mark schemes and willing to refine specific skills, such as structuring responses or showing working in maths.

In English, colleges describe supporting learners to understand what exam questions are asking and how marks are awarded, without relying on rigid formulas. Several teachers describe explicitly moving away from analytical structures that learners have memorised at school but could not apply. Instead, learners are supported to develop secure reading and writing skills first, with exam questions introduced as applications of those skills.

At New City College and Brockenhurst College, teachers describe sequencing exam practice carefully. Extended responses and high-mark questions are delayed until learners have developed confidence with ideas, language and structure. Where exam questions are introduced earlier, they are often broken down and modelled explicitly, with teachers demonstrating how to plan, select evidence and shape responses.

In maths, exam literacy focuses on helping learners recognise the structure of questions and select appropriate methods, rather than memorising procedures. Teachers spend time analysing why marks were lost, exploring common misconceptions and modelling how to approach unfamiliar problems. Interleaving of exam-style questions alongside skills practice is used to help learners see how core skills transfer across different contexts.

Several colleges describe using returned exam papers or mock papers as learning tools rather than judgement tools. Teachers analyse questions with learners to identify where marks are gained and lost and use this analysis to inform teaching.

Learner insight

Learners told us that mocks and past papers are more useful in college than they had been at school. They describe being shown how to use them as learning tools, rather than simply being given a score. Several learners said that going back through questions with teachers, understanding where marks are gained or lost and revisiting similar questions later helps them see improvement over time. This approach makes mocks feel less like a judgement and more like preparation, which reduces anxiety and helps them feel more confident about the exam.

Exam preparation is positioned as a way of building confidence and control, not as pressure to perform. Teachers describe being explicit that mistakes in practice are expected and valuable, and that exam literacy is about learning how to show what you know, not about reducing learning to tricks.

Effective practice point 65: New City College - using mocks to build familiarity, stamina and confidence

Mock examinations are embedded into learning rather than treated as isolated tests, with different sequencing in English and maths to reflect the nature of each subject. In English, learners start with non-fiction reading and transactional and persuasive writing. This offers a softer landing for learners progressing from ESOL or functional skills, while also allowing learners maximum time to explore the demands of paper 2. Teachers review papers with learners using exemplars to show what success looks like and how to improve.

In maths, Paper 1 is sat first, followed by a pause for teaching and reflection before Papers 2 and 3. This enables teachers to address misconceptions, rebuild confidence and improve fluency before learners face further exam demands.

Across both subjects, exam conditions are introduced gradually and supportively, helping learners build resilience and stamina without re-creating the fear associated with previous failure.

Effective practice point 66: Runshaw College - building exam literacy through modelling and interleaving

Exam literacy is taught explicitly but incrementally. Teachers model how to interpret questions, select relevant skills and apply them within exam-style tasks, rather than teaching exam technique in isolation. Exam questions are interleaved throughout the scheme of work and revisited regularly, helping learners become familiar with command words and mark expectations over time. This approach reduces anxiety around exams and helps learners see exam questions as applications of skills they practised routinely, rather than as something separate or intimidating.

The evidence suggests effective colleges teach exam literacy explicitly but embed it within a wider pedagogical approach focusing on mastery, confidence and understanding. Where learners understand how exams work and how questions are structured in particular ways, teachers find greater confidence, reduced anxiety and more effective application of skills in assessment.

Supporting diverse learners

English and maths classrooms bring together learners with a wide range of needs, experiences and starting points. This included learners with SEND, ESOL backgrounds, those with disrupted schooling and learners experiencing anxiety or low confidence. Colleges with stronger practice describe adapting teaching within classrooms rather than relying solely on separate pathways or withdrawal models.

Teachers describe inclusive classroom practice as central to engagement and progress. This involves careful task design, flexible scaffolding and explicit modelling, allowing learners to access the same curriculum while receiving different levels of support. This helps avoid stigmatisation and reinforces the message that success in English and maths is for all learners, not just a subset deemed “able”.

Learner insight

Learners told us that memorable lessons in English and maths were those where teachers took time to explain ideas clearly and let them practise without pressure. Learners describe lessons where work is broken down into steps, with chances to talk things through or try again. They recall these lessons as moments when they realised, they could understand the subject. Learners said these types of lessons stand out because they feel calmer, more focused and different from school, where they had often felt rushed or lost.

Learners at Loughborough particularly like maths starters which always start with a number. Around 20 questions are set on this number such as square roots, factors, number sequences. Learners could remember many questions from the previous lesson on the number 45.

For learners with SEND, clarity, structure and reduced cognitive load are important. Lessons are carefully sequenced, instructions are explicit and tasks are broken down into manageable steps. Visual supports, writing frames and worked examples are commonly used, particularly in English, to support comprehension and organisation. At Reaseheath College, leaders describe these approaches as enabling learners with SEND to remain in GCSE classes while feeling supported.

ESOL learners feature prominently in several case studies. Colleges describe recognising that language barriers can mask mathematical or analytical ability. At Trafford and Stockport College Group, ESOL learners are grouped together with maths taught by ESOL specialists so that language development is embedded within subject teaching. This approach enables learners to progress quickly in line with their potential.

Responding to high levels of anxiety is a clear focus. Avoiding public comparison, using low-stakes practice and giving learners time to think before responding are tactics often used by effective teachers. It is important to note that these approaches are not about lowering expectations, but about creating conditions in which learners can engage and persist.

Support for diverse learners is not limited to in-class strategies. Close working with support staff, learning mentors and youth workers to address barriers affecting engagement in English and maths continue to be an important partnership. Where communication between teams is strong, teachers feel better able to adapt teaching and respond quickly to emerging needs.

Professional judgement and teacher autonomy

While shared frameworks, common schemes of work and agreed pedagogical principles are widely used, colleges recognise the risks of over-prescription. Leaders describe trusting teachers to adapt teaching in response to learners' needs, while working within a clear and coherent structure.

Teachers are clear that English and maths learners do not progress in linear or predictable ways. Engagement, confidence and understanding can fluctuate, particularly for learners with anxiety, disrupted schooling or complex needs. Teachers value flexibility to adjust pace, revisit content, provide additional modelling or slow down when learners are not yet secure.

Several colleges describe a balance between consistency and autonomy. Common schemes of work, shared lesson structures and agreed approaches to mastery and metacognition provide a stable foundation, particularly for less experienced teachers. Within this, teachers are encouraged to make professional decisions about how content is taught, the examples used and the level of scaffolding required.

At Trafford and Stockport College Group, teachers are trusted to teach core skills "in the way that works for their learners", within a skills-first curriculum. This autonomy makes teaching more satisfying and enables them to draw on their subject expertise and creativity. Similar themes emerged at New City College and Activate Learning, where shared resources support rather than constrain teaching.

Professional judgement is evident in how teachers interpret assessment information. Rather than relying solely on data points, teachers combine diagnostics, classroom observation and learner behaviour to inform next steps. Leaders emphasise that this is crucial for some learners, whose performance in formal assessments may not fully reflect understanding or potential.

Several leaders note that supporting professional judgement requires confidence in staff expertise. Colleges that invested in subject-specific development and collaborative planning are more comfortable allowing flexibility in delivery. Where teachers feel trusted and supported, leaders have found a greater willingness to adapt teaching, experiment with approaches and persist with learners who are struggling.

The next section focuses on the importance of developing the workforce for effective delivery of English and maths.

Theme 9: workforce capacity, expertise and wellbeing

Top takeaways

- Workforce stability and expertise are critical

English and maths resit teaching should be seen as specialist work, with leaders prioritising recruitment of subject experts, structured induction, and continuous professional development (CPD), including encouraging examiner work

- Continuous, collaborative professional development

Effective CPD should be embedded in daily practice through collaborative planning, peer observation, and subject-specific networks. Protected team time for collaboration and examiner-led insights strengthens subject knowledge and reduces isolation, supports retention and reduces burnout.

- Staff wellbeing is a strategic priority

Emotional resilience in teaching staff is essential. Colleges invest in smaller class sizes, additional staffing, mentoring, and trauma-informed approaches to sustain staff wellbeing. Visible leadership support and collaborative structures are key to preventing burnout and maintaining morale.

Sustained improvement in English and maths depends on having the right staff, with the right expertise, supported in the right ways. Colleges describe English and maths provision as unusually demanding work, requiring high levels of subject knowledge, emotional intelligence and resilience. Consequently, workforce decisions are framed not simply in terms of recruitment, but in relation to retention, development and wellbeing.

Leaders reject the idea that English and maths can be delivered effectively through short-term fixes or inexperienced staffing. Colleges with stronger outcomes are deliberate about who teaches English and maths, how teams are structured and how staff are supported over time. This includes recognising and acting on the emotional resilience required to teach English and maths learners.

Building and sustaining subject expertise

Investing in subject expertise is considered a priority. This includes recruiting subject specialists where possible but also developing existing staff through structured CPD and collaborative practice. English and maths teaching requires both strong subject knowledge and an understanding of how learners re-engage after failure.

Case studies describe supporting teachers to deepen their understanding of GCSE specifications, assessment objectives and common learner misconceptions. This is seen as particularly important in maths, where gaps in foundational knowledge are

widespread, and in English, where teachers need confidence in supporting learners with complex texts and extended writing.

A significant proportion of English and maths teachers in the colleges that contributed to this guide also work as examiners or moderators, and leaders consistently highlight the value of this expertise for learner progress. In many of the case studies, around half of GCSE teachers are active examiners, and in some cases almost all practitioners hold examiner roles. Examiner insight informs both teaching and professional development, with practitioners modelling problem solving, analysing exam questions dialogically and leading walking/talking reviews of assessment. Where colleges have an examiner/moderator expertise, they use collaborative marking approaches to share examiner experience across teams, supporting consistency, deepening subject understanding and strengthening teaching practice.

Where staffing shortages exist, colleges are cautious about placing inexperienced or non-specialist staff in isolation. Instead, they describe using team teaching, shared planning and common resources to provide structure and support.

Effective practice point 67: North Kent College – recruitment of highly skilled Maths and English lecturers

English and maths lecturers are deliberately recruited from the school sector. Whilst the college group cannot compete with school salaries, a marketing campaign around the benefits of working in further education has been deployed with some success. The college group uses ‘talking heads’ videos of current staff positively promoting the joy of working in further education, and their own personal job satisfaction.

Professional development as ongoing practice

Professional development is not considered an occasional activity, but as embedded and continuous. Collaborative planning, peer observation and shared curriculum tools are key mechanisms for developing practice. These approaches are seen as more effective than single events, particularly for less experienced teachers.

Several organisations engage with national networks and subject-specific initiatives, valuing the opportunity to share practice and benchmark approaches. Others have developed internal programmes focusing on mastery and metacognition. Leaders highlight that sustained, practice-embedded CPD is more likely to influence classroom practice and learner outcomes than isolated sessions.

Importantly, CPD is framed as supporting staff wellbeing as well as quality. Shared resources and agreed approaches reduce workload and uncertainty, particularly for teachers new to English and maths teaching. It is believed that this helps prevent burnout and improves retention.

Supporting wellbeing in demanding roles

Leaders recognise the emotional burden of teaching English and maths learners. Teachers understand the need to support learners with anxiety, low confidence, and experiences of failure alongside academic teaching, but express concern in having to balance these two critical roles. Managing this level of need in learners is a defining feature of this provision and cannot be absorbed indefinitely without consequence. Where this is not acknowledged, colleges tend to experience higher levels of staff burnout, turnover and difficulty sustaining improvement.

As a result, investment decisions around staffing levels, class size and workload are often driven as much by staff wellbeing as by pedagogy. Several leaders describe deliberately over-resourcing English and maths, including smaller classes, additional staffing or pay uplifts, to make the work sustainable. Mentoring, structured induction and practice-embedded CPD are also used as retention strategies, particularly for newer staff. Leaders are clear that workforce stability matters: where staff feel supported and remain in post, learners benefit from stronger relationships, greater consistency and improved engagement over time. This includes manageable teaching loads, access to support from pastoral teams and opportunities for staff to share challenges as well as successes. The importance of visible support from senior staff, particularly when behaviour or attendance issues arise cannot be overestimated. Where teachers feel backed by leadership, they display greater confidence and willingness to persist with challenging cohorts.

Effective practice point 68: New City College - collaborative planning as a wellbeing strategy

Collaborative planning time is built into English and maths teams' working practices. Teachers plan together, share resources and agree approaches, reducing isolation and workload. This helps newer staff and supports retention in what can otherwise be an emotionally demanding role.

Effective practice point 69: Trafford and Stockport College Group - valuing GCSE teaching as specialist work

GCSE English and maths teaching is treated as specialist, skilled work rather than an entry-level role. This includes structured induction, mentoring and access to subject-specific CPD.

Workforce stability and quality over time

Workforce stability matters over time. High turnover disrupts relationships, reduces consistency and undermines improvement. Colleges that invest in staff development and wellbeing experience greater stability and stronger team cultures over time.

The evidence suggests that effective English and maths provision depends on treating the workforce as a strategic asset, not a delivery mechanism. Aligning recruitment, development and wellbeing around the specific demands of English and maths teaching means colleges are better placed to sustain quality and support learners effectively.

Continuous professional development (CPD)

Colleges with clear strategies, systems and structures for English and maths also have a deliberate approach to teaching and learning development. In most cases, this has evolved over time through reflection, review and use of evidence, rather than being introduced as a single initiative. Leaders frequently describe a journey in developing their approach to English and maths, shaped by changing cohorts, increasing volumes of resit learners and wider policy and funding pressures.

English and maths learners are a distinct group. While they sit within study programmes and vocational provision, their shared experiences of low prior attainment, repeated failure, anxiety and negative attitudes to English and maths make them unlike any other cohort. Effective CPD therefore goes beyond generic teaching and learning frameworks. Colleges develop specific pedagogical approaches, refined over time, and embed these through professional development. In stronger provision, these approaches are introduced through CPD, implemented in practice and followed up through short learning visits or walks, ensuring that development translates into classroom change.

Professional development takes multiple forms. While whole-college CPD sessions remain important, practitioners describe learning through collaboration, protected time, subject networks and shared problem-solving. Teachers do not view CPD as something that only happens in training sessions, but as something embedded in day-to-day professional practice.

Protected time and collaborative practice

Colleges describe the allocation of protected time for English and maths teachers as a highly effective form of professional development. Leaders recognise the demands of this teaching and, in some cases, release staff from wider college duties to create space for subject-focused collaboration.

Effective practice point 70: Middlesbrough College – agile staffing banks

Leaders deliberately over-staff English and maths teams, deploying 2 fulltime equivalents (FTEs). This means that lessons can be covered when staff are absent. When the agile staff are not deployed in cover, they work with small groups of weaker learners or those close to grade boundaries. This reduces pressure on individuals which teachers say allows time to focus on exam analysis, planning and shared problem-solving, supporting both staff wellbeing and learner progress.

Collaboration beyond college

Most of the case studies acknowledge that supporting teachers emotionally is as important as developing subject expertise. Staff explain that learners' anxiety, disengagement or past negative experiences affect the rhythm of lessons. Colleges respond by building cultures of support: designated spaces for collaboration, regular opportunities for staff to discuss challenges, and leadership behaviours that foreground care, respect and realistic expectations. Many strengthen the wider support infrastructure, such as wellbeing teams, teaching assistants, inclusion staff, so that teachers do not carry the burden of complex needs alone.

Some colleges suggest that strong professional networks play a central role in sustaining English and maths staffing, improving practice and reducing the isolation often associated with English and maths teaching (Lancaster, 2021). Leaders highlight the importance of creating formal and informal structures that allow staff to share expertise, discuss challenges and develop a shared sense of purpose. Many colleges explain that, without these networks, English and maths teachers, particularly those working across multiple sites or embedded in vocational areas, can quickly feel disconnected from colleagues facing similar learners and curriculum demands.

Isolation is not simply a professional inconvenience; it has material consequences for retention and morale. Teachers working alone, or without access to subject specialists, are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the emotional and pedagogical demands of this provision. Leaders recognise that this vulnerability can be reduced through deliberate investment in collaborative structures such as subject team meetings, shared planning spaces, collaborative moderation and opportunities for peer observation. These mechanisms build confidence, provide a forum for problem-solving and reinforce a collective identity among English and maths staff.

Many colleges engage actively with external networks. Staff participate in national subject communities, regional maths hubs, English networks, Centres for Excellence in Maths activity, or partnerships with other colleges. Leaders describe these networks as important sources of evidence-informed practice, professional challenge and practical resources. For teachers new to the sector or transitioning from school settings, external networks offer wider perspectives and reduce the sense of working in isolation.

Effective practice point 71: New College Durham - strategic improvement through action learning and coaching with other colleges

Leaders describe participation in an Action Learning Set with other colleges as a catalyst for significant improvement in maths. Maths outcomes improved significantly, including GCSE success and high-grade achievement, alongside substantial gains in Functional Skills. Attendance and exam participation has increased, and the quality of teaching improved through an intensive coaching model, supported by clear expectations and rapid intervention. Leaders described maths leadership as now strong, visible and data-driven.

A recurring theme is that strong networks, whether internal or external, contribute to improved stability. English and maths staff state that they are more likely to stay in colleges where they feel part of a subject community, have access to shared expertise and experienced leadership structures that foster collaboration. Heads of English and maths therefore view networks not simply as professional development opportunities but as systems that promote belonging, confidence and resilience in subjects where recruitment pressures remain acute.

Effective practice point 72: Subject Practitioner Conferences

At Chichester College Group, English and maths practitioners come together twice a year for a group-wide practioner-led English and maths conference.

Teachers describe the conferences as valuable professional development because sessions are grounded in classroom practice and shaped by subject specialists.

A similar approach is adopted by Middlesbrough College with a regional GCSE English and maths teacher conference hosted by a different college each year. The event is “created by teachers for teachers” and feedback indicates that this is seen as very powerful professional development.

CPD focused on behaviour, relationships and resilience

A consistent feature of effective CPD is its focus on behaviour, relationships and emotional pressure, alongside subject pedagogy. Leaders recognise that English and maths teaching places emotional demands on staff and that traditional behavioural approaches are often ineffective. Several colleges invest in relational practice, often using shared language to ensure consistency, such as ‘know me to teach me’, ‘connect before correct’ and ‘positive learning behaviour’. These approaches are applied across college, with additional depth for English and maths teams.

Trafford and Stockport College Group has moved away from behaviourist approaches towards a relational model. Teachers find that this reduces time spent on punitive conversations and improves attendance and outcomes in English and maths. Runshaw

College emphasises using knowledge of the learner to inform approaches, such as welcoming late learners into lessons first, and dealing with the reason later.

In Salford City College, CPD focuses on growth mindset and resilience. English and maths teachers participate in the ‘Thrive programme’, which supports practitioners to respond to learners’ academic, emotional and wellbeing needs.

CPD focused on teaching and learning

Where CPD focuses explicitly on teaching and learning, metacognitive approaches feature strongly. Practitioner-led sessions at Middlesbrough College place metacognition at the centre of CPD.

Effective practice point 73: Middlesbrough College - metacognition through devolved faculty leadership

A devolved faculty model gives teams autonomy to interpret the college’s teaching and learning strategy for their learners.

Faculty CPD is shaped by learning visits, learner feedback and live dashboard data, enabling rapid and targeted improvement. In 2025, this includes metacognitive approaches, such as guided practice and adaptive teaching for grade 1 to 2 learners

Leaders emphasise that CPD is most effective when it is subject-specific, practice-embedded and sustained, rather than generic or one-off. Colleges that invest in this approach establish stronger consistency in teaching, greater staff confidence and improved learner outcomes.

Theme 10: sustaining improvement through evaluation and adaptation

Top takeaways

- Ongoing and informed review and evaluation are key to keeping up with changing learner needs, enabling leaders to make changes to systems and structures in the best interests of learners
- Data dashboards support ongoing reflection with live information on all aspects of the re-sit learner journey for individuals and the cohort
- The development of systems to measure distance travelled and progress from starting point is a significant factor in building confidence and maintaining motivation
- Sustaining improved practice is the work of the whole college

Research partners agree that improvement in English and maths is rarely linear and never complete. Leaders and teachers see it as a continuous cycle of evaluation, learning, and adjustment rather than a fixed model. Sustaining progress demands evidence-based decisions, adaptability, and patience.

Learner cohorts, staffing, and external pressures change yearly, so successful approaches cannot simply be repeated without review. Colleges that maintain improvement create regular opportunities to reflect and refine, rather than relying on informal impressions or end-of-year results.

English and maths often operate at scale, involving hundreds or thousands of learners across multiple sites. This complexity makes decisions about timetabling, staffing, data systems, and assessment high-risk, as small changes can have large consequences. Central coordination, dashboards, and automated systems are essential for managing this scale, ensuring consistency, and enabling early intervention. Without such infrastructure, provision risks drift and reactive decision-making. Colleges that acknowledge scale and design systems to manage it respond more effectively to maintain quality and meet individual needs.

Evaluating what is working, and for whom

Effective colleges evaluate impact using a wide range of evidence rather than relying solely on attainment or grade 4 outcomes, which are often insufficient for learners with low or no prior achievement. They consider outcomes alongside in-year progress, attendance, engagement, and learner confidence. Progress measures such as distance travelled, proximity to grade boundaries, and value-added indicators are used carefully and interpreted with professional judgement, acknowledging that progress can be uneven. English and maths leads use this broader view to guide teaching, support, and exam entry decisions.

Learner and staff feedback also plays a key role. Colleges gather insights from learners to understand experiences around confidence, anxiety, and motivation, while staff reflections help assess whether systems are practical and sustainable. This qualitative evidence is vital for explaining data trends and shaping effective approaches.

Adapting approaches without destabilising provision

Colleges that sustain improvement avoid frequent changes, recognising that instability harms learner confidence and staff morale. Instead, they make targeted, evidence-based adjustments to existing approaches, such as refining exam entry strategies, adjusting groupings, or strengthening early support where needed. These changes are often tested with defined cohorts or over limited periods, reviewed for impact, and then either embedded, adapted, or discontinued, balancing innovation with stability.

Adaptation is typically incremental. Rather than replacing entire systems, colleges implement small, deliberate changes, like adjusting review cycles, refining assessments, or clarifying expectations.

Building evaluation into everyday practice

Colleges with established practices integrate evaluation into routine activities rather than treating it as an extra task. Regular reviews, shared progress analysis, and structured reflection help teams learn collectively and address issues early.

At Derby College Group, six-week review cycles follow initial diagnostic assessments and continue throughout the year, providing a consistent forum for reflection and intervention.

Loughborough College uses case review meetings after assessments to keep provision aligned with learners' needs and goals. Evaluation also supports staff development, encouraging teachers to reflect on classroom strategies and share effective practices. Leaders describe this as strengthening professional judgment and building collective expertise.

Effective practice point 74: Trafford and Stockport College Group - the Delta system for tracking risk and progress

The Delta system tracks progress and risk for learners in English and maths. Delta produces a weighted risk score for every learner, updated regularly, drawing on attendance, assessment and progress data. English and maths are disaggregated so that subject-specific risk is visible.

Leaders describe using Delta to identify learners at risk of underperformance and to inform timely intervention. The system supports a high level of data rigour and enables staff to respond quickly, rather than waiting for end-point outcomes. Delta is used alongside professional judgement to inform decisions about support, intervention and review, rather than as a standalone measure.

The case studies identify that sustaining improvement in English and maths requires a disciplined approach to evaluation and adaptation. Colleges that combine robust evidence, reflective practice and measured change are better placed to respond to complexity, maintain stability and continue improving outcomes for learners.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this guide, we set out a series of questions that we felt needed to be explored through this research:

What does good performance in English and maths look like for both achievement and progression for 16 to 19 year old learners?

Good performance is framed as a blend of attainment and value added progress that is sensitive to learners' starting points and the realities of different provision types and cohort sizes. DfE policy is to ensure learners continue to study and make progress. However, providers tend to track headline grade 9 to 4 pass rates in GCSE English and maths monitoring trends year on year. The dataset shows rising GCSE maths 9-4 rates alongside stable but slightly lower English rates in the most recent year, with maths progress from a grade 3 improving from -0.32 to -0.08 over two cycles, indicating a narrowing gap to expected outcomes. These patterns are set against a rising volume of learners needing to continue to study, especially in maths, which places a premium on strategies that sustain performance at scale. Good performance therefore does not rest solely on the proportion achieving GCSE grade 4, but on improved progress scores by prior grade, by age, gender and sector area, and on reducing the disparity in outcomes between colleges with similar intakes.

The analysis shows that younger 16 year old entrants tend to make better progress than older peers, which foregrounds the importance of early, well-structured reengagement. In all cases, high performers present a coherent picture: central timetabling that signals priority, stable staffing, clear early year routines, and a culture that treats English and maths as entitlement rather than remedial obligation.

Crucially, the guide emphasises the importance of recognising that high performance must be calibrated to starting points.

For learners at grade 3, "good" looks like accelerated progress to readiness for a timely exam entry, sometimes in November where appropriate, with in year evidence of movement through sub-bands within the grade and tactical improvements in exam literacy.

For grade 1 to 2 learners, it is unrealistic to define success narrowly as a single year pass threshold; instead, colleges reference modular mastery of foundational content, movement within and between grade bands, improved attendance and confidence, and, where appropriate, achievement in stepping-stone qualifications that set up a credible second year pass.

Case studies show colleges using fine-grained internal progress measures, such as 3a/3b/3c, question level analysis, or modular pre/post assessments, to make incremental improvement visible and motivating for learners who have experienced repeated failure is effective.

Colleges with smaller cohorts often achieve this through small classes, intensive pastoral alignment, and specialist learning support, while larger general FE colleges achieve "good" by industrialising the same principles through disciplined systems: non-negotiable timetable protection, shared assessment routines, integrated dashboards, and a visible narrative from senior leaders that frames continued study as a right and a route to progression.

Are there differences between effective practices that lead to good progress v effective practice that leads to level 2 attainment?

The research confirms that the two overlap substantially but are not identical. Practices that drive progress for all learners, regardless of whether they cross the GCSE grade 4 line, begin with relationship rich classrooms, a deliberate reset of learner identity, and curriculum models that emphasise retrieval, interleaving and mastery of high value skills before wholesale exam drilling. These "progress engines" are especially powerful for grade 1 to 2 learners: shorter, structured lessons, visible early wins, use of online platforms to engage through immediate feedback, and granular subgrade tracking that celebrates movement within a band.

Colleges that excel at progress use diagnostics as a process rather than an event, avoid demoralising test heavy starts, and align pastoral, SEND and academic teams so that barriers are reduced quickly. Progress therefore accrues through confidence and continuity as much as content.

By contrast, practices that most strongly correlate with level 2 attainment for learners that are considered ready for a resit add a tactical layer: normalising exam conditions through staged mocks; explicit teaching of question interpretation and mark scheme behaviours; practitioner examiner insights shared across teams; and, where appropriate, selective November entries that convert near misses while using returned scripts as high precision diagnostics for the remainder of the year.

In maths, this often includes sustained rehearsal of reasoning and number fluency; in English, structured modelling for extended writing and adaptation of a pre planned response across prompts.

In short, progress practices rebuild the platform; attainment practices, judiciously timed, exploit that platform to secure grade 4+, particularly for learners close to the boundary.

Colleges that separate the two phases, by first stabilising learning and belonging, then intensifying exam literacy, tend to sustain both improved progress indices and higher pass rates across varying cohort sizes.

What are the key barriers to 16 to 19 year old students achieving their English and maths goals and how can they be overcome?

The most persistent barriers are emotional as much as academic. Many learners arrive with a history of failure, low self-efficacy, anxiety and a belief that English or maths is "not

for them". This is amplified for older retakers and for those with disrupted schooling or unmet SEND needs. Operational issues compound the problem: delayed starts, timetable churn, large mixed ability classes, and inconsistent staffing signal low priority and quickly erode attendance.

The diversity of prior attainment means that one pace delivery leaves some learners overwhelmed and others unchallenged, and when early assessment is experienced as another high stakes test, it can trigger disengagement rather than diagnosis.

Finally, systemic pressures, growing cohorts, recruitment shortages in specialist staff, and the temptation to equate "success" solely with pass rates, can pull colleges away from approaches that would reengage the hard-to-reach learners.

The guide supports a multilayered response. Barriers rooted in confidence and identity are addressed through a whole college narrative of entitlement, predictable routines from week one, visible pastoral and SEND "touchpoints," and small but symbolic decisions, like timetabling English and maths first, that tell learners these subjects matter.

Academic barriers are met with a skills first curriculum, interleaving and spaced retrieval to rebuild long term memory, and strategic grouping so learners encounter appropriately pitched instruction with the option of movement as diagnostics sharpen.

Attendance barriers are tackled by live dashboards, rapid relational follow up, and practical exam period supports, while anxiety around assessment is reduced through staged exposure to exam conditions, responsive analysis, and explicit modelling of examiner expectations. Structural barriers, cohort growth and staffing churn are mitigated by protected CPD time, collaborative planning, examiner expertise distributed through teams, and, in some colleges, embedded models where English and maths staff sit within vocational schools to strengthen accountability and contextualisation.

The common thread is alignment: when culture, systems and pedagogy pull in the same direction, barriers shrink and both progress and achievement improve.

What strategies, approaches and techniques in the management and delivery of post-16 English and maths have a positive impact on the performance of young people retaking GCSE English and maths?

The most effective providers treat English and maths as central to the study programme rather than a bolt-on. Leadership signals purpose through strategic planning, governance attention and non-negotiable timetable rules. Early year execution is meticulous: teaching starts in week one; groups are built from diagnostics gathered in low threat ways; and learners experience stability, same room, same teacher, clear routines, so cognitive load goes into learning rather than orientation.

High performers mix central consistency with local adaptability: shared schemes of work that emphasis retrieval, modelling, interleaving and mastery alongside department level autonomy to contextualise content and manage micro interventions. Several colleges

demonstrate the power of practitioner examiners to lift collective practice, using walking talking mocks, exam wrappers, video clips and annotated scripts to build assessment literacy across entire cohorts.

On the ground, two complementary pedagogical arcs keep surfacing. The first is a mastery and memory arc that rebuilds underpinning skills through interleaving, spaced practice and explicit instruction, often in shorter, more frequent sessions that suit anxious or low attention learners. The second is an exam readiness arc that, at the right time, normalises full paper endurance, teaches time management and mark scheme tactics, and helps learners convert understanding into marks.

Colleges harness digital tools, adaptive platforms and AI tutors not as replacements for teaching but to extend practice between lessons, surface individual gaps at scale, and generate quick wins that motivate attendance. Where cohorts are large, providers develop personalised programmes by combining whole class routines with targeted small groups or 1:1 support from specialist learning assistants embedded within the English and maths teams. Vocational alignment, through coteaching pilots, shared planning, or simple teacher colocation, cements relevance and keeps attendance high; even colleges that prefer to keep GCSEs “knowledge rich” rather than heavily contextualised still align people and messages so vocational staff own outcomes alongside specialists.

Finally, progress reporting is made visible and sensitive: learners see movement within grades, not just a pass/fail cliff, and parents or carers are engaged early with clear, positive messaging about the journey ahead. The cumulative impact of these choices is evident in the case studies that report higher attendance, steadier progress from grade 3, and improved pass rates despite expanding cohorts.

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Appendix A: Policy and Context

The delivery of English and maths at level 2 in further education is not just a pedagogical challenge; it is deeply influenced by national policy, funding structures, and accountability frameworks. These factors shape the priorities of colleges and training providers, determining how resources are allocated and how success is measured.

Government policy places English and maths at the heart of 16 to 19 year old education, recognising their role as essential skills for life, work, and progression. Funding arrangements reflect this priority, with mechanisms designed to incentivise participation and penalise non-compliance. The 16 to 19 maths and English condition of funding sets out that 16 to 19 year old learners without a GCSE grade 4 or equivalent in English and/or maths must continue studying these subjects as part of their study programme. This requirement ensures that providers integrate English and maths into their study programmes, but it also creates operational pressures, particularly when learners have low prior attainment or lack motivation.

To drive improvement in outcomes, from 2025/26 the Department of Education (DfE) set minimum annual teaching hours of 100 hours for GCSE English and 100 hours for GCSE maths, with those failing to comply risking withdrawal of funding.

Despite an increase in GCSE resit passes since 2014, limited progress persists, especially among those with low prior attainment of grades 1 to 2. To put this into context the 2024/25 data (MiDES R13) identifies that the numbers of learners making progress is improving, but the volume of learners requiring to continue studying GCSEs or take an alternative qualification is increasing significantly.

Key findings from the 2024/25 (R13) dataset identify that:

- the percentage of learners in GFEs needing to continue studying English and/or maths has increased by 3% to 56%
- there has been a significant increase in volumes of learners completing GCSE maths between 23/24 and 24/25 (+12%) and English (+16%)
- there has been a moderate increase in maths high grade pass rate (9-4) from 15.1% in 2023/24 to 16.4% in 2024/25
- there has been a slight fall in English high grade pass rate (9-4) from 22.3% in 2023/24 to 22.0% in 2024/25
- English high grade performance is better than maths. This could be attributed to larger volume of learners resitting maths with lower starting grades
- maths progress from Grade 3 has shown steady improvement, rising from -0.32 in 2022/23 to -0.16 in 2023/24, and to -0.08 in 2024/25
- English progress from Grade 3 has marginally improved from -0.19 in 2023/24 to -0.18 in 2024/25

- progress from Grade 3 is better for those learners aged 16. In 2024/25 the data reveals progress scores of 0.00 for 16 yr olds, -0.14 for 17 yr olds and -0.26 for 18 yr olds

Appendix A provides illustrative data framing recent performance against past years.

The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper 2025, emphasises the importance of English and maths making it clear that they remain a compulsory element of education for 16 to 19 year old learners who have not achieved at least a grade 4 or equivalent. Continuing to study English and maths is integrated within the proposed qualification pathways, which allocate guided learning hours specifically to accommodate these subjects alongside vocational study and enrichment activities. This approach reflects the ongoing condition of funding and reinforces the government's commitment to improving literacy and numeracy as essential skills for progression and employability. In short, continued study of English and/or maths for 16 to 19 year olds without a level 2 in both are not optional; they are a core expectation within all pathways to ensure learners leave further education equipped with the fundamental competencies required for work and higher-level study.

In summary the post-16 education and skills white paper states:

New level 1 preparation for GCSE qualifications

- For students with very low prior attainment (grade 2 or below), the government will introduce new 16 to 19 English and maths qualifications at Level 1
- These are designed to consolidate foundational skills before attempting a GCSE the following year, thereby reducing repeated failures and improving readiness

GCSE resit policy

- Learners who have achieved a grade 3 will continue to study for the GCSE
- Clearer guidance that only students ready for improvement are entered for the November series, avoiding repeated entries without sufficient teaching

Teaching time requirement

- From September 2025, all students continuing to study English and/or maths must receive a minimum of 100 hours of in-person, standalone, whole-class teaching for each subject with an expectation (not a requirements) of an additional 35 hours maths study

Funding and support

- Additional funding will continue for students who have not achieved level 2 (GCSE grade 4+) in English and maths by age 19
- Funding rates for English and maths will rise by over 11%, and disadvantage payments by nearly 7%.

Progress measures

• The 16 to 18 English and maths progress measure has been reinstated for 2024 and 2025 data.

We will revise the 16 to 18 English and maths Progress Measure and Qualification Achievement Rates, so that providers are recognised for the progress their students make towards a Level 2 qualification.

Effective practice and guidance

- Colleges will be supported to adopt best practice, including:
- High-quality teaching and formative assessment.
- Robust attendance policies with wraparound support.
- Whole-college approaches to improving outcomes.

This guide represents a part of this support.

Accountability Measures

Accountability frameworks have been introduced to reinforce these policy objectives through rigorous monitoring. As one of the main levers to influence behaviours, funding is linked to compliance with the 16 to 19 maths and English Condition of Funding. Data analysis is indispensable for understanding organisational and sector-wide trends and pinpointing areas for improvement. Persistent issues for the sector include low pass rates among resit learners and significant variation in outcomes between vocational and academic pathways. These patterns highlight the need for targeted interventions and innovative teaching strategies. However, data must be interpreted with care; while it provides valuable insights, it can also oversimplify complex learner journeys if used solely for compliance purposes rather than holistic improvement.

Beyond policy and accountability, English and maths are fundamental to employability and progression. Employers consistently identify literacy and numeracy as core competencies, essential for communication, problem-solving, and adaptability in the workplace. Similarly, access to higher-level study often depends on achieving these qualifications, making them a gateway to broader opportunities. English and maths are not merely academic requirements but critical enablers of social mobility and economic participation.

The challenge for providers is to move beyond compliance-driven delivery and create learning experiences that connect these subjects to real-world contexts. In addition to the required stand-alone English and maths teaching, embedding English and maths within vocational and technical programmes, using applied learning approaches, and fostering learner confidence are key strategies for making these qualifications meaningful.

Appendix B: Summary of previous research

The evidence consistently shows that success in delivering English and maths at level 2 to 16 to 19 year olds depends on a combination of pedagogical strategies, learner engagement and support, diagnostic assessment, and strong institutional leadership. (EEF & University of Warwick, 2023; Maskos et al., 2025) (Crisp et al., 2023) (Education Policy Institute, 2025) (Department for Education, 2024)

Across all reviewed sources the most significant challenge is low motivation among learners who perceive studying English and maths as a continuation of prior failure. This is compounded by socio-economic disadvantage, special educational needs, and English as an additional language, which can be disproportionately represented. Providers therefore prioritise strategies that rebuild confidence and foster a sense of progress, such as promoting growth mindsets and reframing failure as “not yet” (Crisp et al., 2023). (Zhao et al., 2024)

Effective teaching practices emphasise adaptative practice. FE colleges typically use diagnostic assessments at enrolment to identify gaps in knowledge and allocate learners to levelled classes, although mixed-ability groups remain common due to timetabling constraints. Diagnostics also inform targeted interventions and early resit opportunities, which can reduce class sizes and improve motivation. However, the literature warns that GCSE grades alone are unreliable indicators of ability, and detailed mark data is often unavailable from schools, creating barriers to accurate placement . (Zhao et al., 2024) (EEF & University of Warwick, 2023; Maskos et al., 2025)

Pedagogical approaches that differ from school experiences are critical. Students respond positively to active learning, collaborative tasks, and contextualised content linked to vocational subjects, which enhance relevance and engagement (Ireland, 2019). For mathematics, connectionist teaching methods and realistic contexts, such as Realistic Mathematics Education (RME), are associated with improved understanding and retention. Similarly, embedding English and maths within vocational curricula or using real-life applications is widely endorsed, though teachers note challenges in aligning contextualised learning with GCSE assessment requirements (Crisp et al., 2023). Functional Skills qualifications have been perceived as more relevant and motivating than GCSEs, particularly for learners with low prior attainment. However, whilst still used, most case studies identified that, for maintaining continuity with pre-16 course content, GCSE is the preferred qualification route. (Crisp et al., 2023) (Learning & Work Institute, 2025)

Learner support beyond the classroom is another recurring theme. Drop-in workshops, one-to-one tuition, and virtual learning environments provide additional opportunities for consolidation, while pastoral interventions address exam anxiety and attendance issues. Peer-mediated support and small group teaching are highlighted as effective for both English and maths. Technology-based solutions, such as blended learning and online platforms, are used when appropriate, but show mixed results: while some students

appreciate flexibility and immediate feedback, others struggle with access and prefer face-to-face interaction (Crisp et al., 2023). (Education Policy Institute, 2025) (Department for Education, 2024)

Teacher expertise and staffing stability strongly influence outcomes. FE colleges face acute recruitment challenges, particularly for maths specialists, leading to reliance on staff with varied qualifications and experience. Successful providers invest in subject-specific CPD, collaborative planning, and mentoring to build capacity and improve pedagogy (Crisp et al., 2023). Leadership commitment to a “whole-college” approach, where vocational staff reinforce the importance of English and maths, is associated with higher pass rates. Strategic planning, clear organisational policies, and timetabling that prioritises English and maths before vocational subjects also contribute to improved attendance and engagement. (Learning & Work Institute, 2025)

However, the research evidence base remains limited and fragmented. The Post-16 GCSE Resit Practice Review (EEF, 2023) underscores the scarcity of robust trials and calls for interventions that integrate academic and socio-emotional support, adapt proven strategies from other phases, and develop collaborative, place-based models (Crisp et al., 2023). Overall, while no single approach guarantees success, the convergence of findings suggests that effective provision combines tailored teaching, contextualised learning, sustained support, and strong institutional leadership within a culture that values English and maths as essential for progression. (Education Policy Institute, 2025) (Department for Education, 2024)

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Appendix D: Contributing colleges

The research team would like to formally thank the following colleges for sharing their expertise and experience in delivering 16 to 19 year old English and maths up to level 2

- Activate Learning
- Brockenhurst College
- Chichester College Group
- Derby College Group
- East Lancashire Learning Group (ELLG)
- Exeter College Group
- Halesowen College
- Harrow, Richmond and Uxbridge Colleges (HRUC)
- Hartpury College
- Loughborough College
- Middlesbrough College
- Milton Keynes College
- New City College
- New College Durham
- Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group
- Northampton College
- North Kent College
- Reaseheath College
- Runshaw College
- Salford City College
- Telford College
- Trafford and Stockport College Group

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For further information about support with delivering 16 to 19 year-old level 2 English and maths, please contact the Further Education Commissioner's Office FEC.OPERATIONS@education.gov.uk.

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