System leadership: does school-to-school support close the gap?

Resource

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The importance of closing gaps in attainment

The government has signaled the importance of closing gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for free schools meals (FSM) and their peers, through

— the 2010 Importance of Teaching White Paper and the wider agenda on social mobility

— the introduction of pupil premium funding

— the intention to publish performance information about the progress of pupils eligible for FSM

Despite strenuous efforts by school leaders and policy makers, gaps in attainment at a national level have narrowed only slightly over the past 10 years: the gap between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers remains significant at both Key Stages 2 and 4.

The links between material deprivation, lower levels of attainment, and reduced life chances and employment are well evidenced and pervasive. Pupils from materially disadvantaged backgrounds are vulnerable to a range of risk factors and share a number of characteristics that have a further impact on their levels of educational attainment. International evidence also points to the challenge of raising standards overall at the same time as reducing gaps in attainment between different pupil groups, although there are examples of countries that have succeeded in this task.

The role of NLEs

National Leaders of Education (NLEs) have been supporting other schools since the first NLEs were designated in 2006. Successive reports by Hill and Matthews (Schools Leading Schools) have charted the impressive impact which NLEs and their national support schools (NSSs) are having in terms of school improvement, supporting other schools and the wider system, and building collective capacity.

Closing gaps in attainment in the schools they have been supporting has not been part of the formal remit of NLEs. NLEs have most often been targeted to provide additional leadership capacity to schools with serious whole-school weaknesses - such as being below a floor target or in an Ofsted category.

This research project has not been an attempt to evaluate NLEs' effectiveness in undertaking a remit with which they have not been tasked. Rather we have sought to learn from the good practice that NLEs are adopting in their own schools to close gaps; and to identify the effective strategies they have used in their work with other schools to improve the attainment of targeted groups of pupils - within the context of improving achievement for all.

The impact of NLEs and NSSs

The data analysis included in this report demonstrates that:

— samples of both primary and secondary National Support Schools (NSSs) had smaller gaps in attainment between their pupils eligible for FSM and their peers than nationally. The attainment of FSM-eligible pupils was improving faster than nationally in the secondary NSS sample, and attainment was above national averages for FSM-eligible pupils in both primary and secondary NSS samples

— samples of both primary and secondary schools supported by an NSS for more than one year showed that the attainment of pupils eligible for FSM in these supported schools improved at a faster rate than national averages between 2008 and 2010. By 2010, FSM-eligible pupils in the primary and secondary samples of supported schools were on average performing better than pupils eligible for FSM nationally

Effective strategies at three different levels

Our review of the research evidence, analysis of effective school-level interventions and discussions with school leaders, NLEs and staff in NSSs demonstrated that effective strategies for closing gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers, in their own schools and schools they have worked with tended to work at one of three different levels.

Firstly, at whole school level, school leaders and schools took action to develop strategies that supported all pupils. Examples included:

— high-quality teaching and learning, consistent across the school, supported by strong CPD culture, observation/moderation and coaching

— engaging and relevant curriculum, personalised to pupil needs

— pupil-level tracking, assessment and monitoring

— inclusive and positive school culture, underpinned by values and moral purpose that all pupils will achieve

Secondly, there were a more specific set of strategies that school leaders and schools used to support pupils who were under-performing. These strategies were benefiting all under-achieving pupils, including those eligible for FSM, and might include, for example:

— early intervention and targeted learning interventions

— one-to-one support and other catch-up provision

— rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the impact of targeted interventions

— targeted parental engagement, including raising aspirations and developing parenting skills

— developing confidence and self-esteem through pupil voice; and empowering student mentors through sport, music, or other programmes

Thirdly, there was then a set of strategies which might be targeted specifically at the school's FSM-eligible pupils which would provide more specific additional levels of support. Examples included:

— explicit school-level strategy to identify and support FSM-eligible pupils through targeted funding

— incentives and targeting of extended services and parental support

— subsidising school trips and other learning resources

— interventions to manage key transitions between stages or between schools

— dedicated senior leadership champion or lead worker to co-ordinate a support programme

NLE behaviours, skills and perceptions

NLEs share a sense of moral purpose in wanting to provide additional support to some of the country's most disadvantaged pupils and to help them achieve at the level of their peers. NLEs were leading their schools in different ways, but exhibited similar behaviours and skills in discussing their work to close gaps in attainment:

— drive and determination to make a difference for all pupils

— the ambition to transform the culture of the schools with which they were working

— giving the leadership of teaching and learning a high priority

— the close personal interest they took in individual pupil progress

— regular monitoring and tracking of performance

— vision and strategic grip to select and sequence the most appropriate set of intervention strategies, and in some cases searching for quick wins to steady the ship

There are differences of view between NLEs on whether eligibility for free school meals is a sufficiently accurate benchmark for assessing deprivation and disadvantage; and whether a child's current performance, rather than FSM status, should be the trigger for providing extra support.

NLEs working with a school in an Ofsted category or in challenging circumstances will be working in most cases at the level of whole-school strategies to address the immediate priorities in the partner school, and help the partner school respond to key accountability measures. These priorities have rightly provided the prime focus for NLE/NSS' work during the period researched. Establishing the potential for whole school improvement - including basic expectations and systems for monitoring teaching, learning and behaviour - are essential precursors to any work to close gaps in these contexts. Exactly when and how NLE/NSS staff should focus more directly on activities aimed at closing gaps remains a key question for research.

Using NLEs more effectively to close gaps in attainment

The contribution of NLEs and NSS to closing gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers could be strengthened by:

— considering whether and how in selecting NLEs, the criteria might include questions about a school leader's track record in closing gaps and working with FSM-eligible pupils

— including information about closing gaps in NLE induction sessions and considering how NLEs can exchange good practice at network or other events

— establishing an action research project to test a range of strategies to be used by schools when supporting a partner school to close gaps, and the leadership skills needed to support them

— considering the strategic deployment of NSSs with strong track records in closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils, to facilitate their engagement with clusters of local schools that need support on this issue, and to act as local or regional hubs of good practice

— considering how the commissioning of NLEs might strengthen a focus on closing gaps through ensuring that, where due diligence identifies this as an issue, NLE engagements include appropriate performance measures

— monitoring the experience of NLEs working with partner schools as the government's new accountability framework is implemented to gauge the impact of the incentives (intended and otherwise) on work related to closing FSM related attainment gaps

— considering steps to link the work of NLEs in closing FSM related attainment gaps with other government programmes and measures aimed at reducing disadvantage and promoting social mobility

Preface

National leaders of education (NLEs) and their national support schools (NSSs) are at the forefront of the drive towards creating a self-sustaining school system. Hill and Matthews (2008; 2010) have provided evidence of their impact in schools across England. NLEs are working in some of the most challenging circumstances: whether in schools in special measures, or areas of urban and rural deprivation. They are working to eradicate educational disadvantage, whether for pupils with special educational needs, pupils for whom English is an additional language, or (the focus of this project) pupils suffering from socio-economic disadvantage who are eligible for free school meals (FSM). They are doing so in the context of attempting to improve the life chances not only for the children in their own schools but also in the schools they are supporting. Many NLEs and their NSSs are improving those life chances dramatically.

For NLEs and staff from their NSSs, narrowing or closing gaps in the schools they are supporting has not previously been part of their formal remit. They have most often been targeted to support schools with serious whole-school weaknesses to address and which might have resulted in the partner school being below a floor target or placed in an Ofsted category. Addressing these weaknesses will usually be part of the formal contract between the two schools.

The coalition government's policy focus is now firmly highlighting work to close gaps in attainment through the targeted funding of the pupil premium, promises of new accountability measures for the progress of disadvantaged pupils, and the wider agenda on social mobility. The moment seems appropriate to understand how some of our school leaders are working effectively to close these gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers. It is also an attempt to understand how school leaders are achieving this in their own schools, and what we can learn from current practice about the potential for schools to work with other schools to help close gaps. We can learn from NLEs in relation to both of these questions.

This is not an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of NLEs in undertaking a remit with which they have not been tasked. That would be grossly unfair. Rather, it is an attempt to learn from current good practice, understand the successes and challenges being faced by these system leaders and consider some recommendations for the future. We seek to learn from the good practice that NLEs are adopting in their own NSSs to close gaps, and we seek to learn about the ways they have approached their work with other schools to improve the attainment of targeted pupils within the context of improving achievement for all. Our intention is to offer a contribution to the current debate about how schools can work effectively with other schools to reduce social inequality and ensure all pupils achieve their potential regardless of their home background. There are few more important challenges facing our education system today.

Throughout this report we focus on the particular gap between the performance of pupils eligible for FSM and their peers. We recognise that there are other gaps in performance between pupil groups (for example based on gender, ethnicity and special educational needs) which for some schools might be even more pressing issues. We also recognise that the current proxy of eligibility for FSM for measuring material or socio-economic disadvantage is an imprecise measure. On the former issue, there will be much of the following good practice that will be equally applicable to gaps in attainment based on different inequalities. However, the FSM gap is widespread and persistent in our education system, and damaging to the life chances of many children today. On the latter issue, we explain in the report some of the issues raised during our research about the difficulties in using eligibility for FSM as a proxy indicator. Nevertheless it is the current indicator that the government is using to apportion additional funding through the pupil premium and also to measure the educational progress of disadvantaged pupils; it is therefore the indicator we have used in this research.

Simon Rea, Robert Hill and Leigh Sandals

Isos research team

May 2011

The policy context: on closing gaps and system leadership

Policy challenges

The coalition government since May 2010 has signalled its intention to position both school-led system reform and policies to help close the gap in attainment between deprived pupils and their peers at the forefront of its educational agenda. The latter is one element of the wider government strategy to attempt to end child poverty in the UK.

The child poverty strategy (HM Government, 2011) makes the case clearly:

'It is our moral duty to support all children to be productive, healthy and happy members of society, and we are determined to achieve this goal.'

HM Government, 2011a:11

The strategy has statutory force in the Child Poverty Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010), with the legislation setting out the aim of ensuring as far as possible that no child suffers from socio-economic disadvantage. In parallel, the government's social mobility strategy, also published in April 2011 (Cabinet Office, 2011), explained that 'improving social mobility is the principal goal of the government's social policy' and that:

'Our goal is to make life chances more equal at the critical points for social mobility such as: the early years of development; **school readiness at age five; GCSE attainment**; the choice of options at 16; gaining a place at university or on an apprenticeship; and getting into and on in the labour market. These are the crucial moments, where we can make the most difference.'

Cabinet Office, 2011 (our emphasis):6

The current challenges that the wider strategies seek to overcome are considerable. Figures cited in the child poverty strategy remind us that there are still many children across the country suffering material disadvantage:

— 2.8 million children (22 per cent) were in relative income poverty in 2008-09

— 2.2 million children (17 per cent) were in both low-income and material deprivation in 2008-09

This measure refers to the proportion of children in households with incomes below 70 per cent of median household income and who experience material deprivation (a lack of basic goods and services). The child poverty strategy states that there has been no sustained impact on this number since 2004 (HM Government, 2011a).

Moreover, the research evidence on the links between material disadvantage and lower levels of educational attainment is persistent and strong (see, for example, Ofsted & Matthews, 2009; Mongon & Chapman, 2008; DCSF, 2009 and 2010; Ofsted, 2008). The links between material disadvantage, lower levels of educational attainment, and then reduced life chances (health, employment opportunities and life expectancy) are much of the reason for a sustained focus on attempting to close these gaps in attainment during the school years.

Goodman and Gregg, in Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviours? (2010), explained the gaps at key developmental points of ages 3, 5, 11 and 16 thus:

'Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study showed big differences in cognitive development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the **age of three**, and this gap widened by **age five**.'

Goodman & Gregg, 2010 (our emphasis):19,24

Goodman and Gregg describe how evidence suggested that these gaps were related to:

— health and wellbeing factors

— family interactions

— home learning environment (reading regularly to the child)

— parenting style and rules (regular bed-times and meal times)

'Analysis of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children suggested that the gap in attainment between children from the poorest and richest backgrounds, already large at age five, grew particularly fast during the primary school years. By **age eleven**, only around three-quarters of children from the poorest fifth of families reached the expected level at Key Stage 2, compared with 97 per cent of children from the richest fifth.'

Goodman & Gregg, 2010 (our emphasis):26

Their evidence suggested that some of the associated factors were:

— parental aspirations for higher education

— parental and children's beliefs that their own actions could affect their lives

— behavioural problems, including problems relating to their peers

'While the gap between the poorest children and children from better-off backgrounds grows less quickly across secondary school than primary, by the time young people take their GCSEs, the gap between rich and poor is very large. For example, only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth (measured by parental socioeconomic position; SEP) manage to gain five good GCSEs (grades A*–C, including English and maths), compared to 75 per cent of the top quintile – an astonishing gap of 54 percentage points'

Goodman & Gregg, 2010:7

We know that achieving these key threshold targets at ages 11 and 16 are also closely correlated to future chances of going on to higher education and employment (DCSF, 2009a). Failing to reach level 4 in English and maths, and subsequently failing to gain five good GCSEs significantly increases the likelihood of individuals becoming one of the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), with the associated impact on life chances, health and wellbeing.

Figure 1: Attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and their non-FSM peers at KS2 and KS4
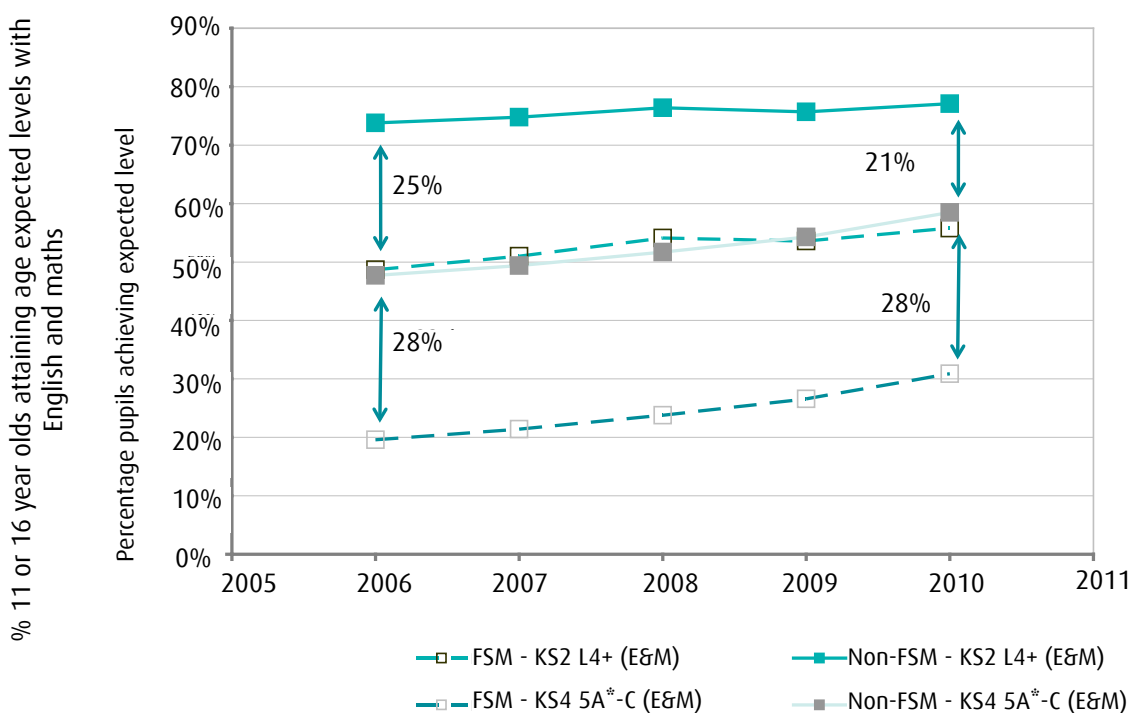
Source: Isos analysis of DfE data

These lower levels of educational attainment at key points can be seen clearly when we look at the gap between the performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds against that of their peers (using the proxy indicator of eligibility for free school meals (FSM)[1] at the end of primary school (Key Stage 2) and aged 16 (Key Stage 4) Figure 1).

Risk factors and characteristics associated with material deprivation

Pupils from materially disadvantaged backgrounds will be vulnerable to a range of risk factors and share a number of characteristics which will have a further impact on their levels of educational attainment.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) research division (DCSF, 2009) explained why deprivation leads to lower educational attainment and identified features such as:

— income and material deprivation

— health

— family stress

— parental education

— parental involvement in their children's education

— cultural and social capital, and experience of schooling

— low aspirations

— exposure to multiple risk factors

— literacy

In the school environment, these factors are likely to result in FSM-eligible pupils who experience material disadvantage sharing a range of characteristics:

— They would be seven times more likely to be **permanently excluded** from primary school than their non-FSM peers, and three to four times more likely to be permanently excluded from secondary school (DCSF, 2009a).

— They would be three times more likely to have **unauthorised absence** and to be persistently absent than their non-FSM peers (DCSF, 2009a).

— They would be more likely to make **lower levels of educational progress**, for example:

  · between KS2 and KS3 (between the ages of 7 and 11), the chances of a pupil eligible for FSM falling out of the top 20 per cent of performers was two-thirds compared with only one-third of non-FSM pupils doing so (FSM 64 per cent probability compared with non-FSM 38 per cent probability)

  · between KS3 and KS4 (between the ages of 11 and 14), pupils eligible for FSM were less likely than their non-FSM peers to make two levels of progress (the expected rate of progress) regardless of their starting position.

The DCSF research division noted that:

'... low attaining FSM pupils typically find it slightly harder to catch up if they fall behind; and... high attaining FSM pupils typically find it much harder to excel.'

DCSF, 2009a:39

FSM pupils would be more likely to **change schools** during the year or between key stages, are twice as likely to have a **statement** of special educational needs (SEN), and are more likely to have **lower levels of parental aspiration** (DCSF, 2009a). While pupils who are eligible for FSM will therefore share many characteristics, they will have one in common: that of material disadvantage (Figure 2).

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1   Pupil eligibility for FSM is the proxy indicator used in this report for material deprivation. For a full explanation of the term and associated issues, see section 2.

Figure 2: Common characteristics of pupils eligible for FSM

Pupils eligible for free schools meals share many overlapping characteristics and have one thing in common - material disadvantage

SEN
Twice as likely to have a statement

Absence
Three times more likely to have unauthorised absence

Exclusions
At least three times more likely to be permanently excluded

FSM Material Disadvantage

Aspirations
More likely to have lower levels of parental aspirations and engagement

Turbulence
More likely to change schools in-year or between key stages

Progress
More likely not to make expected levels of progress

Source: DCSF, 2009a

Closing gaps in attainment: a three-part model

It is these persistent gaps in progress and attainment between pupils who are eligible for FSM and their peers from more advantaged backgrounds that have become the focus of efforts by school leaders and policymakers. There is a clear evidence base about what constitutes effective school leadership in challenging circumstances for pupils from materially disadvantaged backgrounds (for example, Buckler et al, 2010; Chapman & Mongon, 2008; DCSF, 2008; DCSF, 2009; DCSF, 2010; Matthews, 2009; Ofsted & Matthews, 2009).

In reviewing the research evidence and school-level practice which was successfully closing gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers, and also discussing effective practice with school leaders and NLEs during our fieldwork, it appeared that effective strategies tended to work at one of three levels.

Those familiar with the set of tiered interventions used by local authority support services for vulnerable young people (universal, targeted and specialist interventions) will recognise the notion of different levels of engagement (Figure 3).

Our findings revealed the following insights:

— At whole-school level, school leaders and schools took action to develop strategies that supported all pupils, for example, on the quality of teaching and learning.

— There would then be a more specific set of strategies that leaders and schools were using to support pupils who were underperforming. These strategies were benefiting all under-achieving pupils, including those eligible for FSM, and might include, for example, targeted learning interventions.

— There was then a third level of strategies that would be targeted specifically at the school's FSM pupils and that would provide additional levels of support, for example through additional targeted funding.

Figure 3: Strategies at three levels to close gaps in attainment

Strategies to close attainment gaps between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers operate at three levels

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit
all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under achieving pupils

Targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM
...which specfically benefit
FSM pupils
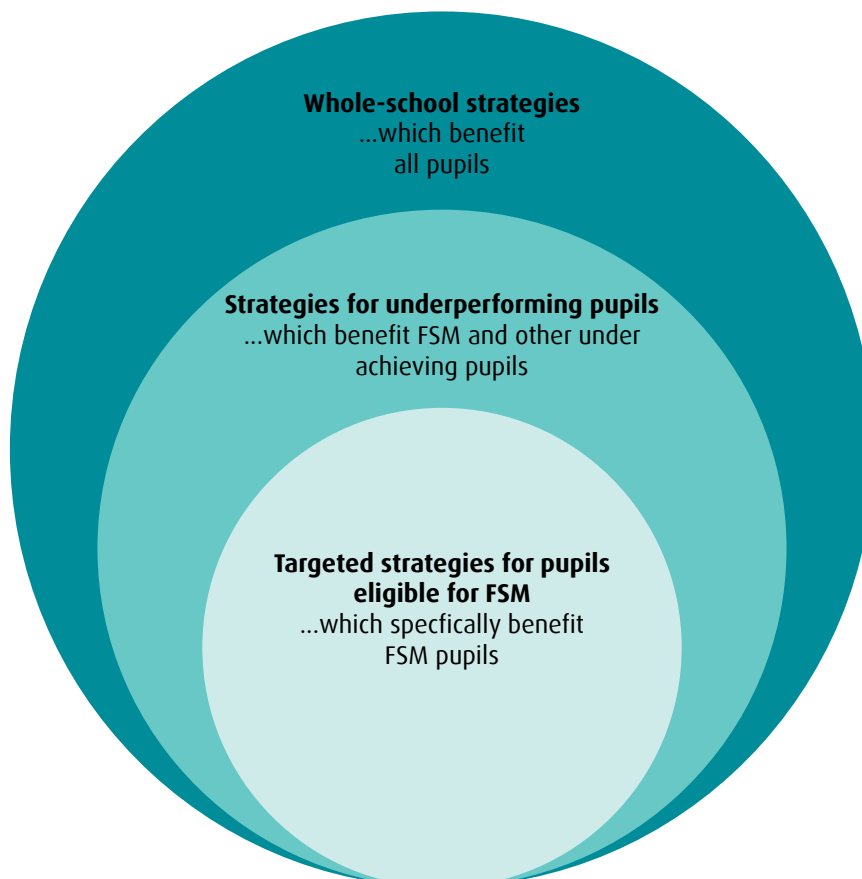
We will return to this three-part model in reviewing the evidence from our fieldwork discussions, and consider the specific strategies being deployed at each level of the model. We will also look at how the accountability challenges for school leaders now similarly operate at three levels: whole-school improvement, progress for all pupils and faster rates of progress for FSM pupils. We return to these points in section 3.

The government's policy response

It is important to recognise, of course, that school-level strategies will only be able to go so far in addressing some of the underlying issues that affect the home environment and life chances of pupils eligible for FSM. To take one example, the importance of the effect of early years support on the development of children is well evidenced, and we know that disadvantaged families are less likely to be able to access good-quality childcare and early years education. Ofsted in its 2009/10 annual report noted:

'The quality of [early years] provision is lower in areas of high deprivation; the more deprived the area, the lower the proportion of good and outstanding providers. Just over half (52 per cent) of childminders in the most deprived areas are good or outstanding, compared with 71 per cent in the least deprived areas.'

Ofsted, 2010a:15

How is the coalition government seeking to address the challenges? The government's social mobility strategy (Cabinet Office, 2011) set out three components of the approach when considering the school years:

1. Raising standards in all schools through system-wide reform: improving the status and quality of teaching, devolving as much power as possible to the frontline, improving accountability and transparency, and setting clear expectations of what all children should achieve.

2. A relentless focus on narrowing gaps in attainment between children from different backgrounds, with a new Pupil Premium to help raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

3. Raising children's aspirations through access to high quality advice and guidance coupled with a radical change in how we engage with businesses, universities and wider society.

Cabinet Office, 2011:35

The government's child poverty strategy (HM Government, 2011a) set out five aims to support family life and improve children's life chances:

1. Reforming funding structures to ensure early, sustained, decentralised and targeted support for children and families and empowering practitioners to do more for the most disadvantaged young people.

2. Supporting strong, stable families and positive home learning and physical environments.

3. Enabling children to achieve their potential by improving their attainment, aspiration and progression at all stages of education.

4. Improving health outcomes by improving NHS, public health and social care provision and focusing on the provision of physical and mental health support for children from conception onwards.

5. Addressing specific barriers facing the most disadvantaged groups of children such as Looked After Children, children from some ethnic groups, children with Special Educational Needs and teenage parents.

HM Government, 2011a:35

The recent education white paper, The Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010), set out plans for the pupil premium, which will provide additional funding for the most disadvantaged pupils including those eligible for FSM:

'The Pupil Premium will provide additional funding for the most disadvantaged pupils, including those eligible for Free School Meals, those whose parents are in the armed forces and children who have been in care for more than six months. Funding is not ring-fenced so that schools can develop local solutions to support pupils.'

DfE, 2010:45

The white paper explained that the additional funding would mean that that there would now be an incentive for schools to admit children from some of the most materially deprived backgrounds, and an incentive to those wishing to open free schools to do so in more deprived parts of the country. With the incentive and additional funding comes accountability:

> 'Schools will be accountable for narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children. We will reform performance tables to include new measures that show the attainment of pupils who receive the Pupil Premium compared with their peers. We will also ask schools to report to parents on an annual basis how they have used the Pupil Premium.'

HM Government, 2011a:45

The introduction of the pupil premium is one important strand of the current government's drive to close gaps in attainment, alongside other elements of its reform agenda set out in the white paper:

— increasing the autonomy given to schools through funding, and also increasing the diversity of provision through the increasing numbers of academies and the introduction of free schools

— reforming the curriculum and accountability system, for example with the introduction of the English baccalaureate, raising the floor targets for primary and secondary schools, and refocusing the work of Ofsted

— aiming for a self-sustaining system in terms of schools supporting schools, the work of NLEs and NSSs, and the introduction of teaching schools

On the final point, the coalition government has signalled its support for system-wide improvement using collective capacity through expansion of the NLE programme. The notion that for the foreseeable future, school-to-school support and the work of system leaders – heads leading the system and other schools, not solely their own institutions – has become the accepted orthodoxy. NLEs have a pre-eminent position as models for effective leadership support. The 2010 white paper has signalled that the number of NLEs is expected to double by 2015.

What impact could this have on closing the gap? We know already from the analysis undertaken by Hill and Matthews (2010) that schools supported by NSSs have improved at a faster rate than the national average. We are therefore seeking to learn from NLEs about the approaches they have taken to close gaps in attainment in their own schools. We are also seeking to learn about the ways in which they have approached their work with other schools to improve the attainment of targeted pupils and remove differences in outcomes between groups, within the context of improving achievement for all. That is the subject of sections 2 and 3.

The global policy context

Finally, it is worth noting that education systems around the world are grappling with similar challenges. Two recent publications provide evidence of the international focus on closing gaps in attainment, and offer comparisons and learning. The PISA report (2010) demonstrated the wide variation in pupil performance in England compared with other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries and conveyed some important messages:

— Some countries (Canada, South Korea and Japan for example) perform well above the OECD mean, and their students tend to perform well regardless of their background and the school they attend.

— Across OECD countries, a student from a more socio-economically advantaged background (among the top one-seventh) outperforms a student from an average background by 38 score points, or about one year's worth of education, in reading.

— PISA found that many of the most disadvantaged students attended disadvantaged schools which had great difficulty in attracting high-quality teachers.

The report How the world's most improved systems keep getting better (Barber, Mourshed & Chijioke, 2010) suggested there are few systems around the world that have succeeded in raising the bar and narrowing the gap at the same time. Singapore was one of the few countries to manage to do both - between 1987 and 2006 there was a narrowing of the specific gap between different ethnic groups (Chinese and Malay being the top and bottom performers respectively) from 20 per cent to 5 per cent.

In the terms employed by Barber, Mourshed and Chijioke (2010), Singapore is a system moving from 'great' to 'excellent' for which some of the key principles are collaborative practice among educators and creating school-based learning communities to encourage peer-led support and accountability. Although England, according to the same model, is moving from 'good' to 'great', it is interesting to see innovations such as NLEs and the proposals for teaching schools in the same vein of 'collaborative practice' or 'collective capacity' that, according to Michael Fullan, are necessary for a system moving from 'great' to 'excellent'. The following excerpt from Michael Fullan (2010) would be appropriate for considering the developing roles of NLEs:

> 'Collective capacity is when groups get better – school cultures, district cultures, and government cultures. The big collective capacity and the one that ultimately counts is when they get better conjointly – collective, collaborative capacity, if you like. Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching.'

Fullan, 2010:xiii

In the words of Barber, Mourshed and Chijioke (2010):

> '[A]s teacher capabilities rise, the distance between teacher and coach in terms of their expertise levels reduce[s], ultimately making the teachers themselves the instructional experts in the system.'

Barber, Mourshed and Chijioke, 2010:88

In section 2 we investigate the recent progress in closing gaps in attainment across England between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers.

The current landscape: on closing gaps and system leadership

From material disadvantage to free school meals

We explained in the preface that the current proxy indicator for measuring levels of material or socio-economic disadvantage and deprivation at pupil and school level was eligibility for free school meals (FSM). Pupils are recorded as being eligible for FSM if their parents or carers are in receipt of certain benefits, such as employment support allowance and income support, and have applied to their local authority to claim entitlements to a free school meal (DCSF, 2009a; HM Government, 2011a). However, FSM is an imprecise measure as it does not accurately record all pupils who experience material or socio-economic deprivation. For example:

— It will not record pupils who are in families who do not claim the benefits to which they are entitled.

— It will not record pupils in families which do not take up the offer of a free school meal. This is most often due to the social stigma associated with seeking and receiving a free school meal. Many schools now take steps to address this through, for example, actively encouraging families to claim this benefit, and using pre-paid smart cards to pay for lunches, thus ensuring no difference between FSM and non-FSM pupils at the point of purchase. Improvements in the quality of the school meal on offer will act as an incentive for some, although some local authorities do not offer a hot meal to FSM pupils which discourages take-up in some cases.

— It will not record those pupils whose parents and carers are in paid employment, even though they may still experience deprivation.

At school level, there will also be other area-based measures available to estimate levels of deprivation, for example the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI): during our fieldwork a number of school leaders explained how they were using IDACI or other measures to track levels of deprivation in their own schools (see sections 3 and 4).

Despite these weaknesses, FSM-eligibility is objective because it is based on publicly held data, is binary (pupils are either eligible for FSM or they are not), and it can provide longitudinal analysis since the national pupil database holds FSM data mapped to unique pupil numbers (DCSF, 2010a). As we set out in the preface, it is also the measure that the government currently uses to measure deprivation at pupil and school level, and therefore to allocate funding through the pupil premium.

Distribution of pupils eligible for free school meals

What then does our proxy indicator tell us about the levels of eligibility for FSM across England, and by implication the levels of material disadvantage at pupil and school level? First, the national average levels of eligibility for FSM at school level are reasonably constant over time at about 17 per cent of pupils across primary schools, and 14 per cent across secondary schools (DCSF, 2009a). This difference between the phases might in part be explained by parents returning to work as their children get older and therefore becoming ineligible for a free school meal according to current criteria. Second, about half the pupils eligible for FSM are to be found in the third of schools with the greatest concentration of disadvantage, while the other half of FSM pupils are spread across the other two-thirds of schools:

— In primaries, around 40 per cent of FSM pupils are concentrated in just 13 per cent of schools (DCSF, 2009a).

— About half of all secondary school FSM-eligible pupils are distributed across three-quarters of schools with the other half concentrated in a quarter of schools (DCSF, 2009a).

Impact on closing gaps in recent years

Policy initiatives and actions by school leaders to close the gap in attainment between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers have had a marginal impact in primary schools between 2008 and 2010; but the gap at secondary level has remained constant. This reinforces the scale of the challenge in addressing educational disadvantage.

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Figure 4: Proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and maths 2008–2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible)
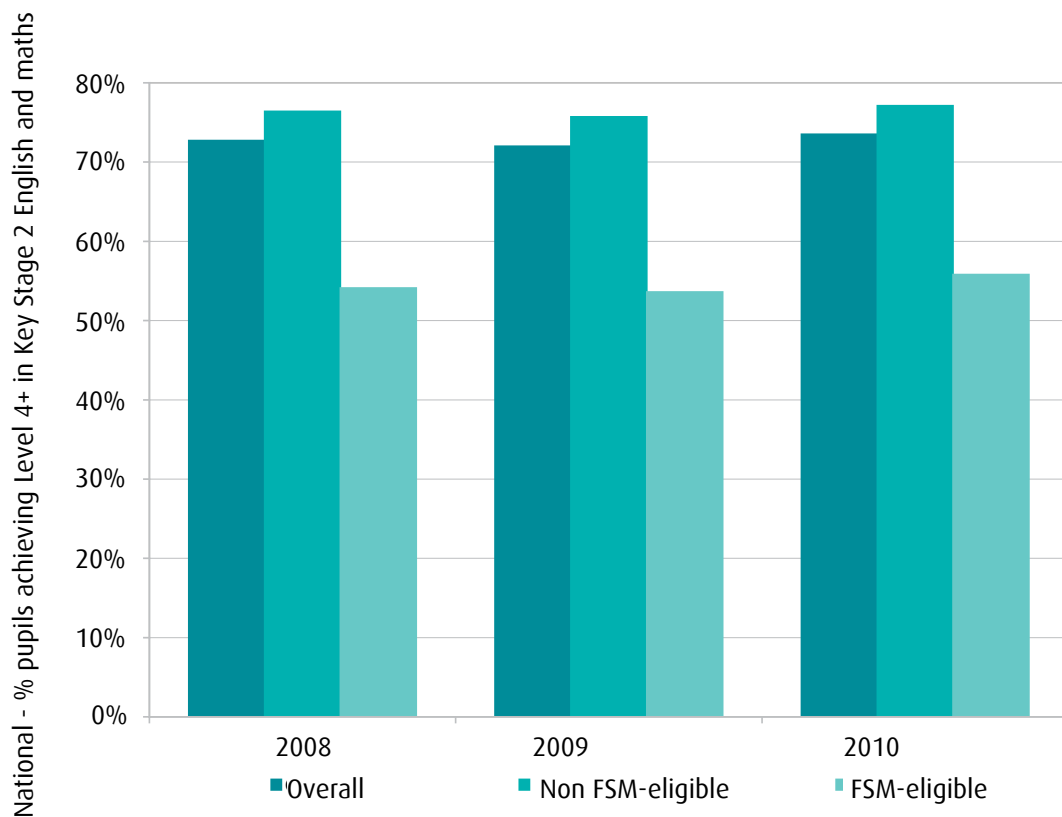
Source: DfE Statistical First Release (SFR) 35/2010

Figures 4 and 5 show how the gaps between the performance of pupils eligible for FSM and all other pupils have changed between 2008 and 2010: at the end of KS2, with the proportion of 11 year olds reaching level 4 or above in English and maths; and at the end of KS4, with the proportion of 16 year olds achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths.

At KS2, the performance of all pupils increased by one percentage point over this period, with non-FSM-eligible pupils improving by one percentage point, and FSM-eligible pupils by two percentage points: the gap therefore closed by 1 point to 21 percentage points.

At GCSE over the same period, the performance of all pupils increased by 7 percentage points, with non-FSM-eligible and FSM-eligible pupils improving at the same rate: the gap therefore remained constant at 28 percentage points.

Figure 5: Proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths 2008-2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible)
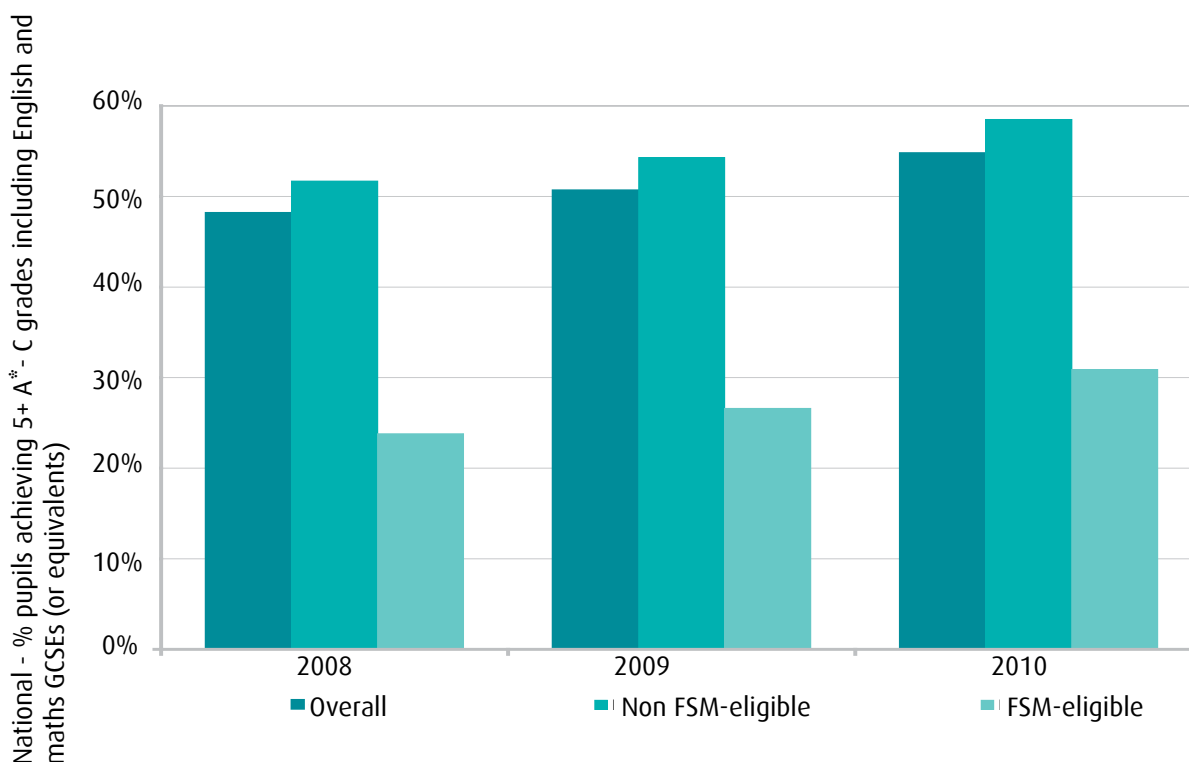
Source: DfE Statistical First Release (SFR) 37/2010

Our proxy indicator shows us that most schools have an attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers. In secondary schools, for example, almost 90 per cent of schools have some gap in attainment at GCSE level between their FSM and non-FSM pupils (DCSF, 2009). The size of the attainment gap between pupils also varies according to the number of pupils eligible for FSM in the school. Typically, where a school has more than 18 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM, the gap will be 10 percentage points smaller than a school which has fewer than 5 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM.

The role of national leaders of education

We set out in the preface that the purpose of this research project was to learn from some of the very best school leaders about current practice in closing gaps. We have focused on the work of national leaders of education (NLEs). Who are these NLEs?

Robert Hill and Peter Matthews through their 2008 and 2010 studies have provided the most extensive analysis of the work and impact of NLEs. As Hill and Matthews explained in Schools leading schools: the power and potential of National Leaders of Education (2008), a number of inter-related policy strands led to the establishment of the NLE programme in 2005 and the identification of the first 68 NLEs in October 2006:

— the success of headteacher support models such as the consultant leader programme and the support provided to Keys to Success schools in the London Challenge programme

— emerging research and international evidence about the impact of sustained school-to-school support models

— the important role that heads could play as system leaders, as well as the growing evidence relating to executive head models

— the impact of previous support federation initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and leading edge partnerships

The then National College for School Leadership was asked to select a first tranche of approximately 50 outstanding leaders in primary, secondary or special schools who 'could not only demonstrate excellent leadership in their own school but who would also be able to support schools in challenging circumstances, particularly those in special measures' (Hill & Matthews, 2008; 29). Alongside the designation of the first NLEs, the capacity of their schools to support wider school improvement was also considered and these schools were designated national support schools (NSSs).

The growth of NLEs

— The first 68 NLEs were identified in October 2006. Those designated were required to be 'very good or outstanding leaders of schools, and had to show that their school had a good track record of supporting other schools in difficulty' (Hill & Matthews, 2008; 35).

— A second group of 60 NLEs was designated in July 2007. A third group joined in September 2008, with further waves in 2009, 2010, and 2011.

— The aim announced in the recent schools white paper (DfE, 2010) is to establish 1,000 NLEs by 2014 in order to create a critical mass of system leaders across the country. In addition, many NLEs are likely to be leading Teaching School alliances once these have been begun to be designated from 2011.

— About 80 per cent of NLEs are deployed at any one time in supporting at least one other school and over 500 schools have been supported by NLEs since 2006.

NLEs and closing gaps

As we made clear at the beginning of this report, narrowing or closing gaps in attainment in the schools they are supporting has not previously been part of the formal remit of NLEs. They have most often been targeted to support schools with serious whole-school weaknesses to address, which for example might have resulted in the partner school being below a floor target or placed in an Ofsted category. This research project has not been an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of NLEs in undertaking a remit with which they have not been tasked. We have sought to learn from the good practice that NLEs are adopting in their own schools to close gaps, and we seek to learn about the ways in which they have approached their work with other schools to improve the attainment of targeted pupils within the context of improving achievement for all.

What can we discern from performance data at a national level about the work of NLEs and the gaps between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers? Let us start in their own schools.

The range and average levels of eligibility for FSM in NSSs are broadly in line with national averages. When we look at the performance of NSSs between 2008 and 2010 we see that in both primary and secondary schools, NSSs have smaller gaps in attainment between their pupils eligible for FSM and their peers than nationally. We analysed the performance of 105 secondary NSSs between 2008 and 2010[1]. While the overall increase in performance and the increase in the performance of non-FSM pupils were in line with national averages (an increase of 6 percentage points) albeit with higher absolute figures, the increase in the performance of FSM-eligible pupils was 8 percentage points. In our sample of secondary NSSs, the attainment of pupils eligible for FSM in 2010 (at 46 per cent achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths) was 15 percentage points higher than the national average for all FSM pupils. The average gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers across our NSSs sample was 21 percentage points by 2010: 7 percentage points, or a quarter, less than the gap across all secondary schools at the same point.

1   See methodology at the end of this section for description of sampling criteria. Primary and secondary NSS samples were selected using four criteria: designation as NSS by the end of 2010; 'active' according to National College criteria; performance data available for 2008-10; and had FSM pupils 2008-10

Figure 6: Proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths 2008-2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible) in sample of 105 secondary NSSs
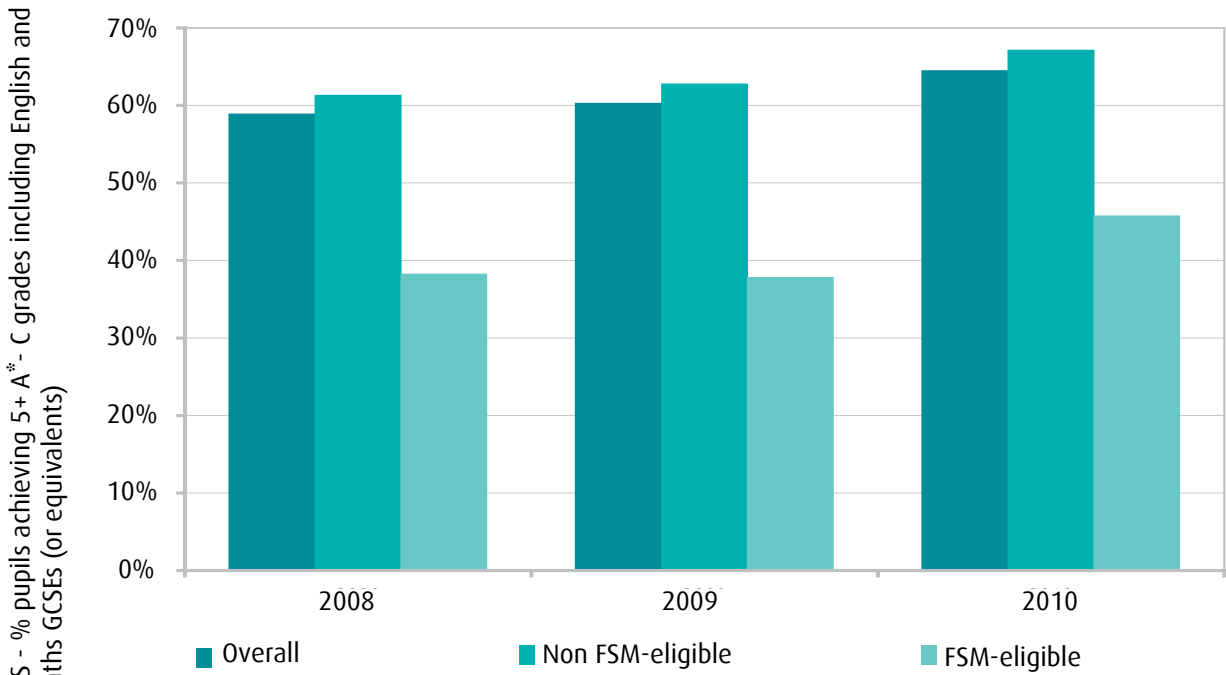
Source: Isos analysis using National College deployment and school-level attainment data

We also analysed the performance of 87 primary NSSs[2]. Between 2008 and 2010 these schools increased their overall performance, the performance of pupils eligible for FSM, and the performance of non-FSM-eligible pupils (all by 1 percentage point, and from an already high base). The attainment of FSM-eligible pupils in 2010 in our sample of primary NSSs (at 76 per cent achieving level 4 or above in English and maths) is 20 percentage points higher than the national average for FSM-eligible pupils. The average gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers across our primary NSS sample is only 9 percentage points – less than half the national gap in 2010 (9 percentage points compared with 21 percentage points nationally) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and maths 2008–2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible) in sample of 87 primary NSSs
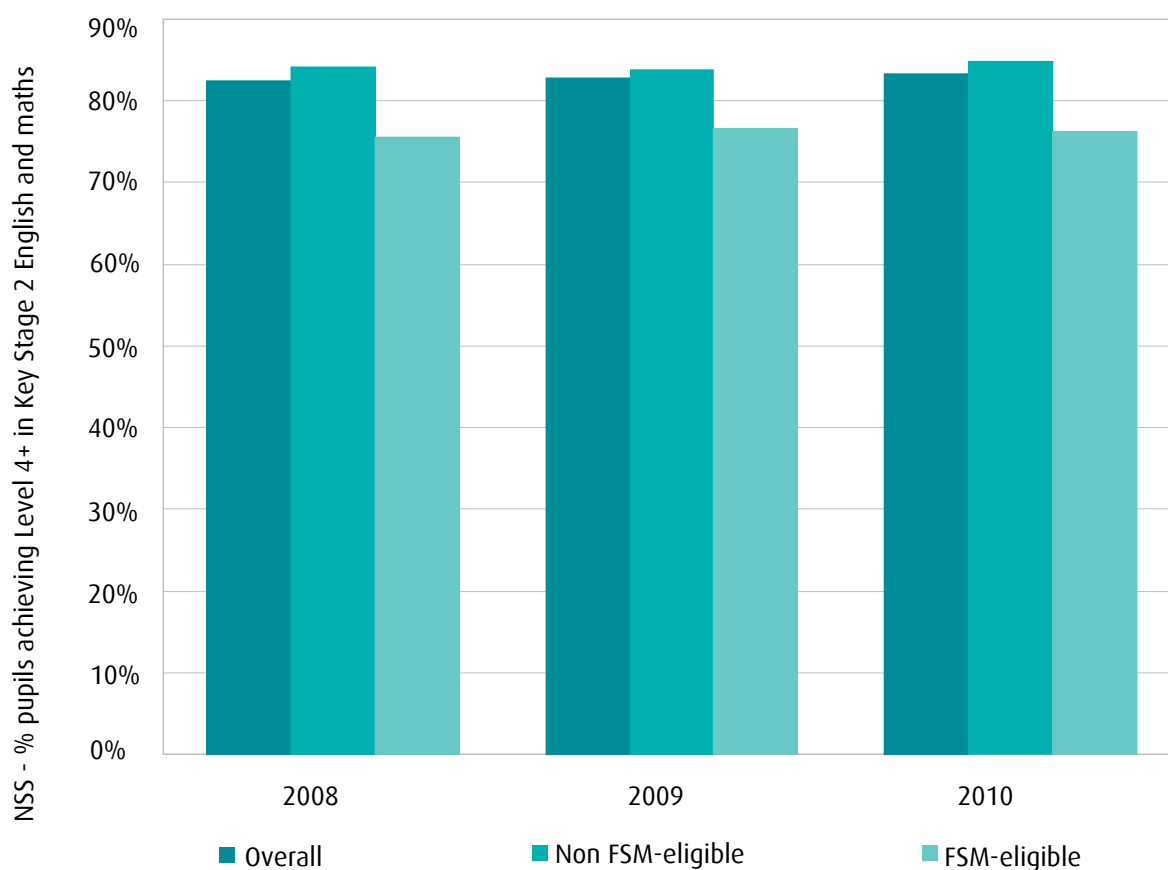
Source: Isos analysis using National College deployment and school-level attainment data

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2. See methodology at the end of this section for description of sampling criteria. Primary and secondary NSS samples were selected using four criteria: designation as NSS by the end of 2010; 'active' according to National College criteria; performance data available for 2008-10; and had FSM pupils 2008-10

We then analysed how the performance of pupils eligible for FSM and their peers have been affected in schools that have received support from NLEs and their NSSs over the same period.

At secondary level, we used data from the National College to look at 130 schools that received support from an NSS for more than one year between 2008 and 2010. The data shows that both FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils improved at a rate faster than the national average during this period, with the attainment of FSM-eligible pupils in these 130 supported schools surpassing the national average for all FSM pupils by 2010 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths 2008-2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible) in 130 NSS-supported secondary schools

Source: Isos analysis using National College deployment and school-level attainment data

At primary level, we used data from the National College to look at 164 primary schools that received support from an NSS for more than one year between 2008 and 2010. Again, the data shows that the overall performance improvement and improvement of non-FSM-eligible pupils were at faster rates than national averages. The increase in the performance of FSM-eligible pupils was the fastest of all (an 8 percentage point improvement, which was four times the national rate of improvement for FSM-eligible pupils across the same period). By 2010, FSM-eligible pupils in these 164 supported schools were on average performing better than FSM-eligible pupils nationally (Figure 9).

Over this three-year period then, it does indeed appear that school-to-school support (and just as importantly the schools doing the supporting), can help to close the gap.

Figure 9: Proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and maths 2008–2010 (overall, non-FSM, and FSM-eligible) in 164 NSS-supported primary schools
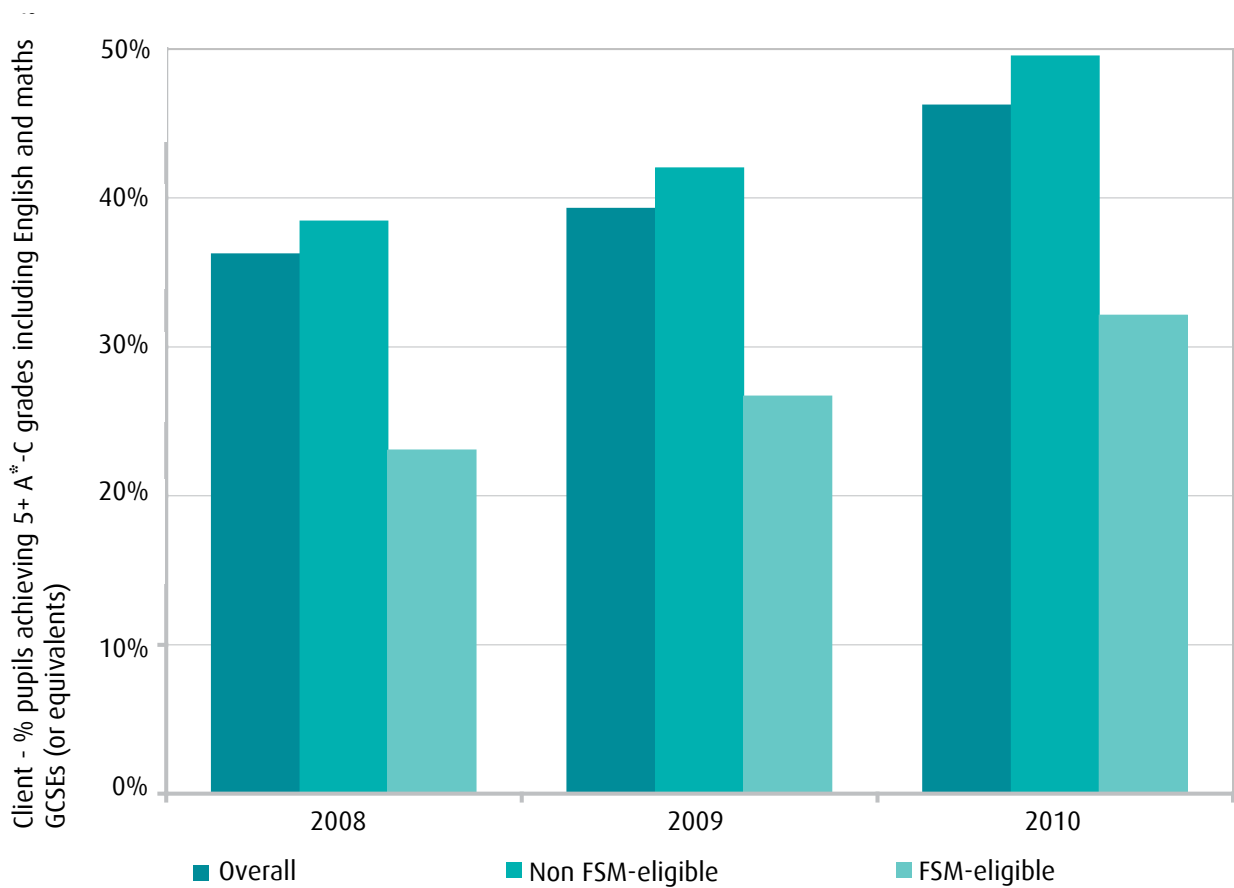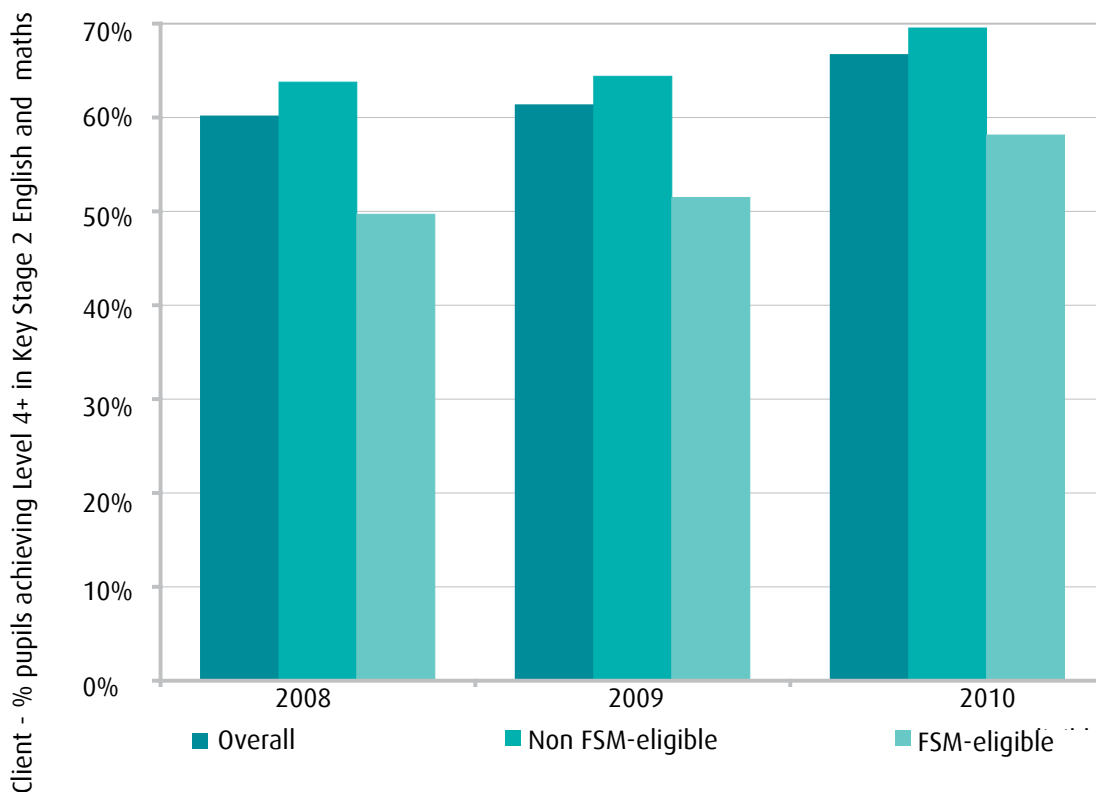

Source: Isos analysis using National College deployment and school-level attainment data

Selection of national support schools

To select a sample of primary and secondary NSSs on which to undertake data analysis for this section of the report, four criteria were used:

— Schools that had been designated as a NSS by the end of 2010

— NSSs that were shown to be "active" according to the National College database and criteria (for example, supporting at least one school during the period)

— NSSs that had complete performance data available for the three years of the analysis: 2008-10 (for example, primary NSSs needed to have 2010 KS2 SATs data available)

— NSSs that had at least one pupil eligible for FSM in each of the three years 2008-10 according to National College pupil level data held in 2011

Adopting these criteria, we generated the NSSs samples previously mentioned in this section of the report (87 primary NSSs and 105 secondary NSSs).

For the following section 3, a sample of NSSs was generated to provide a group of schools for fieldwork interviews and visits.

A selection framework was adopted to ensure:

— a mix of primary and secondary schools, and different school types (for example, community, foundation, voluntary aided/controlled schools, and academies)

— a range of NSSs with both high and low numbers of pupils eligible for FSM, and (on the basis of the available data) with both large and small gaps in attainment between their FSM-eligible pupils and their peers

— a range of schools that had been supported by the NSSs, including those with both high and low numbers of pupils eligible for FSM, and both large and small gaps in attainment between their FSM-eligible pupils and their peers

A sample of NLEs was then contacted to seek a 30-45 minute telephone interview. This followed a semi-structured framework designed to discuss the context of their NSS, their work as an NLE, the work the NLE had undertaken in their own NSS to close gaps in attainment, and the work they had undertaken in partner schools. Approximately 30 NLEs were interviewed. A further 20 NLEs were engaged through two inter-active workshops which generated learning about strategies which had been adopted to close gaps in attainment.

Using the evidence from the telephone interviews, 10 NSSs were contacted to arrange a follow up visit to consider their practice in more detail and examples of good practice in strategies to close gaps in attainment.

How do national leaders of education and national support schools close their own gaps, and help to close gaps in partner schools?

Introduction

This section of the report is divided into two parts. First, we address the work that national leaders of education (NLEs) and their national support schools (NSSs) have been undertaking to close their own gaps in attainment. We identify how NLEs have prioritised this issue, what strategies have been found to have the greatest impact, and how resources have been utilised. We also identify the barriers that have been overcome and those that remain.

We start here because we recognise that NLEs are highly skilled professionals working at the top of their profession and with outstanding capacity available in their schools. They will be adept at brokering a range of resources and strategies appropriate to the context of the schools they are supporting. Nevertheless, in the context of work to close gaps in attainment, the background and challenges faced by their own schools will have provided a crucial bedrock of experience. NLEs who had significantly closed the gap in attainment between their own FSM-eligible pupils and their peers, or who were on that journey of improvement, were more likely to give priority to this issue when making the initial engagement with the partner head or determining the priorities for improvement.

The second part of this section analyses the work that NLEs and their NSSs have undertaken with the schools with which they have been matched. We explore some of the successful strategies that have been used to close gaps in attainment, the capacity that has been necessary, and the leadership skills and behaviours that have been employed. We set all this in the context – as explained earlier in this report – that NLEs have not previously been tasked with closing gaps as part of their formal remit, that we are focusing in this report on the gap between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers, and that we have specifically sought to learn from good practice during our fieldwork discussions.

Closing gaps in their own schools

How have NLEs prioritised closing gaps?

NLEs were unanimous in bringing a moral perspective and purpose to the work on closing gaps in attainment between any group of pupils and their peers: "it's what we're here to do". The only differences were in how they approached closing the gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. For example, some NLEs explicitly supported their FSM-eligible pupils as a group because they were known to come from socially and economically deprived backgrounds and consequently had different needs from their other pupils. Others used their school's internal monitoring systems to highlight the performance of their FSM-eligible pupils to close gaps in attainment.

The result was that some NSSs identified and provided additional support for FSM-eligible pupils, either as a specific group or part of a wider group of pupils from materially disadvantaged backgrounds[1]. Others responded to the needs of their individual pupils without offering differentiated provision for those eligible for FSM. Their philosophy was that they addressed the needs of each individual pupil and took as their starting point the educational progress (or lack of it) rather than socio-economic background of the pupil. The following quotations illustrate the point:

> "I am not a great believer in 'you are a pupil eligible for FSM and therefore you need this additional support' approach."
>
> NLE, primary school

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1   A number of NLEs commented that they considered FSM to be a poor proxy for identifying pupils from deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds – see section 2 for a discussion about the pros and cons. For these NLEs, this was either because families did not claim FSM or, in the case of one NLE, because the local authority did not provide hot school meals and there was therefore less incentive for families to register as FSM-eligible. These NLEs preferred to use ACORN groupings or IDACI data to more accurately identify pupils' socio-economic background.

"It is better to take underachievement itself as the starting point for action to raise achievement rather than the background data. We do not start with the assumption that all students on FSM or with high IDACI scores need help; some do, but some do not."

NLE, secondary school

On the other hand, many NLEs considered it was necessary to provide for their FSM-eligible pupils some of the educational and economic support structures which many of their pupils who came from more advantaged backgrounds might take for granted. These included not only access to resources and opportunities outside the classroom, but also expectations about pupils' progress, outcomes and aspirations.

The extent to which NSSs prioritised the attainment gap between their FSM-eligible pupils and non-FSM-eligible pupils for action was occasionally driven by their analysis of whether such a gap existed, or how the number of pupils eligible for FSM compared with other pupil groups that might require focus and attention. For some NSSs, the gap in attainment between boys and girls was the significant gap they needed to close; for others, it was the performance of a particular ethnic group. As the size of the FSM cohort as a percentage of the overall school population increased, so the focus on the gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers tended to increase. NSSs with an FSM-eligible population similar to the national average were more likely to cite the FSM gap as a key school improvement priority, or one on which they had been successfully working. Significantly, as the size of the FSM cohort rose, so the approach tended to become one of providing similar support structures for all pupils across the school, rather than anything different for FSM-eligible pupils; although there were still differences of opinion as to whether FSM-eligible pupils were targeted for support.

What strategies have been successful?

Figure 10: Three-part model for closing gaps

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit
all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under
achieving pupils

**Targeted strategies for pupils
eligible for FSM**
...which specfically benefit
FSM pupils
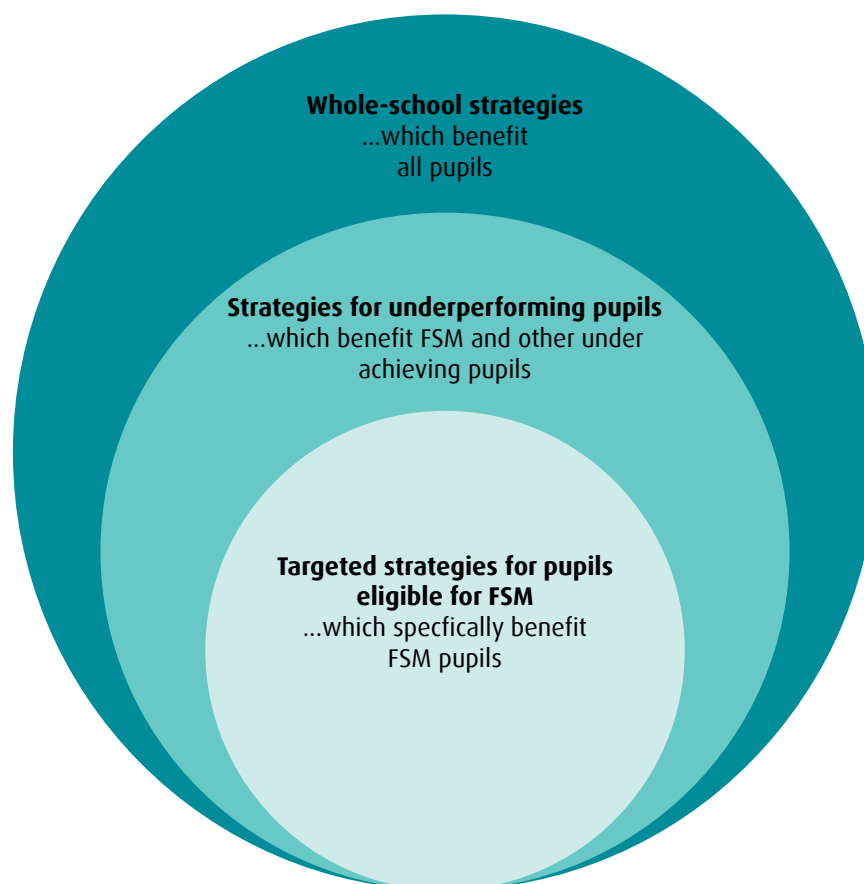
We have considered the strategies that NSSs have employed to close the FSM gap against our three-part model (Figure 10). This model suggests that there are a number of core whole-school strategies which, when implemented effectively, will have benefits for all pupils across the school including pupils eligible for FSM. There is then a set of strategies that are focused on underperforming pupils, and these are also very likely to benefit FSM-eligible pupils as well as other vulnerable pupils or pupils who are not making the progress that might be expected. Finally, there is a set of strategies and interventions that might be applied only to FSM-eligible pupils or other pupils suffering from material disadvantage and with socio-economic barriers to their learning.

The model is based on our dialogue with NLEs and their schools during the course of this evaluation, and what the existing research evidence tells us about effective school improvement practice to close gaps and address issues such as in-school variation. All the strategies contained in the model are part of existing school improvement good practice (see, for example, NCSL (2006); Reynolds (2007); DCSF (2009a; 2010b); Matthews (2009); Hill & Matthews (2010); Ofsted (2010); TDA (2011)).

What are the whole-school strategies?

Figure 11: Whole-school strategies

Whole school strategies might include:

— high-quality teaching and learning, consistent across the school, supported by strong CPD culture, observation/moderation and coaching

— engaging and relevant curriculum, personalised to pupil needs

— pupil-level tracking, assessment and monitoring

— quality assessment for learning

— effective reward, behaviour and attendance policies

— high-quality learning environment

— inclusive and positive school culture, underpinned by values and moral purpose that all pupils will achieve

— effective senior leadership team with ambition, vision and high expectations of staff and pupils

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under achieving pupils

Targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM
...which specfically benefit FSM pupils

Sources
Deprivation and Education - the evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to KS4 (DCSF, Schools Analysis and Research Division, 2009)
Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling aginst the odds and Twelve outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds (both Ofsted with Peter Matthews, 2009)
Isos research on narrowing the gap (internal report for DfE, 2010)
Discussions with NLEs 2011

All NLEs emphasised the importance of whole-school strategies as the foundation for closing gaps. Whether NSSs focused explicitly on their FSM-eligible pupils or not, all talked of the need for consistently applied systems and structures across the school that would assist efforts to close gaps in attainment.

NLEs stressed the priority that had to be given to the **consistency of high-quality teaching**. For a number of NLEs, this and ensuring the consistency of pedagogical practice, was more important than everything else:

> "For us, this is the number one priority. We know that our core offer has to be consistently high quality."

> NLE, primary school

Another NLE in a primary school said that the main focus in closing gaps in attainment had to be ensuring consistently good or outstanding teaching across the school, and had used the London Challenge Outstanding Teaching Programme to help with this. The high quality of continuing professional development (CPD), coupled with a deep culture of lesson observation, peer learning and effective coaching had been crucial. This NLE believed the quality of teaching had been raised across the school and this would have a strong impact on all pupils including those eligible for FSM. When effective pedagogy means utilising the full range of teaching styles to respond to the needs of all learners, in particular FSM-eligible pupils (for example, using active learning approaches, problem-solving, small-group work or use of talk partners), DCSF research (2009a) holds good:

> '[There is]...no evidence to suggest that effective pedagogy for pupils from deprived backgrounds is qualitatively different to effective pedagogy for other pupils.'

> DCSF, 2009a:71

NLEs were clear that the cycle of **pupil-level tracking and assessment**, interventions, and then **monitoring and evaluation** was one of the most important tools to help close gaps in attainment. For example, one secondary-school NLE described pupil tracking as "core business". We will explore its use in targeting support below. At the whole-school level, NLEs described the frequency with which they undertook regular teacher assessment and monitoring of pupil progress: one primary-school NLE explained how every six weeks she cleared her diary for two days and held meetings with all class teachers and subject co-ordinators to review the progress of all the pupils across the school, using the latest teacher assessment of progress to identify any pupils who were not making progress as expected. Many assessment systems were being used (for example Assessment Manager, Target Tracker and SIMS-based systems); the common theme was the involvement of the senior leadership team in conversations about individual, pupil-level progress, the frequency of the monitoring (usually half-termly), and the focus on individual pupils and the progress they were making. For secondary-school NLEs, this process would also support a cycle of departmental reviews to address any variation in performance across departments.

Ensuring an **appropriate curriculum** is another whole-school strategy that is highly relevant to FSM-eligible pupils. NLEs gave examples of how they provided challenge and pathways to attainment, irrespective of background or socio-economic status, while avoiding reinforcing failure for those that could not manage mainstream or more advanced courses:

> "Although our school is a high-performing school and sends many students to higher education it will ensure that students are placed on the courses that are right for them – including sending students to [FE] colleges for vocational studies for two days a week. They will not be forced into doing lots of GCSEs for the sake of it. We will also have transition groups in Year 7 for students who struggle to make the transition from primary to secondary – students are taught in a primary-style setting for the first six months."

> NLE, secondary school

The consistent application of **rewards and praise for progress and achievement** was also viewed as important in addressing lower levels of confidence about aptitudes and abilities, and knowledge of their own material disadvantage on the part of FSM-eligible pupils. One secondary-school NLE talked of the need to "reward everything", given the lack of self-esteem and self-confidence of many of her pupils on joining the school. Praise and positive affirmation were important features of the culture of the school.

A culture that 'all our pupils will progress and achieve' was often mentioned as a core building block to **promote high expectations and ambitious outcomes** for all children. We shall return to this point in some of the challenges faced in working with partner schools.

Several NLEs pointed to the artificial cap often placed on pupils due to their backgrounds and the need to counter any staff preconceptions about the talents of all their children. One NLE in a primary school had deliberately transformed the school's gifted and talented register to ensure a fair representation of FSM-eligible pupils by taking a wide-ranging view of the talents of all pupils (including sporting, leadership, social and cultural talents) rather than purely academic talent. This had resulted in a "dramatic effect on the ways in which some of the FSM-eligible pupils were perceived".

The vision, expectations and ambition that flowed from the senior leadership team were crucial in affirming that all pupils could achieve: one NLE in a primary school with about half her pupils eligible for FSM summed it up as a "relentless pursuit of high expectations of everyone... because our children don't get second chances".

What are the strategies for underperforming pupils?

Figure 12: Whole-school strategies and strategies for underperforming pupils

Targeted strategies for underperforming and other pupils might include:

— early intervention and targeted learning interventions

— one-to-one support and other catch-up provision

— rigorous monitoring and evaluation of impact of targeted interventions

— extended services (eg breakfast and after-school clubs, including homework and study support) and multi-agency support

— targeted parental engagement, including raising aspirations and developing parenting skills

— in-school dedicated pastoral and wellbeing support and outreach

— developing confidence and self-esteem through pupil voice, empowering student mentors through sport, music, or other programmes eg, SEAL

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under achieving pupils

Targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM
...which specfically benefit FSM pupils

Sources
Deprivation and Education - the evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to KS4 (DCSF, Schools Analysis and Research Division, 2009)
Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling aginst the odds and Twelve outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds (both Ofsted with Peter Matthews, 2009)
Isos research on narrowing the gap (internal report for DfE, 2010)
Discussions with NLEs 2011

While NLEs agreed that there were essential whole-school strategies that would support closing the FSM gap, most views about successful strategies focused on the second part of our three-part model (Figure 12). These strategies would be used explicitly to focus on pupils who were under-achieving or underperforming, or who were at risk of not making the progress that might be expected of them, or who were vulnerable and at risk and therefore required specific support.

Those NLEs who said they did not focus exclusively on their FSM-eligible pupils as a group used this second level of targeted strategies as the tool with which they attempted to close gaps in attainment. They recognised that many of their FSM-eligible pupils would be part of a wider group of pupils who might be vulnerable and require additional support, or at risk of under-achieving. Moreover, some FSM-eligible pupils would fall into more than one category and just categorising or responding to them because of their FSM status would not address their all-round needs. For example, in one primary school led by an NLE executive head, 38 pupils (23.2 per cent) were eligible for FSM but 7 also had special educational needs, 5 spoke English as their second language (EAL) and 17 were boys. The final point was particularly relevant as the school had particular problems with boys' writing (relative to the performance of girls in the school and the performance of boys nationally). The interventions being taken to address this problem are therefore also likely to boost attainment by FSM-eligible pupils.

For NLEs who did have specific support for their FSM-eligible pupils in place, these were still the strategies which in the classroom were likely to have the strongest impact on closing the gap.

At its core is the classic cycle of identification of pupil needs through analysis of their performance, interventions designed to meet those pupil needs, monitoring of the impact of the interventions, and then evaluation of the interventions with lessons learned:

"We look at the data for each cohort and have focus group meetings every half-term to analyse the performance of pupils where we're concerned they're at risk of not making the progress we expect. At this stage, we don't accept any excuses as to why they might not be making sufficient progress, including 'X is not being supported well at home'.

We are likely to say 'that's fine, and what are you going to do about it? We are here to make a difference'. We then consider how we can meet the needs of these pupils through [high-quality] teaching, and if not, then what additional support might be necessary. We then establish our intervention groups and use our class-based teaching assistants to focus on particular needs. And then we review the progress of the pupils against expectations"

NLE, primary school

One of the common messages was the need for intervention as early as possible to ensure pupils are supported to catch up before they fall too far behind. This was to ensure pupils did not become disengaged from their learning or have increased levels of anxiety about particular subject areas which are then more difficult to address and turn around in the future.

The most common intervention strategies that NLEs said were being employed to support pupils at risk of not making the expected levels of progress were:

— small-group interventions to ensure greater personal learning, support and attention

— catch-up programmes, reading recovery, mentoring or coaching, additional maths coaching

— other focused support from teaching assistants or learning mentors

— one-to-one support outside lesson time

One NLE of a primary school described how she had restructured the first hour of the school day to allow for more one-to-one support for more of her pupils as they had seen the benefits of this approach for their targeted pupils. Other NLEs also pointed to the huge difference provided through one-to-one support.

Many NSSs were using detailed provision maps showing the targeted pupils and the specific interventions being used to support them. This provided confidence that FSM-eligible pupils were receiving support appropriate to their needs, and a detailed evidence-base then to review progress and evaluate the impact of those strategies. For some NSSs, this got down to the level of the particular aspect of maths practice which needed to be supported during an intervention group using clear and precise targets.

One secondary-school NLE explained how there was often a range of professionals available to support specific interventions, for example reading recovery teachers, speech and language therapists and dyslexia specialists.

For most NSSs, the rigorous approach to evaluation of their interventions allowed them to review progress and to target resources on strategies that were deemed to have the greatest impact:

> "We are continually asking 'is it working?' People don't feel scared to ask 'how is this working, and how could it be working better?"
>
> NLE, primary school

The effective use of the time and capacity of all the staff in the school to support targeted pupils to help close gaps was seen as important. One primary-school NLE had remodelled the support so that rather than having all teaching assistants class-based in most classrooms, she was using two part-time members of staff who each took 15 children for more intensive literacy and numeracy sessions 4 times a week. This had produced a significant impact and suggested that the staff had not been as effectively employed in the whole-class setting.

Another primary-school NLE emphasised that both her teachers and teaching assistants needed to feel that there were high expectations: "I expect all the adults in the school to know their children". She had introduced a school-based training programme for teaching assistants on specific interventions that was led by school staff.

Case study 1: the importance of teaching assistants

Charles Dickens Primary School in Southwark is an NSS with a wide-ranging and ambitious professional development programme for its teaching assistants (TAs). NLE Teresa de Quincey said they have a "skilled and passionate" group of TAs, and they want to ensure they develop them as effectively as possible whilst ensuring that "everyone across the school feels accountable for our pupils reaching level 4". They also know the impact that targeted support can have in closing gaps, and that "interventions are only as good as the staff that deliver them".

The TAs are managed and developed by one of the Year 5/Year 6 teachers, Helen Roberts. They have focused on three key aspects as part of a three-year change programme:

— A comprehensive professional development programme runs through fortnightly training sessions looking at, for example, what makes outstanding teaching, sharing examples of marking and giving feedback, and how to run effective guided groups.

— Observation is established as routine practice. TAs were asked to observe their partner teacher working with a guided group on literacy and numeracy, and then to observe a different teacher. TAs then observed each other with guided groups, and would be observed by Helen as part of their end-of-year review. TAs were asked to take notes and give feedback.

— A detailed performance management contract includes target pupils, their current levels of attainment and expected rates of progress by the end of the year. TAs keep detailed observation diaries, and these, together with the evidence from observations, inform their performance management and pay discussions.

Alongside the targeted interventions in the classroom to help close gaps in attainment, NSSs also used a range of targeted strategies to support FSM-eligible and other pupils outside the classroom. As with the learning and teaching interventions, these strategies focused on a broad range of vulnerable or at-risk pupils, although NLEs acknowledged that they were very likely to engage many of their FSM-eligible pupils too. The purpose of these strategies was to help remove barriers to learning outside the classroom. For example, the wraparound care provided by the breakfast and after-school clubs gave an opportunity to support pupils who would arrive at schools not having had breakfast, or who did not have the space or resources to complete learning tasks at home.

One primary-school NLE had established a separate pastoral team to support pupils outside the classroom (with interventions and programmes to boost self-esteem and self-confidence and deal with "all the external baggage" many pupils brought to the classroom and which are barriers to learning). This had consequently taken some of the tasks away from class teachers and increased the time they could use to focus on teaching and learning and pupil progress.

NSSs also stressed the importance of engaging parents and families of underperforming pupils as early as possible. All the schools had well-developed systems for communicating and building a trusting relationship with parents. This was seen as particularly important for parents whose own educational experience had not been positive, or for a range of reasons might be hesitant about engaging with the school. One secondary-school NLE said it was important not to assume all parents of FSM-eligible pupils would need targeted support, and important not to stereotype these pupils and their parents. A primary-school NLE mentioned the need to "set high expectations of parents so that they feel part of something successful", adding that "parents need to be able to trust me... that I want the best outcomes for their children and would need their support to achieve this".

Case study 2: engaging parents

East Barnet School in Barnet is an NSS that has adopted a programme to engage some of its hard-to-reach parents. The approach begins with its relationship with all parents: founded on a home-school agreement, a prompt response to all phone calls from parents, fortnightly online communications with parents, and an active PTA. Parents' evenings are staggered over two days so that parents have enough time to talk to teachers; and parents are asked for their views on the value of these sessions and other open evenings.

The school runs parent information sessions two or three times a term on issues such as better co-operation and communication with teenagers, internet security and cyber-bullying. The school has also run sessions for parents of Year 7 and Year 8 pupils: the group met every Thursday for some 18 months and sometimes students attended as well. A lot of the issues discussed were not school related but the sessions helped to build trust between parents and the school, and this trust was then disseminated around the community. NLE Nick Christou said:

"The grapevine passes around the supportive attitude we are adopting".

This positive approach (including visiting families at home) sits alongside a policy of being firm, when justified – for example, immediately contacting parents when a pupil is late or absent, and imposing fines for non-attendance; pupils are not allowed just to slip off the radar.

However, the overall approach to relationships with parents provides the basis for the school adopting an approach of assertive mentoring (or tough love) towards pupils who are struggling with schoolwork. Parents are contacted with a view to agreeing to their child spending time after school catching up on work or addressing particular learning needs via coursework and homework clubs. The school has also organised restorative justice sessions to deal with situations where disputes between families were affecting pupils and the life of the school. These sessions have been effective and have resulted in families shaking hands and asking for each others' telephone numbers. Staff at the school have been trained in how to conduct these sessions and they in turn have provided training for local primary schools.

NLEs also stressed the importance of building confidence and self-esteem for many of their pupils, especially those being targeted for specific support. One primary-school NLE reported that this was developed through specific support and also opportunities outside the classroom such as access to musical opportunities and performing at prestigious events, with a significant emphasis on global links:

"We recently hosted a visit for a group of French children [and] for German teachers; and we have Japanese students running a Japanese after-school club. The culture of the school is one in which children are always encouraged to have a go without fear of ridicule."

NLE, primary school

For one secondary-school NLE, a route to building self-confidence was through developing the leadership skills of pupils through an organised programme which led to rewards; it was a way for boys to demonstrate leadership skills in different areas and work in other schools. One boy who had been excluded from another school had been re-engaged through the leadership programme and had become the school's head boy. Vertical tutor groups also had a strong impact in allowing older pupils to mentor younger ones.

What were the targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM?

Figure 13: Whole-school strategies, strategies for underperforming pupils, and targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM

Targeted strategies for FSM pupils might include:

— explicit school-level strategy to identify and support FSM-eligible pupils through targeted funding

— incentives and targeting of extended services and parental support

— subsidising school trips and other learning resources

— additional residential and summer camps

— interventions to manage key transitions between stages or between schools

— dedicated senior leadership champion, or lead worker to co-ordinate support programme

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under achieving pupils

Targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM
...which specfically benefit FSM pupils

Sources
Deprivation and Education - the evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to KS4 (DCSF, Schools Analysis and Research Division, 2009)
Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling aginst the odds and Twelve outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds (both Ofsted with Peter Matthews, 2009)
Isos research on narrowing the gap (internal report for DfE, 2010)
Discussions with NLEs 2011

It was the third set of strategies from our model that highlighted the differences in approach among the NLEs that we interviewed during our fieldwork discussions. For some schools, the targeted interventions focused on vulnerable or underperforming pupils were addressing the needs of their FSM-eligible pupils. They were very effective in improving the progress of their FSM-eligible pupils and closing gaps in attainment in doing so. For other NLEs, there was a conscious strategy to monitor and intervene because the pupils were eligible for FSM. This difference in view was neatly summed up by two primary-school NLEs both in a similar area of deprivation a couple of miles apart, both with between 40 and 50 per cent of their pupils eligible for FSM. One NLE said she wasn't conscious on a routine basis which of her pupils were eligible for FSM. The other NLE said she was "acutely aware of who her FSM-eligible pupils are, and she does offer different things for them; although it is discrete, [the additional support] is very definitely there". Interestingly, both NLEs have been equally successful in closing the gaps in attainment between their FSM-eligible pupils and their peers.

There were also NLEs who had changed their view on this. One primary-school NLE said that over time she had taken both approaches (explicitly targeting and not) to addressing the needs of her pupils eligible for FSM:

"I originally took the view that it was important not to differentiate the support and interventions for FSM-eligible pupils, and address their needs as with any underperforming pupils. I then undertook some case study work for my local authority on the specific support we could offer our FSM-eligible pupils. I looked at how we could support them better with their homework. That made me think differently about how we could help them more effectively."

NLE, primary school

This NLE now uses some of her disadvantage subsidy grant to offer more extra-curricular opportunities to her FSM-eligible pupils and she now takes the view that "it is important to look for an holistic package of support for young people from deprived backgrounds to support their learning outside the classroom".

For most NSSs that had decided to have an explicit focus on FSM-eligible pupils, the starting point was the data analysis of where the gaps were both in terms of progress and also in some cases participation. The ongoing performance and progress of pupils eligible for FSM were then highlighted and flagged compared with other pupils. Walthamstow Schools for Girls had taken a comprehensive approach to analysing their challenges as part of a whole-school strategy to closing the FSM gap (Case study 3).

Case study 3: whole-school focus on the FSM gap

Walthamstow School for Girls in Waltham Forest is an NSS that has carried out a detailed self-audit of its FSM gaps, looking at the prior attainment, progress and participation of FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils. The school has 22 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM. NLE Rachel Macfarlane described the school as having:

> "...a great culture in terms of piloting activities, taking risks and then evaluating performance. All staff were keen to make progress on this issue, and we made sure that colleagues did not feel that anything we did would stigmatise our FSM pupils in any way."

The audit has shown that although the FSM-eligible pupils make very good progress and have a higher contextual value-added (CVA) score than non-FSM-eligible pupils, there is still a gap in Year 11 attainment. The school carried out a rigorous and comprehensive review of many data sets including performance and progress data; attendance data; behaviour interventions; SEN and gifted and talented (G&T) representation; participation in extra-curricular activities, including music and arts; destinations of Year 11 leavers; and student positions of responsibility across the school. The purpose was to highlight any areas where there was a significant gap between FSM and non-FSM performance or involvement. The senior leadership team (SLT) was fully on board with the approach, and Rachel said:

> "This is a really great school in that it is not afraid of this type of forensic analysis."

A range of key messages emerged from the analysis, including the following:

— There were gaps between FSM and non-FSM-eligible pupils in attendance levels, rates of internal fixed-term exclusions and participation in some extra-curricular activities.

— There were no gaps between FSM and non-FSM-eligible pupils in their representation on the G&T register, positions of responsibility across the school or participation in extended school activities.

— The SLT looked at the attainment gap on entry in Year 7 (through KS2 test scores and the school's own CAT (cognitive ability test) scores) between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. This differed across different cohorts, sometimes quite significantly.

Rachel commented:

> "We have decided that although our FSM pupils make at least as much progress as our non-FSM pupils, five years is not enough time to close the gap that they arrive with completely."

She concluded that the school needed to work with the three main feeder primaries (that provide around 60 per cent of pupils) to try and address this attainment gap earlier.

The exercise has also collected examples of existing good practice to support, motivate and raise the aspirations of FSM-eligible pupils across the school, including:

— highlighting FSM-eligible pupils in teaching-staff plans and on class lists, and also for lesson observations (to monitor levels of engagement)

— analysing results by looking at the performance of FSM and non-FSM groups, including termly KS3 data collection, allowing student progress leaders to identify gaps and put appropriate intervention strategies in place for FSM-eligible pupils

— making support for FSM-eligible students a priority in the school improvement plan

— raising the profile of FSM-eligible pupils by beginning staff meetings with a presentation of the images of FSM-eligible students in a particular year group

— providing additional resources (for example loans of ICT equipment or text books), subsidising trips or offering lower cost music lessons for FSM-eligible pupils

— targeting FSM-eligible pupils for Aim Higher visits to raise aspirations for further and higher education

The review that the school has undertaken has also resulted in a series of further proposed actions that will be taken to help to close gaps in the future, including the following:

— To respond to the Year 7 attainment gap, the school has decided to appoint two additional maths teachers to work with its three main feeder primary schools and their own Year 7 groups. Their role will be to support whole-class teaching, develop practice, deliver one-to-one support and small-group interventions, deliver after-school or Saturday sessions, and train and coach staff across the four schools. Accountability and line management will be held with a member of Walthamstow School's maths faculty.

— The school is ensuring faculties consider the type of home learning that is set when reviewing policies to ensure FSM-eligible pupils are not disadvantaged in terms of access to resources or use of computers.

— The school is investigating further with middle leaders the reasons behind some of the other FSM gaps, for example, in internal exclusions and participation in extra-curricular activities.

For some NSSs, targeting families with pupils at the school who were eligible for FSM was an important engagement strategy, alongside funding for residential and extra-curricular activity.

Case study 4: targeted family learning

The Hayesbrook School in Kent is an NSS that has a well-developed approach to boosting the confidence and self-esteem of its boys and engaging their families in their learning. NLE Debbie Coslett recognised that the progress of her FSM-eligible pupils was not as good as that of her non-FSM-eligible pupils, and that there was a gap that needed to be closed. Supporting the motivation and engagement of disadvantaged pupils was a priority.

The school's family learning programme has been successful in increasing attendance and engagement and improving relations with specific families. A group of 40 families was selected, including those of all the pupils eligible for FSM. The programme kicked off by inviting all the families to attend a Fulham FC game. This was followed by a mixture of learning sessions, outward-bound activities, and other visits funded by the school. There were two learning sessions on maths, English and ICT, at which pupils and their parents participated together to help the parents support their children in their learning. A visit organised to the science museum was the first trip to London that some families had ever made (a journey of only 35 minutes by train from Tonbridge).

The feedback from parents was very positive, especially about the way that the programme had developed the relationship with their children:

> "These are the best child–parent-based activities we have ever taken part in. We enjoyed working together and learning new things, meeting new people, building friendships and having new shared experiences."
>
> Parent

> "These events have allowed me to experience things with my son that we would otherwise not have been able to."
>
> Parent

The school also reported how engagement with the parents had improved, helping it "to address some of the invisible barriers around the school site". The programme was a way for the school's pastoral support managers to meet the parents and boys. The pastoral support managers had subsequently established strong links and were now the first point of contact at the school for many of these pupils and their families.

Finally, some NSSs made it an explicit part of the responsibilities of a member of the SLT to lead on support for FSM-eligible pupils, as this example illustrates:

> "We have just appointed a new assistant principal who has a role to tackle FSM under-achievement. She wanted it putting into her job description. I think if a school is taking this issue seriously then you might have expected it to be one of the senior leadership team's responsibilities. Her role is focused on targeted support and also supporting activities and trips."
>
> Secondary-school NLE

Challenges and barriers

NLEs also considered the barriers – both potential and actual – that might hold them back from making further and faster progress in closing gaps in their own schools. In addition to the difference in opinion (discussed above) as to whether there should be an explicit focus or not on FSM-eligible pupils, NLEs raised a range of other challenges.

The costs of resourcing intervention strategies was a key issue for many. Resources might be required for additional time for teaching assistants to support a small group with guided reading, or for a class teacher to provide pupils with one-to-one support. In an era of more constrained resources, there were concerns about school leaders' ability to fund the intervention packages needed. NLEs did however acknowledge that the introduction of the pupil premium from April 2011 would lead to a more transparent focus on funding and support for FSM-eligible pupils.

NLEs noted that school-based solutions to close gaps in attainment were only one of a series of local interventions that might be supporting particular families. The wider barriers faced by the local community and disadvantaged families required a multi-agency response and a co-ordinated set of interventions. This reflects the wider societal and policy context that is needed to address educational disadvantage that was referenced in section 1. One NLE, who had made considerable progress in closing gaps in his school, still noted that:

> "For some pupils there were barriers outside the school gates which it was very difficult for the school to address."

> NLE, primary school

NLEs were adept at overcoming the challenges connected with intervention programmes for targeted pupils. They identified the most common barriers to sustaining progress and achievement of FSM-eligible pupils as:

— maintaining individual pupil progress when the intervention ceases

— integrating small-group guided learning with whole-class teaching

— managing practical issues such as timetabling, space and resources for the additional learning time

We also considered as part of our fieldwork interviews the accountability challenges facing school leaders. These are now operating at three levels, in a way that is comparable with our three-part model for the level at which strategies are focused at school level.

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Figure 14: Accountability at three levels

Whole school improvement

Ensuring as many pupils as possible achieve key thresholds on which the school's performance is monitored:

— KS2 L4+/L5 English

— KS2 L4+/L5 maths

— KS2 L4+ in English and maths

— 5+ GCSEs grades A* C

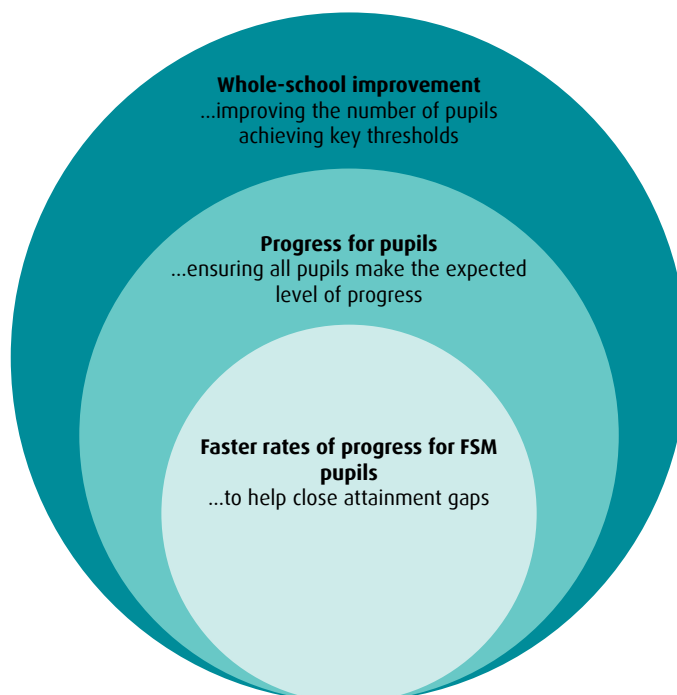— 5+ GCSEs grades A* C incl English and maths

— English baccalaureate

Progress for all pupils:

Ensuring that all pupils make at least the expected levels of progress across the relevant key stage:

— Percentage of pupils making expected levels of progress across key stages in English and maths

Faster rates of progress for FSM pupils:

Closing gaps in attainment between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers requires FSM pupils to make faster rates of progress across key stages

Whole-school improvement
...improving the number of pupils achieving key thresholds

Progress for pupils
...ensuring all pupils make the expected level of progress

Faster rates of progress for FSM pupils
...to help close attainment gaps

First, at whole-school level, pupils are measured at the key threshold indicators of the percentage of pupils achieving level 4 in English and maths at primary stage, and the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths at secondary stage.

Second, schools are monitored and held to account for the progress of all their pupils with the intention that all pupils make the expected levels of progress, irrespective of their starting point.

Third, school leaders will, linked to the introduction of the pupil premium, be specifically accountable for the progress of FSM students entitled to the premium, with the expectation that these pupils will make faster progress than their peers in order to close gaps in attainment. The government is also planning to introduce arrangements that will show the progress schools are making in relation to the performance of the lowest-attaining 20 per cent of pupils.

The interrelationship between these three overlapping and connected challenges poses interesting questions for school leaders: to what extent does a focus on one of these challenges act to the detriment of any of the others? For example, focusing on the threshold indicators in order to address a serious weakness might perversely mean putting in additional interventions for borderline pupils with the consequent risk of the gap with FSM-eligible pupils getting wider. If these multiple accountability measures pose a challenge in their own school, they pose a further challenge when working with a partner school, as we will see in the second part of this section.

Closing gaps in partner schools

This second part of this section analyses the work NLEs and their schools have undertaken with their partner schools. We explore some of the successful strategies that have been used to close gaps in attainment; the capacity that has been necessary; and the leadership skills and behaviours that have been employed. These issues are again described against the backdrop of our three-part model but are also set in the context of the strategies used in NSSs to close gaps in attainment.

Improvements need to be seen in the context of the point made in the preface that the role of NLEs and NSSs as originally envisaged has to date not included a specific remit to close gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers.

What our fieldwork evidence has shown – through both interviews with NLEs and visits to National Support Schools – is that the majority of school improvement work with partner schools is undertaken at the level of the first part of our model, ie whole-school strategies and interventions. We consider in the rest of this section and in section 4 why this might be the case, and look at which strategies tend to be employed, how the work of NLEs with partner schools is delivered and which of the targeted strategies are most commonly used.

Figure 15: Whole-school strategies, strategies for underperforming pupils and targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM

Whole-school strategies
...which benefit all pupils

Strategies for underperforming pupils
...which benefit FSM and other under achieving pupils

Targeted strategies for pupils eligible for FSM
...which specfically benefit FSM pupils

Whole-school strategies might include:

— high-quality teaching and learning, consistent across the school supported by strong CPD culture, observation/moderation and coaching

— engaging and relevant curriculum, personalised to pupil needs

— pupil-level tracking, assessment and monitoring

— quality assessment for learning

— effective reward, behaviour and attendance policies

— high-quality learning environment

— inclusive and positive school culture, underpinned by values and moral purpose that all pupils will achieve

— effective senior leadership team with ambition, vision, and high expectations of staff and pupils

Targeted strategies for underperforming and other pupils might include:

— early intervention and targeted learning interventions

— one-to-one support and other catch-up provision

— rigorous monitoring and evaluation of impact of targeted interventions

— extended services (eg. breakfast and after school clubs, including homework and study support) and multi-agency support

— targeted parental engagement, including raising aspirations and developing parenting skills

— in-school dedicated pastoral and wellbeing support and outreach

— developing confidence and self-esteem through pupil voice, empowering student mentors through sport, music, or other programmes, eg SEAL

Targeted strategies for FSM pupils might include:

— explicit school-level strategy to identify and support FSM-eligible pupils through targeted funding

— incentives and targeting of extended services and parental support

— subsidising school trips and other learning resources

— additional residential and summer camps

— interventions to manage key transitions between stages or between schools

— dedicated senior leadership champion, or lead worker to co-ordinate support programme

Sources
Deprivation and Education - the evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to KS4 (DCSF, Schools Analysis and Research Division, 2009)
Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling aginst the odds and Twelve outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds
(both Ofsted with Peter Matthews, 2009)
Isos research on narrowing the gap (internal report for DfE, 2010)
Discussions with NLEs 2011

How is engagement initiated between national support and partner schools?

All NLEs emphasised the importance of understanding the context and challenges of the partner schools with which they were working right from the start. Hill and Matthews (2010) have described the differences between unplanned engagements (in response to an emergency at a school which requires a rapid response) and planned engagements (allowing more time for brokerage) (Hill & Matthews, 2010:43).

Once it has been agreed that the NSS will work with a specific school, it is the role of the NLE to manage the initial engagement with the headteacher in that partner school (or with the acting head or deputy if there is no substantive headteacher in post). In carrying out an initial engagement with the school, the NLE will have available all published information about the school. This information will be supplemented by, for example, initial discussions with the school leaders in the partner school, learning walks and conversations with staff. Taken together, this information will provide the context for the initial audit or due diligence study carried out by the NLE which will then, in discussion with the school leaders of the partner school, form the basis for initial priorities for action between the two schools.

The engagement between the NSS and the partner school will normally be formalised through a contract or letter of engagement. This will set terms of reference for the NLE's work and the expected outcomes. If the contract specifies, for example, that the partner school is to be taken out of special measures or have its attainment raised beyond floor targets, this provides a very direct focus for the NLE's commission and work. This, rather than closing the gaps, will determine the measure by which the NLE's (normally time-limited) intervention will be judged and they will pursue this as the central focus.

As discussed above, focusing on the overall performance can and does provide support for FSM-eligible pupils, but that will not necessarily be the focus of the intervention strategies. The extent to which FSM-eligible pupils will be targeted tends to be seen through the prism of how the performance of this cohort is linked to and is impacting on the overall performance of the partner school.

What whole-school strategies were used?

For NSSs working with a partner school in an Ofsted category, in challenging circumstances, or with serious issues to address, there were several whole-school strategies that NLEs said tended to form the focus of immediate work[2]. NLEs most often cited the following key areas:

— **Improving the quality of teaching and learning** in the partner school: this often manifested itself as a need to ensure greater consistency in the quality of teaching across the school and to eradicate unsatisfactory teaching. This was very likely to be an early priority, especially if there were significant vacancies or absences that meant that lessons were being covered by temporary staff. The prevailing culture of the partner school often needed to be challenged with more frequent lesson observations, and increased scrutiny of lesson plans or marking as a way of improving quality.

— Improving (or perhaps introducing) systems to **monitor and track pupils' progress:** teachers' understanding of current levels of performance were likely to need support. Pupil-level learning objectives might need to be introduced, and meetings to review pupil progress would also often need to be established.

— Improving the **culture of the school and raising expectations** of what the pupils were able to achieve: low expectations and lack of ambition were likely to have gained a hold for a variety of reasons, for example, engrained perceptions of "what can we expect from these pupils?", complacency founded on tried and trusted methods and resistance to change, or a sense of failure from a recent inspection judgement. In the most challenging circumstances, the behaviour of students might also need to be improved urgently.

— Restructuring the senior leadership team and **improving leadership and management:** this was also likely to include establishing clear roles and responsibilities.

— Improving the **learning environment:** this is intended to raise morale and motivation for the children, as well as promoting the feeling of a learning community which took the wellbeing of its pupils seriously.

2   Compare, for example, the list in Hill and Matthews (2010:56) for a wider list of issues facing an NLE when working with a school in special measures.

Figure 16: examples of whole-school focus from NLEs (anonymised)

One primary-school NLE identified the key issue at the partner school as **expectations** for the children about what they could achieve, and what they were capable of achieving. The NLE had been surprised at how little the teachers understood about **assessment**. He was improving the accuracy of predictions to allow them to explain why a child was performing at this level and what then needed to be done about it. His key role was to increase expectations, and also work carefully with parents in addressing this.

A secondary-school NLE said that the significant improvements that had been achieved in the partner school were a greater **focus on pupils' learning** and a stronger focus on outcomes. Learning support staff had been used in different ways and in different intervention programmes. She thought that the focus in the school now really was about learning.

Another primary-school NLE said the issues at the partner school had been whole-school ones: **improving standards of behaviour** and the **quality of teaching**. They had employed a considerable number of additional teaching assistants. It was a small school and they had therefore been able to take action quickly to address staff performance management, with several staff moving on. They had addressed basic structures and processes, and improved expectations of pupil performance.

Another secondary-school NLE said:

"Is the leadership tired? That's what I assess. If the vision and energy are not there the school is unlikely to make progress on improvement generally or with FSM-eligible pupils."

The same NLE said of another school:

"Middle leadership support and development look like being the key factor and providing the means to get that consistent [high-quality] teaching and learning across the school."

A primary-school NLE said that one of the key issues at the partner school had been putting in place the systems and assessment measures to be able to **monitor the progress of individual pupils** as there was no history of assessment or progress meetings. She was now working at coaching and developing staff to ensure greater consistency of high-quality teaching across the school.

Another primary-school NLE said that focusing on the quality of teaching was essential and that improving the **quality of teaching and learning** across the partner schools was the most important single improvement that needed to be made.

As figure 16 demonstrates, the initial engagement for the NLE and NSS may be wide-ranging and get quickly down to the level of core systems and processes in the partner school. Examples of the strategies and interventions employed by a secondary-school NLE and her staff in supporting a partner school over six months were as follows:

— delivered RAISEonline training

— reintroduced performance management system

— reviewed all school policies

— revised the financial procedures and monitoring

— restructured support staff

— overhauled governance processes

— established consistent lesson observations

— introduced six-weekly tracking of pupils

— addressed a creaking ICT infrastructure

— reintroduced middle leadership training

— ensured regular SLT meetings with minutes

— looked at the progress of pupils every two weeks

— established twice-yearly consultations with parents

— ensured departmental reviews and self-evaluation

— introduced a Year 11 support programme

As the list above demonstrates, it might then be for a deputy head to get to grips with the quality of teaching and learning in the school in a practical way (Case study 5).

Case study 5: one deputy head's experience of improving teaching and learning in a secondary partner school

The deputy head, as part of the package of support from an NSS had been working for one day a week at the partner school, which had been given a notice to improve by Ofsted the previous September. She had been leading a teaching and learning group to try and change the culture around learning and demonstrating that "a quiet class is not always a class making progress".

She had used shared lesson observations, and began by working with the staff in the school who were delivering good lessons so that she could demonstrate that there were positive aspects to practice which could be cascaded to other staff. The Ofsted judgement had led to a sense from the staff that everything was ineffective and all staff were performing poorly, so she asked the group to identify the effective teaching that was happening, and produced two posters showing these points. She took the points to the SLT and also to pupils to test how realistic they were; the pupils' response was not that they didn't happen, but that "they wanted this to happen across all of their groups".

The deputy then facilitated discussions in the groups about how some of the barriers could be addressed. For example, several staff wanted to try some more active group work with particular groups of Year 9 students but were concerned because behaviour and energy levels had been poor due to many pupils arriving at school without having had breakfast. The deputy arranged for a free breakfast to be provided.

The deputy head reported that it had been a "massive learning opportunity for me". She feels she has managed to re-engage and reinvigorate the practice of some of the teachers. She can see how the group will change the ethos of learning and teaching in the school.

How is the work undertaken?

NLEs emphasised the nature of the partnership between their NSS and the partner school. They also made the point strongly, as recorded by Hill and Matthews (2010), that there were benefits to the NSS in undertaking the engagement. We shall return to this point in section 4, but it is worth reinforcing the value that NSS staff gain in terms of professional development from the opportunities for learning at practitioner level, and the chances to co-create new systems and processes that can be used in both schools.

Just as the context of the partner schools and challenges that they face differ, so the balance of work between the NLE and their NSS is different. For some NLEs, their role is confined to brokering the initial engagement, agreeing the parameters and priorities for the work, and then co-ordinating the support from their NSS. The majority of the work is then carried out through practitioner-to-practitioner engagement, perhaps through a deputy head, head of department or subject co-ordinator working directly with peers at the partner school. This might take the form of modelling lessons, joint lesson observations and planning, or introducing new systems and procedures. The role of the NLE is then, as one secondary-school NLE described it, "lead representative or strategic overseer".

For other engagements, the NLE might be at the forefront. He or she might have support from a deputy or assistant head, but the majority of the work is carried out by working individually with the senior team in the partner school. This might be in the form of leading staff in-service training, learning walks and joint lesson observations with the SLT, or working on systems and procedures.

In both cases there is often a focus on introducing new, or revising existing, processes and systems. These are often created to suit the individual circumstances of the partner schools; in several cases they were then brought back to the NSS being at least as good if not better than their existing approaches.

Case study 6: supporting a school in special measures

Chepping View Primary School is an NSS in Buckinghamshire which since September 2010 has been supporting The Watchetts Junior School in Surrey. Watchetts has an above-average numbers of pupils eligible for FSM (23 per cent). In September 2010 Ofsted confirmed that the school required special measures: pupil achievement, the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management were all judged inadequate. The head and the chair of governors both subsequently resigned.

The deputy head stayed on and worked with the NLE, Richard Millington, who became the executive headteacher until July 2011. He was joined by one of his own deputies, who became an associate head. The NLE and staff from Chepping View have been working with staff from Watchetts on a range of strategies to help improve the school and close gaps in attainment:

Whole-school level

— Introducing a personalised pupil assessment system that involves the leadership team sitting down with teachers in years 3, 4 and 5 three times a year and tracking each child's progress in reading, writing and maths. For Year 6 pupils the same process is followed but more frequently and is supported by pupils undertaking mock SATs. The results of the reviews are expressed in the form of targets for the next term (or, in the case of Year 6, the next days and weeks) and are shared with and signed off by parents.

— Deploying the deputy head and assistant head to take Year 6 pupils on a shared basis, so enabling the 47 Year 6 pupils to be divided into 3 smaller literacy and numeracy sets.

— Participating in a cross-curricula boys' writing project supported by the local authority that focuses on role play, drama, and other interactive tasks. This provides a framework for writing and encourages them to write about things that they have participated in and helped shape.

— Revising the school day to allow more time at the beginning of the day to focus on literacy and writing when pupils are at their freshest. School now starts at 8.50am with a 2-hour session before morning break and assemblies have moved to the afternoon.

— Increasing the range of engagements with parents, by for example individual parent-teacher meetings each term and the deputy head being accessible to hear and respond to parental concerns.

Targeted strategies for underperforming pupils

— Identifying children needing additional support as silver star pupils who are then closely supported and monitored.

— Supporting targeted pupils with extra RM Maths resource sessions[3] and lunchtime maths clubs.

— Focussing one-to-one support on individual pupils for short intensive periods to address specific learning needs where they may be stuck, by, for example, providing additional support from qualified teachers, or spending time in small groups with learning support assistants during the afternoon to work on writing skills.

— Tracking and evaluating the impact of interventions and progress on targets, including average points scores and mock SATs to identify pupil needs and the further progress required

— Analysing pupil data by cohort whether there are patterns in the progress of specific groups of pupils linked to SEN, EAL or FSM and assessing the extent to which it is closing gaps in attainment.

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3   RM Maths gives pupils 15 minutes of individualised maths support a day, exactly matched to their ability, with focus on core skills and mental maths. The time is spent on a computer answering mathematical questions.

The Watchetts Junior School is currently making satisfactory progress according to the most recent Ofsted monitoring visit, with progress in school improvement planning being 'good'. Ofsted noted that:

> Much support is being given by the [NSS] which has positively impacted on teaching and assessment... the senior leadership team has implemented swift actions to promote a culture of rapid improvement... attainment targets are challenging and data are being used well to target pupils requiring extra support. It is enabling school leaders to have a clear overview of the progress being made to improve pupil outcomes. A combination of peer observations which is often undertaken by the partner school, coaching and mentoring are having [a] good effect on improving teaching practice.

Ofsted monitoring letter, January 2011

How are targeted strategies helping to close gaps in partner schools?

As Case study 6 demonstrates, work to close gaps in attainment is also being undertaken at the second level of our model: targeted strategies for underperforming pupils. As was the case with whole-school strategies, a number of targeted strategies were mentioned by NLEs and their staff:

— The most commonly used strategies were **targeted learning interventions**. Once the NSS had put in place or helped revise the tracking and monitoring systems, worked with the partner school to review data about pupil progress, and identified pupils and groups who were not making the expected levels of progress, the two schools worked together to put in place appropriate learning interventions. For some partner schools, this would involve rigorous focus on their FSM-eligible pupils for the first time. Some interventions would be transferred from the support school, while others would be designed specifically for the needs of the pupils in the partner school. A provision map would be used to record interventions with specific pupils.

— In many cases, learning interventions would be delivered in the form of one-to-one or other small-group guided learning or **catch-up provision**. These might be delivered by newly recruited teaching assistants, or by class teachers leading small groups once the structure of lessons had been revised to involve more differentiated learning.

— There were efforts to develop **pupil confidence** and self-esteem through the targeted use of extra-curricular opportunities.

Figure 17: examples of targeted strategies from NLEs (anonymised)

One secondary-school NLE said she had used residential activities to support learning and had targeted FSM-eligible pupils to engage in these activities. Every class now had a profile with all the targeted groups identified, including FSM and SEN pupils and looked-after children. Against these groups, teachers identified the intervention within the class that was supporting these groups of pupils.

A primary-school NLE said that one difficulty had been getting teachers to track pupil progress when they hadn't been used to it, especially looking at the performance of different pupil groups: "This has been arduous and it will take several years to get right". The staff were having to learn how an analysis of gaps in performance was able to inform teaching and learning.

Another primary-school NLE said she had been less successful in engaging target groups of parents:

"It is often a long and drawn-out process and has taken us several years to get the engagement we have received from our parents at our own school. We have tried to engage parents in discussing the school's priorities but this has not yet worked as well as in our own school; we'll need to work hard on this."

She said that small steps such as establishing adult literacy and numeracy classes were likely to help with this.

A secondary-school NLE said it was very likely that once the significant systemic weaknesses in the partner school had been addressed, it was possible to use the data to dig down to the level of the **performance of particular pupil groups:** "So where you're engaged as an NLE for a significant length of time, then it's very possible to start targeting the performance of individual pupil groups".

Another primary-school NLE said she had introduced a **trajectory tool**, allowing them to tag individual pupils. She needed to introduce basic data and tracking systems. She believed her role had been to provide training for leaders and then help them to put the basic systems in place. One-to-one support had made a big difference.

A secondary-school NLE said that the partner school had been looking for some funding from the Youth Sport Trust to appoint some athletics mentors to **boost pupil self-esteem, motivation and confidence**. He was focusing the selection on their FSM-eligible pupils.

Case study 7: supporting a school in challenging circumstances

Swan Valley School is in an area of socio-economic deprivation in north Kent, with higher levels of pupils eligible for FSM than average (25 per cent). After a chequered past, the school is now improving well. It was part of the National Challenge, and over the last two years results have increased from 14 per cent to 34 per cent of pupils gaining five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths.

NLE Debbie Coslett has been working at the school, bringing with her a range of staff from **Hayesbrook School** including five curriculum leaders and the deputy head with responsibility for inclusion.

Some of the key strategies and interventions that have been successful in supporting the school to improve results include:

— a targeted strategy of one-to-one support for vulnerable pupils

— increased engagement with parents

— winning the confidence of pupils and identifying a target group to support and push hard to improve their results; other pupils saw the support this group was receiving and wanted to be part of the targeted group

— putting data and tracking systems in place to identify interventions (eg, specialist literacy support), and subsequently evaluating their impact as well as demonstrating to staff which pupils should be receiving targeted support

— establishing an SEN register ("it's no good being supportive if you don't know who you are supporting") and empowering the special educational needs co-ordinator by modelling good practice and getting her access to senior leaders and the necessary systems

— reinforcing a culture which would ask the questions "what can I do to help move things forward for these children?"

— establishing a process of departmental reviews to evaluate performance

Over the last six months, Hayesbrook has supported the appointment of a consultant senior leader to add capacity to the SLT, lead on elements of school development and act as a coach and mentor.

Both Hayesbrook and Swan Valley staff put the success of the engagement down to the honest and open relationship between the two schools, and the receptive response to the support from Swan Valley:

> "We would not have made the improvements that we have without the support of Hayesbrook and Debbie Coslett."

> Nigel Jones, headteacher, Swan Valley

From their experience, they noted three key lessons to ensure a successful engagement between the NLE and partner school:

— The relationship has to be trusting, and the partner school has to be receptive to the support: "Is there a willingness to utilise the support?" The NSS has to see itself as wanting to learn and also reflect on its own practice.

— There needs to be clarity about the role of the NLE: what precisely is their role, and what do they need from the partner school?

— The head of the partner school has to understand and see that the NLE has a job to do: "respectful recognition of what the NLE needs to do and an acceptance of the need for sharp, relentless questioning" (Nigel Jones, headteacher, Swan Valley).

The Ofsted monitoring visit in January 2011 reported that:

> 'Students' attainment has risen significantly at Swan Valley over the last few years as a result of the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and careful tracking and intervention, particularly in KS4. Staff morale is high and the students are very proud of their school.'

> Ofsted monitoring letter, January 2011

Different models of deployment

Thus far, we have set out a reasonably consistent framework for how NLEs are brokered and deployed, and a number of ways in which they work. In the former City Challenge areas, NLEs have tended to have been deployed more actively in support of schools in challenging circumstances, linked with the deployment of local leaders of education (LLEs) and local hubs of expertise. This has led to some initiatives that are more strategic in nature and focused on closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils not just in an individual school but across a cluster of schools. The results of this work could be very significant for the organisation and the deployment of NLEs, LLEs and their schools, and could also point to an alternative way of combating educational disadvantage.

Hill and Matthews noted (2010) how the Greater Manchester Challenge strategy had included:

— a range of programmes designed to support school leaders

— leadership opportunities and high-level coaching skills for senior leaders

— programmes for middle leaders ranging from school-to-school support skills to bespoke, school-led programmes

— team development programmes

— programmes for school business managers and a range of other specialisms

For the forthcoming academic year (2011/12), NLE Darran Lee from Mills Hill School in Oldham will be leading a closing the gap project with a group of schools utilizing the new National College leadership module (the framework for action). Darran will be working with a range of schools to test strategies which are effective in closing gaps in attainment. Across the former London Challenge area in 2011/12, NLE Robin Bosher will be leading a wide-ranging project supported by DfE funding to work with schools to close gaps in attainment. Robin will be working with a group of 12 facilitation schools (many of which are NSS themselves) across London, each of which will be working with about ten other schools who have gaps in attainment to close, or have recently made improvements in closing gaps.

This approach to the deployment of NLEs to support networks of schools working on the specific challenge of closing the gap is also found in the Black Country area.

Case study 8: influencing a network of schools working to close the gap

Richard Mason is an NLE working at **Milking Bank Primary School** in Dudley. Since September 2010 he has been working with the National College and Black Country Challenge to lead a project to help close FSM-related gaps in attainment in 16 schools across 4 local authorities in the Black Country region. The schools have been grouped into four clusters, with each cluster led by a local leader of education (LLE). Richard has been overseeing the overall project with support from the National College. The schools have been provided with £3,000 in additional funding to work on activities and solutions to close gaps between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers. Each school has a lead worker on the project and support from the headteacher.

Schools had been identified through existing gaps in attainment, although agreeing the final set of schools for intervention with the relevant local authority took some time, and not all schools originally identified were deemed by the local authorities to have the capacity to engage due to other demands.

For most schools, the barriers to learning for most of the FSM-eligible pupils targeted for support were similar:

'low self-esteem, lack of aspiration, poor language skills and lack of experiences outside school'

Cluster action plan, Black Country Challenge

What have the schools been doing?

— One cluster met together as a group of four schools, produced action plans and then began work. The LLE undertook learning visits to all four schools. There will subsequently be a meeting with all schools to review impact and learning.

— One school had observed its FSM-eligible pupils in numeracy lessons and realised that pupil responses in plenary sessions were often limited and sometimes incorrect. The school initiated some small-group work for its FSM-eligible pupils on building confidence and there is an improvement in terms of classroom responses. This has been done through five children in Year 4 and five children in Year 5 having small-group support once a week from the class teacher and a teaching assistant.

— One school has identified FSM-eligible boys in Year 5 as the target group, with the focus on writing. The project aimed to improve engagement and motivation, introduce ideas for ICT, raise standards through visual literacy materials and to use pupil questionnaires to understand the impact of work alongside improvements in pupils' progress.

— One school wanted to broaden the learning opportunities for pupils outside the classroom to support its literacy work, so organised a Year 4 visit to the Black Country museum with pupils funded for the visit.

What has been the added value of the NLE?

— Influence and getting the project established: contacting all the schools to get them involved. Schools were receptive, but not all had realised there was a specific gap for them to close

— Analysis: working as part of the team to make the initial selection of the schools

— Networking: launching the project and working across the network of schools, and working through the methodology

— Influence and challenge: reviewing the action plans and challenging some schools to be more ambitious about their activities and plans

— Reviewing and evaluation: reviewing the impact of the project and the work completed, and reviewing the evaluations

What is the potential impact?

The project will need to be properly evaluated once pupil results are received in summer 2011, although hopes are high about the impact of specific interventions on FSM-eligible pupils. All the schools were receptive to the additional support and funding, and the opportunity to focus on the issue. The NLE thought this was a good project and facilitated a strong focus on closing gaps in attainment between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. Crucially, it allowed Richard to have a broader influence across a wider range of schools, albeit in a less structured and more influencing and guiding capacity.

Challenges and barriers

Many of the challenges we explored earlier in this section which related to closing gaps in the NLEs' own schools apply equally here. There are of course additional barriers that NLEs cited to being able to close gaps in partner schools.

As we have seen, the focus of the commission might be on whole-school accountability rather than closing gaps. Another issue about NLE/NSS deployment was the fixed-term nature of the role: in some cases it was not long enough to allow time to dig down into the performance of different pupil groups.

One head reported how the engagement with her NLE had ended after seven months and been replaced with an inferior local authority improvement programme.

A number of NLEs pointed to the difficulty in finding sufficient additional capacity, especially teaching staff, to support the interventions. Linked to this was the necessity of ensuring strategic planning to enable the NSS to have the capacity to support another school. There was a risk of removing capacity from the NSS which was still needed: "at the same time as looking out you need to look in to build the support" said one secondary deputy head.

NLEs also pointed to the importance of context: of the partner school and the individual pupils. As one NLE said: "As NLEs we need to remember that what works in our own school does not always work as well in other schools. We will need to design new solutions". As with all school-to-school support, the attitude of both schools is vital. The partner school needs to be receptive to external support, and the NSS should see support work as a partnership in which, as one deputy head at a secondary school explained: "you have to go in knowing that you are working with professionals and will learn from them, not that you are imparting knowledge". Most NSSs were very clear about the potential benefits for them in terms of professional development, sharing and learning from practice, and "an affirmation that we are doing the right things". They were constantly aware of the need to earn credibility:

> "Leaders have to earn the right to make a contribution – a school from a leafy [suburb] cannot just descend and say 'This is what you should do'."

> NLE, secondary school

What are the leadership characteristics of NLEs who are working effectively to close gaps?

Finally in this section, we summarise some of the learning from our fieldwork about the key skills and behaviours that we encountered among NLEs who were closing gaps in their own NSSs, and also helping to close gaps in the schools they were supporting. Across a number of features, the characteristics exhibited by these highly effective school leaders in closing gaps were similar to the characteristics that made them outstanding headteachers in the first place.

There is a wide-ranging evidence-base relating to the characteristics of effective school leaders. For example, Matthews (2009) set out some of the qualities of outstanding headteachers as school leaders by looking at the work of NLEs:

Getting the best or most out of people was related to the philosophy, leadership approach and personal skills of the headteacher, including:

— **motivating**, encouraging, trusting and valuing colleagues to do well

— **modelling**, leading by example, especially in teaching

— **providing an opportunity** to undertake greater responsibility and undergo development programmes from the second year of teaching

— **promoting professional development** focused on teaching, learning and leadership, and keeping abreast of change; coaching is much in evidence

— **encouraging initiative** and allowing people – students and staff – to experiment, confident they will be supported

— **showing interest** and being generous with praise, encouragement and help in moving forward

— **knowing the names** of a very high proportion of learners; valuing and respecting them

— **being community-minded**, involving, consulting and being engaged within the local community

— **building teams** and empowering them

> Matthews, 2009:9

Most of these characteristics will be highly relevant for school leaders who are leading schools and staff to close gaps in attainment. We spoke with and visited a wide range of NLEs who were leading their schools in different ways, yet exhibited similar behaviours and skills in discussing their work to close gaps in attainment:

— drive and determination to make a difference for all pupils

— the ambition to transform the culture of the schools with which they were working

— leadership of teaching and learning

— the close personal interest they took in individual pupil progress

— regular monitoring and tracking of performance

— vision and strategic grip to select and sequence the most appropriate set of intervention strategies, and in some cases searching for quick wins to steady the ship

— knowledge and professional networks to engage a range of professionals to support families and raise expectations

— optimism and a drive not to give up even when the challenges appeared daunting

Figure 18 shows some of the most common behaviours we encountered with the skills discussed, together with some examples from our visits of the leadership actions most commonly taken in these areas.

Figure 18: examples of leadership attributes and skills required by NLEs to help close gaps in attainment

Key attributes

— A commitment to social justice and to improving life chances for children who are disadvantaged.

— A commitment to building honest and trusting relationship between senior leaders in NSS and partner schools.

— Commitment to learning from a partner school with a different socio economic context.

— Resilience in persevering with tough challenges.

— A willingness to adapt and learn from experience as projects develop.

Key skills

— Ability to analyse and quickly understand and prioritise the challenges and context facing the partner school.

— Ability to select and deploy the strategies appropriate to the context that will help to improve the systems, culture and practice in the partner school.

— Good judgement in understanding how to balance interventions focused on whole school, target groups and FSM pupils.

— Ability to use and track data and act on the implications down to individual pupil level.

— Ability to change culture and aspirations.

— Ability to communicate and engage pupils, staff and parents in a change process.

Key examples

— NLE reviews the pupil level performance data at the point of 'due diligence' to establish priorities.

— NLE and staff from the NSS model and coach effective interventions for targeted pupils.

— NLE and staff from NSS help to establish effective monitoring and tracking systems which allow the NLE to engage the school leaders in the partner school in discussion about the progress of the FSM pupils.

— NLE supports the improvement of effective relations and communications with parents.

— Coaching and mentoring from NLE and NSS staff help to re-energise the partner school's culture and moral purpose "reminding all of us why we became teachers in the first place" (deputy from a NSS).

In section 4 we analyse the key messages from our fieldwork about school-to-school support for closing gaps in attainment.

Lessons and recommendations

In this section we explore the lessons from our fieldwork interviews and discussions about what support is needed to help close gaps, the future drivers and incentives for school leaders to close gaps in attainment, and present some recommendations for future action.

What has been the approach of national leaders of education?

We know from our fieldwork evidence and data analysis that NLEs and their NSSs have the capacity to help close gaps in partner schools between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers. They share the sense of moral purpose in wanting to provide additional support to some of the country's most disadvantaged pupils and to help them to achieve at the level of their peers. All NLEs said this was an issue on which they felt they would be well placed to help:

> "We are the right group to be supporting this work."

> NLE, secondary school

Moreover, their claim has credibility: many NLEs have a track record of closing gaps in their own schools. Our data analysis of a sample of NSS in section 2 showed the improvements pupils eligible for FSM are making in these schools. They are working on whole-school strategies to close gaps, targeted strategies to address underperformance, and many of them have explicit strategies to support FSM-eligible pupils in their own schools. There is, though, a difference of view among NLEs on two points:

1. whether FSM is a sufficiently accurate benchmark for assessing deprivation and disadvantage, with some NSSs using other measures for their own internal monitoring purposes

2. whether a child's current performance, rather than FSM status, should be the trigger for providing extra support

We also know that closing the FSM gap in attainment in partner schools has not been something that as a group NLEs have previously been tasked with addressing. Despite this, and despite the different approaches, some NLEs are helping to close gaps in attainment in partner schools and in some cases this is happening faster than the national average.

However, what our research has also demonstrated is that NLEs working with a school in an Ofsted category or in challenging circumstances will be working in most cases at the level of whole-school strategies regardless of whether it involves a primary or secondary school. Why is this?

Firstly, and most importantly, these strategies will very often be needed to address the immediate priorities in the partner school because an external agency (usually Ofsted), the local authority, the governors or the NLE will have identified them as significant concerns. Improving the quality of teaching and learning, stabilising the senior leadership team, promoting a culture of high expectations and improving behaviour, and establishing pupil-level tracking and monitoring systems are all very likely to be some of the urgent tasks for the NLE and his or her staff from the NSS. Every school faces its own challenges according to its own context. But our research and previous work with NLEs (Hill & Matthews, 2010) suggests these are consistent priorities that occur again and again.

Secondly, as we explained in section 3, NLEs are helping the partner school to respond to the key accountability measures by which the latter will be judged. They will be helping to move a partner school out of an Ofsted category and/or will be building the capacity for the school to move above a key threshold target. These are the measures by which the successful progress of the partner school will be judged, and by which the value of the interventions from the NSS will be assessed. For some NLE engagements, this will be made explicit in the terms of the agreement and contract for the support.

Thirdly, it may be the case that data and pupil tracking information at the partner school do not allow the NSS, particularly in the initial phase of an NLE engagement, to make accurate judgements about the performance and progress of pupil groups or individual children. These systems often need to be radically improved, or even introduced in the first place. In other cases, NLEs may be able to identify different pupil groups, but so many of the pupils will be performing below expected levels that there will need to be whole-school levels of intervention.

As one NLE put it:

> "Unfortunately almost all the children at the school were under-achieving, not just one specific group."

<div align="right">NLE, primary school</div>

Section 3 demonstrated how the strategies that form the first level of our three-part model can help to close gaps in attainment. In other words, some NLEs are finding that whole-school strategies for improvement in partner schools do result in closing gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers, without necessarily targeting these FSM-eligible pupils for improvement.

This is not, however, happening in all cases. Whole-school interventions are sometimes insufficient on their own, particularly if efforts end up being focused on pupils who are on the level 4 or grade D or C borderline at KS2 and KS4 respectively at the expense of FSM-eligible pupils.

Where NLEs have been able to move beyond the whole-school approach to embrace the other parts of our three-part model, their work on closing gaps has generally been more effective, in the context of raising attainment for all pupils. Ideally, therefore, NLEs working with partner school should embrace all three dimensions of the model. The extent to which they are able to do so will depend on the commission they are given, the number and proportion of FSM-eligible pupils, the length of the contract with the partner school and the scale and depth of their engagement (for example, whether they are acting as consultants and advising another head or are assuming the role of executive head). Figure 16 describes how NLEs might organise their interventions with another school to embrace all three stages of the three-part model.

Where the due diligence report identifies that the school has a very significant proportion of FSM-eligible pupils and significant gaps to close, then in those circumstances phase 3 might come into play more immediately.

Key characteristics

In addition to the interventions and approaches taken by NLEs, it is also important to identify the leadership attributes and skills NLEs need for their work on closing gaps. We set out in section 3 in detail some examples of the attributes required, with evidence of the characteristics displayed by NLEs visited as part of the case studies.

Key characteristics displayed by national leaders of education committed to closing gaps in attainment are:

— ability to analyse, quickly understand and prioritise the challenges and context facing the partner school

— ability to select and deploy strategies appropriate to the context that will help to improve the systems, culture and practice in the partner school

— good judgement in understanding how to balance interventions focused on whole-school, target groups and FSM-eligible pupils

— ability to use and track data and act on the implications down to individual pupil level

— ability to change culture and aspirations

— ability to communicate and engage pupils, staff and parents in a change process

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Figure 19: A possible sequence for NLEs to address targeted as well as whole school improvements

Phase 1. In the first stages of engagement with another school, the audit and due diligence study should identify all areas of the partner school's performance that need addressing (including the performance of FSM-eligible pupils) and, for the reasons explained above, work is initially likely to focus on whole-school strategies.

Phase 2. Once the immediate priorities have been addressed, the school has been stabilised, and basic systems have been put in place, the work might focus on targeted strategies for a range of underperforming pupils, including FSM-eligible pupils.

Phase 3. Finally, with a potentially deeper and longer engagement that has identified the performance of the FSM-eligible pupils as a specific problem that needs to be addressed, the work could move to the third part of the model and specific interventions to support the needs of FSM-eligible pupils at the partner school be put in place.

Changes to the funding and accountability regime to close gaps

As we set out in section 1, the educational landscape in relation closing the attainment gap is changing. The introduction of the pupil premium from April 2011 has attached a level of funding at £430 per pupil for each FSM-eligible child at a school. There will be a separate budget line for this funding, so governors will be aware that there is dedicated funding to support their FSM-eligible pupils. For some schools this funding may simply replace grants and funding they previously received through other routes, but for other schools, particularly those with large numbers of FSM-eligible pupils, it may contribute to an increased budget. However, in all cases the pupil premium will provide a more transparent resource to help to close the FSM gap in attainment.

Accompanying the pupil premium there will be new accountability measures for the progress of FSM-eligible pupils, for example the extent to which the FSM-eligible pupils are making the expected levels of progress each year and across a key stage.

These policy changes will serve to sharpen the focus on the performance and progress of FSM-eligible pupils in all schools. They will therefore have an impact not just on the work of NLEs in their own NSSs but also on the nature of their tasks and contribution in working with partner schools.

In our recommendations below, we note how the work and contribution of NLEs could be strengthened in the area of closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils.

Recommendations

We make recommendations in five broad areas.

1.   How could selection, induction and learning opportunities support national leaders of education and raise the profile of closing the gap activities?

If closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils is going to become a more common part of an NLE's work in partner schools within an overall context of improving outcomes for all pupils, NLEs will need appropriate advice and support to undertake this role[1].

The National College already organises induction, learning and networking events for NLEs. These occasions could provide an opportunity to:

— emphasise the opportunities available to NLEs to close gaps in other schools while improving outcomes for all pupils

— share and consider examples of good practice, and learning

— discuss the barriers most commonly encountered

NLEs were keen to have these opportunities, with several saying that they would welcome the opportunity to hear more about practice in this area:

> "It would be good to have more opportunities through workshops and discussions to consider these issues with other NLEs and hear about practice that has worked particularly well in other partner schools."

NLE, secondary school

This message was also noted by Hill and Matthews (2010) when citing a 2010 National College survey (National College 2010d) which had asked existing NLEs where they would most value support. The top three support needs were:

— case studies and best practice

— access to specific school intervention strategies

— working effectively with parents and pupils from diverse backgrounds

The increasing number of heads who will be selected for the NLE programme might also provide an opportunity to include some criteria in the selection questions about the head's and their school's track record in closing gaps. These need not be pass or fail, but it might be appropriate in the collection of issues under, say, the quality of the school to look at how it had addressed its FSM gap and the school's strategies for supporting FSM-eligible pupils. This might bring into the programme heads and schools with a demonstrable record in closing gaps and supporting their FSM-eligible pupils, and also send a message to heads that this was one of the selection criteria for the NLE programme.

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1   See for example the National College's forthcoming training modules on leadership for closing the gap arising from Denis Mongon's framework for action (Mongon & Chapman, 2011).

Recommendation 1:

The National College should include information about closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils in NLE induction sessions and consider how NLEs can learn from each other about good practice in this area at network or other events. Consider how in selecting NLEs, the criteria might include questions about the track record in closing gaps and work with FSM-eligible pupils.

## 2.	How can we develop a stronger evidence-base of practice indicating which strategies have the greatest impact in which contexts in closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils, and the skills needed by NLEs to support partner schools in implementing them?

We tested our three-part model with the wide range of NLEs with whom we engaged during our fieldwork. Nearly all found it a helpful summary and approach. Within the different levels of the models, there were favoured strategies that arose in most conversations. However, we were seeking to learn from NLEs about the ways in which they have approached their work with other schools to improve the attainment of targeted pupils within the context of improving achievement for all. It was not always clear whether the strategies being pursued by NLEs in partner schools might have a greater and more rapid impact in closing the gap when they were specifically applied to closing the gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. Nor did NLEs always have the data or evidence to underpin their strategies. Are there individual strategies that are particularly powerful when applied in a school-to-school setting specifically to help to close gaps in attainment? What are the most appropriate leadership skills needed by NLEs to support them?

Action-research model

We believe there would be merit in undertaking an action-research project to test gap-closing strategies. The research could be based on a small number of NLEs who would be interested in undertaking work in partner schools which might lead to a closing of the attainment gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. This could be at both KS2 and KS4. The NLEs would be already working with, or be matched with, schools where there is a significant FSM gap. The action research would be based on the 'plan, do, study, act' model which is well established and has proved effective in both an educational and wider public service context.

In such an action-research model, NLEs would meet on a half-termly or termly basis for the following actions:

— They would plan their activities and interventions, selecting from an appropriate suite of interventions (the suite of interventions could be updated during the life of the action research), with the intention of closing gaps. This planning would include identifying appropriate monitoring or progress measures using, for example, tracking data to demonstrate impact and understand how schools use their data to evaluate what works.

— The focus would be on doing, ie putting their selected interventions into effect.

— Study and review the operation and impact of the selected interventions would take place at the meeting. This would be achieved though a mixture of schools collating and analysing their own monitoring, and then telephone discussions, face-to-face interviews and workshops bringing together participating schools. At appropriate points, depending on the assessment cycles within the school, analysis could be undertaken about the impact on FSM-eligible pupils and their performance relative to their peers.

— NLEs would act on the results of their review and plan the next cycle of work.

This approach would start to build a school-led evidence-base for effective interventions. Given the emerging role of teaching schools it might also be desirable and advisable to involve at least one of the teaching schools designated in the first round in the action-research process.

At the opening of this report we said that our intention was to offer a contribution to the current debate about how schools can work effectively with other schools to reduce social inequality and ensure all pupils achieve their potential regardless of their home background. We believe this action research could add further evidence to this debate.

Recommendation 2:

The National College should establish an action-research project to test a range of strategies to be used by schools when supporting a partner school to close FSM attainment gaps and the leadership skills needed to support them.

3.   Could NLEs be deployed more strategically to close gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils?

We encountered a range of methods for deploying NLEs and their NSSs. This is natural for a school-led support system that is operating a range of models for the work that NLEs might undertake in any one school. Nevertheless, we were left with the question as to whether the deployment of NLEs and NSSs with the strongest track record in closing gaps in their own school makes maximum use of their skills, capacity and expertise in working with partner schools that need support to close their own gaps in attainment.

We were impressed by the models that had been developed in the City Challenge areas for NLEs to work with a cluster of schools on particular issues, including closing gaps in attainment. Although City Challenge programmes have now ended we consider that as part of creating a self-sustaining school system there is scope to learn from the approach that was adopted.

We suggest that the National College might wish to help broker a more strategic deployment and use of the skills and expertise of NLEs and LLEs with a strong record in closing attainment gaps in order to maximise their impact across local clusters of schools. Again this approach fits with the emerging teaching school concept and such initiatives could in due course be co-ordinated by teaching schools as part of their broader role in school-to-school support and school improvement across the system.

There might also be a role for local authorities in recognising the particular skills some NLEs bring to their work with other schools, and facilitating the connection between schools. There might also be an opportunity, as the number of NLEs and LLEs increase, to consider developing local or regional hubs of good practice (linked to teaching schools) on closing FSM attainment gaps and so providing a resource for using pupil premium funding effectively.

Recommendation 3:

Consider the strategic deployment of NSSs with strong track records in closing gaps in attainment for FSM-eligible pupils to facilitate their engagement with clusters of local schools requiring support on this issue and to act as local or regional hubs of good practice.

4.   How could the process of commissioning NLEs better support a focus on closing gaps in attainment between FSM-eligible and other pupils? How can NLEs better manage the competing demands of the accountability system?

Currently the commissioning of NLEs to support schools and the associated documentation does not generally focus on closing gaps in attainment unless the issue has been particularly highlighted in an Ofsted inspection report, or FSM-eligible pupils account for a significant proportion of the pupils at a school. It is certainly the case that one of the strengths of the NLE programme hitherto has been that it has avoided fettering the discretion of NLEs in determining the priorities for their engagements, and has not sought to prescribe areas for them to scrutinise. It would clearly not be appropriate to propose that all NSS-partner school engagements should focus on closing gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. However, given the changes in the funding and accountability framework, it might be appropriate to do this where the audit or due diligence process identifies a significant gap in the performance of FSM-eligible pupils relative to other pupils and/or there is no clear strategy for using pupil premium funding effectively or reporting the outcomes to parents.

In addition, the government has made significant changes to the accountability system for schools and is proposing to introduce a much wider range of measures on which schools will be assessed. These include not only performance in the basics (ie, English and mathematics) but the progress of all pupils, progress in other subjects (as measured, for example by the English baccalaureate), the progress of FSM-eligible pupils and the progress of the bottom 20 per cent of pupils. In short, the scorecard is more complex.

In theory this might provide NLEs with the mandate to pursue a more balanced approach in their work with partner schools; there should be no reason why they might focus on pupils at level or grade boundaries to the detriment of FSM-eligible pupils. However, in practice schools below the floor targets or in an Ofsted category are still likely to be judged by whole-school performance statistics, and it will be interesting to see whether NLEs will perceive any real change in the nature of the incentives.

Recommendation 4:

Consider how the commissioning of NLEs might strengthen a focus on closing gaps by ensuring that where due diligence identifies this as an issue, NLE engagements include measures relating to closing the FSM gap in attainment.

Recommendation 5:

The National College should monitor the experience of NLEs working with partner schools as the new accountability framework is implemented to gauge the impact of the incentives (intended and otherwise) on work related to closing FSM attainment gaps.

5. How can NLEs better relate their education-based work on closing gaps in attainment to other relevant government programmes and initiatives?

As section 1 highlighted, closing gaps in attainment for pupils who are materially deprived is a complex challenge. Although there is much schools can and must do, there are also wider determinants that come into play. The government has recognised this with its early intervention programmes for two-year olds, the support for early years education, and the child poverty strategy (HM Government, 2011a). In addition there are agencies at a local level that are often working or supporting the families known to schools as presenting the greatest challenge in terms of their children's attendance, behaviour and attainment.

The local public service landscape is changing with the proposals to create GP commissioning consortia and the introduction of local police commissioners. These changes could provide new opportunities for schools leaders in general and NLEs and LLEs in particular to find new ways of collaborating with local agencies to address the wider causes of deprivation and poor attainment.

Two practical steps could help NLEs to take advantage of these changes:

1. explaining the changes in the public service landscape and summarising the other programmes that may be operating in their locality that could or should be supporting pupils eligible for FSM and their families

2. using one of the action-research sets to test ways of effectively working with other agencies to close gaps in attainment, or in other words to find out how best to use broader collaboration to help deliver improved educational outcomes for the most socio-economically deprived pupils

Recommendation 6:

Consider steps to link the work of NLEs in closing FSM attainment gaps with other government programmes and measures aimed at reducing disadvantage and promoting social mobility.

Case studies

Charles Dickens Primary School

Charles Dickens Primary School is in the inner London borough of Southwark with 320 pupils on roll aged between 3 and 11. It serves a socially and ethnically mixed community with some areas of very high levels of social deprivation. Around 40 per cent of the pupils are eligible for FSM. A high proportion of pupils speak English as an additional language (EAL) and over 35 languages are spoken throughout the school. The KS1 to KS2 contextual value-added (CVA) score in 2010 was 101.0. Teresa de Quincey has been headteacher at the school for almost 5 years, and has been an NLE for about 18 months. In 2009, Ofsted reported:

> 'From their often very low starting point, pupils make excellent progress. The school is to be congratulated for helping pupils to do so well. This is especially so considering the pupils' sometimes complex needs, diverse backgrounds and the fact that high numbers of pupils join and leave the school throughout the school year. All groups of learners achieve well. Pupils in receipt of free school meals... do exceptionally well.'

Charles Dickens Primary School inspection report, 2009

Teresa de Quincey said that to close gaps in attainment, a priority was having high-quality teaching. She knew that the school's "regular offer needs to be consistently good". The intervention programme was based on a cycle of pupil reviews. Senior leaders analysed pupil progress data, then met the class teachers and focused discussion on pupils who were not progressing as expected. Having identified appropriate interventions, these interventions were then mapped. This was in addition to regular classroom teaching rather than withdrawing pupils (via assembly groups, lunch groups, after-school sessions and one-to-one support). Evaluation of the interventions was an important part of the cycle through analysis of the progress data on individual pupils, learning walks and talking to pupils.

The importance of teaching assistants

The intervention maps were distributed to all staff including their teaching assistants (TAs). "Everyone in the school feels very responsible for pupils' progress in getting to level 4," says Teresa. The school knows the impact targeted support can have in closing gaps, and that "interventions are only as good as the staff that deliver them". The school has therefore developed a wide-ranging and ambitious professional development programme for its "skilled and passionate" group of TAs.

The TAs are managed and developed by one of the Year 5/Year 6 teachers, Helen Roberts, and she had a half-day release time each week for this role. The opportunity to lead on this aspect of school improvement is seen as excellent training for an aspiring school leader. Charles Dickens School has focused on three key aspects as part of a three-year change programme.

The first aspect has been a **comprehensive professional development programme** run through fortnightly training sessions. The topics for the meetings ranged broadly and included:

— looking at how the relationship is working between teacher and TA with time to reflect on the key elements of the relationship in terms of the teaching of guided groups, planning for interventions and the learning environment

— good practice in recording information about guided groups in diaries

— reviewing planning and assessment

- looking at what makes an outstanding lesson and running effective guided groups

- sharing examples of marking and giving feedback

- detailed strategies for improving literacy, for example storytelling

The second aspect has been **establishing observations as routine practice**. TAs were asked to observe their partner teacher working with a guided group on literacy and numeracy, and then to observe a different teacher. TAs then observed each other with guided groups, and would be observed by Helen as part of their end-of-year review. TAs were asked to take notes and give feedback. The process emphasised the use of positive phrases in feedback, and used a feedback sheet with lots of space for things they liked and one line for one thing to improve. They have also addressed some of the understandable concerns about being observed by calling the observations 'coming to see' sessions.

The third aspect has been **a detailed performance management contract** which included target pupils, their current levels of attainment and their expected rates of progress by the end of the year. TAs kept detailed observation diaries, and these, together with the evidence from observations, would inform their performance management and pay discussions.

In terms of impact, the headline figures for the attainment of pupils in 2010 speak for themselves: 100 per cent of pupils reaching level 4 or above in both English and maths. In terms of the development of TAs, the school was aware that this was a three-year change programme. However there had already been practical improvements, for example in a proposal for Year 5 and Year 6 TAs to spend more time in collaborative planning activity. Pupil progress data said there was a greater impact from small-group teaching. Feedback from the TAs themselves also suggested they were feeling empowered to direct their own development.

East Barnet School

East Barnet School is an 11-18 national support school in the outer London borough of Barnet. There are approximately 1,250 pupils on roll, of which 12 per cent are eligible for FSM, and a greater than usual number with EAL. The KS2 to KS4 CVA score in 2010 was 1002.9, with 69 per cent of pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths. Nick Christou has been headteacher at the school for 13 years, and has been an NLE since 2006. In 2007, Ofsted reported:

'The enactment of the school's vision to ensure that every child really matters, results in outstanding spiritual, social, moral and cultural development of the students... Senior leaders have excellent links with external agencies to support individual students' needs. This together with a close working relationship with parents provides a strong pastoral support network which ensures that all students, including the most vulnerable, receive outstanding advice and guidance.'

East Barnet School inspection report, 2007

The East Barnet approach is to identify and target under-achievement as the starting point for the school's strategy in tackling disadvantage. Once under-achieving students have been identified, the school looks at the rest of the data to plan its strategies. Often students without adequate home support are disadvantaged since they are less able to undertake independent learning at home and have lower levels of parental engagement generally in their education. Within the overall context of support for under-achieving and vulnerable pupils, East Barnet has put the emphasis on pastoral support and systems to engage parents.

Applying a whole-school pastoral system

The school's pastoral system provides the context for the relationship with students and parents or carers. The school is open and accessible to students from 7am to 7pm. After school there is a range of extra-curricular clubs (including some run by students for students) as well as homework and coursework clubs. The deputy head (who is a trained counsellor) has the overall lead responsibility for pastoral support and is supported by an attendance officer, community officer, two counsellors, an art therapist, a personalised learning centre and the rest of the leadership team, who are involved in mentoring Year 11 students. The two counsellors provide sessions and support for students. This enables much more immediate advice and support to be provided without needing to wait for a referral to another agency or provider.

The pastoral system operates within the context of three other key policies:

— promoting a high-profile 'I want to learn' strategy which includes a focus on three Es: enrichment, enhancement and extension and creating an enjoyable learning experience

— a clear reward (including credits and awards) and sanctions system that is communicated to student and parents

— developing students' sense of pride in the school by involving them in its design and life

NLE Nick Christou said: "Students' pride in the school can pull in parents to take more of an interest in the school and what their child is doing."

Engaging parents

The programme to engage hard-to-reach parents begins with the relationship with all parents which is founded on a home-school agreement, a prompt response to all phone calls from parents, fortnightly online communications with all parents, and an active PTA. Parents' evenings are staggered over two days so that parents have enough time to talk to teachers; and parents are asked for their views on the value of these sessions and other open evenings.

The school runs parent information sessions two or three times a term on issues such as better co-operation and communication with teenagers, internet security and cyber-bullying. The school has also run sessions for parents of Year 7 and Year 8 students: the group met every Thursday for some 18 months and sometimes students attended as well. A lot of the issues discussed were not school related but the sessions helped to build trust between parents and the school. This trust was then disseminated around the community. Nick said: "The grapevine passes around the supportive attitude we are adopting".

This positive approach (including visiting families at home) sits alongside a policy of being firm, when justified, for example, by immediately contacting parents when a student is late or absent, imposing fines for non-attendance and not allowing students just to slip off the radar.

The overall approach to relationships with parents provides the basis for the school's approach of assertive mentoring (or tough love) towards students who are struggling with homework and coursework. Parents are contacted with a view to agreeing to their child spending time after school catching up on schoolwork or addressing their particular learning needs via coursework and homework clubs.

The community officer will investigate bad behaviour or other serious incidents involving students. Parents are informed on the day of any serious action taken against a student. If a student is excluded for a fixed period, he or she will be sent home with learning tasks, including online learning, to complete. Exclusion is not seen as punitive but part of a reform process for students, who, supported by their parents, are expected to be ready to engage with learning on the first day back after an exclusion. Where behaviour is linked to problems at home, the school may provide a referral to another service or agency such as relationship counselling or mental health services.

The school has also organised restorative justice sessions to deal with situations where disputes between families were affecting students and the life of the school. These sessions have been effective and have resulted in families shaking hands and asking for each others' telephone numbers. Staff at the school have been trained in how to conduct these sessions and they in turn have provided training for local primary schools.

Chepping View Primary School and The Watchetts Junior School

Chepping View Primary School is an NSS in Buckinghamshire. It is a 4-11 community school with about 415 pupils on roll. The school serves an area of significant deprivation and about 20 per cent of its pupils are eligible for FSM. In 2010, the school's CVA score between KS1 and KS2 was 101.4. Richard Millington has been a headteacher for 23 years and an NLE since 2006.

Richard believed that the school had been successful in closing its attainment gaps due to the rigorous use of pupil-level data and tracking, and very high-quality teaching and learning consistently applied. Senior leaders identified which pupils were not making appropriate levels of progress and tracked their improvements. The school put in place a clear set of interventions appropriate to the needs of these children and then monitored the outcomes and reviewed whether they had been successful. Pupils eligible for FSM are a named group on analyses and form lists, and senior leaders review their progress alongside the performance of different ethnic groups across the school.

As part of its work as an NSS, in September 2010 Chepping View began supporting The Watchetts Junior School.

The Watchetts Junior School is a 7-11 community school in Surrey with about 160 pupils on roll. The school serves a socially disadvantaged area. In 2010, 23 per cent of the pupils were entitled to FSM. The school's KS1 to KS2 CVA score has declined from 100.3 (2007) to 98.9 (2009). In June 2010 the school was inspected and Ofsted subsequently confirmed it required special measures: pupil achievement, the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management were all judged to be inadequate. The head and the chair of governors both resigned.

Since September 2010, Richard Millington has been executive headteacher at The Watchetts, supported by one of Chepping View's deputy heads. Despite the distance between the two schools (two hours by car), Watchetts staff have also been able to benefit from coaching and training support from Chepping View colleagues. The deputy head of Watchetts has remained in post and in September 2011 will become the acting head with staff from Chepping View moving to providing a support rather than a leadership role.

Richard Millington and staff from Chepping View have been working with staff from The Watchetts Junior School on a range of strategies to help improve the school and close gaps in attainment.

At whole-school level

— Introducing a personalised pupil assessment system that involves the leadership team sitting down with teachers in years 3, 4 and 5 three times a year and tracking each child's progress in reading, writing and maths. For Year 6 pupils the same process is followed but more frequently and is supported by pupils undertaking mock SATs. The results of the reviews are expressed in the form of targets for the next term (or, in the case of Year 6, the next days and weeks) and are shared with and signed off by parents.

— Deploying the deputy head and assistant head to take Year 6 pupils on a shared basis, so enabling the 47 Year 6 pupils to be divided into 3 smaller literacy and numeracy sets.

— Participating in a cross-curricula boys' writing project supported by the local authority that focuses on role play, drama, and other interactive tasks. This provides a framework for writing and encourages them to write about things that they have participated in and helped shape.

— Revising the school day to allow more time at the beginning of the day to focus on literacy and writing when pupils are at their freshest. School now starts at 8.50am with a 2-hour session before morning break and assemblies have moved to the afternoon.

— Increasing the range of engagement with parents, by for example individual parent teacher meetings each term and the deputy head being accessible to hear and respond to parental concerns.

Targeted strategies for underperforming pupils

— Identifying children needing additional support as silver star pupils who are then closely supported and monitored.

— Supporting targeted pupils with extra RM Maths resource sessions[1] and lunchtime maths clubs.

— Focussing one-to-one support on individual pupils for short intensive periods to address specific learning needs where they may be stuck, by, for example, providing additional support from qualified teachers, or spending time in small groups with learning support assistants during the afternoon to work on writing skills.

— Tracking and evaluating the impact of interventions and progress on targets, including average points scores and mock SATs to identify pupil needs and the further progress required.

— Analysing pupil data by cohort whether there are patterns in the progress of specific groups of pupils linked to SEN, EAL or FSM and assessing the extent to which it is closing gaps in attainment.

The Watchetts Junior School is currently making satisfactory progress according to the most recent Ofsted monitoring visit, with progress in school improvement planning being judged 'good'. Ofsted noted that:

'Much support is being given by the partner school which has positively impacted on teaching and assessment… the senior leadership team has implemented swift actions to promote a culture of rapid improvement… attainment targets are challenging and data are being used well to target pupils requiring extra support. It is enabling school leaders to have a clear overview of the progress being made to improve pupil outcomes. A combination of peer observations which is often undertaken by the partner school, coaching and mentoring are having good effect on improving teaching practice'

Ofsted monitoring letter, January 2011

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1   RM Maths gives pupils 15 minutes of individualised maths support a day, exactly matched to their ability, with focus on core skills and mental maths. The time is spent on a computer answering mathematical questions.

Walthamstow School for Girls

Walthamstow School for Girls is an 11-16 community school in the outer London borough of Waltham Forest with 900 girls on roll. It serves a socially and economically deprived area. Approximately 22 per cent of the pupils are eligible for FSM and around half the pupils have EAL. The KS2 to KS4 CVA score in 2010 was 1045.0. Rachel Macfarlane has been headteacher at the school for seven years, and has been an NLE for four. In 2007, Ofsted reported:

'Few schools in similar contexts do as well as this school to prepare students so well for life… although the attainment of students on entry to the school is below the national average, their standards are very high when they leave. Students obtain significantly better examination results than would be predicted based on their prior attainment. This positive picture is the case for all groups of students represented in the school. '

Walthamstow School for Girls inspection report, 2007

Rachel Macfarlane's introduction to the school on its website sets the tone:

"We believe that [our success] is achieved through a combination of high expectations, inspirational teaching and learning experiences, equipping the girls with the skills to become confident and independent learners, strong pastoral support and regular monitoring, target-setting and dialogue with students and parents/carers. In terms of value added measures, the school is consistently in the top 5 per cent of all schools nationally."

Closing gaps in attainment has become a significant priority for the school. To inform the priorities for improvement, the school has carried out a detailed self-audit of FSM-related gaps, looking at the prior attainment, progress and participation of their FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils. Rachel described the school as having:

"… a great culture in terms of piloting activities, taking risks and then evaluating performance. All staff were keen to make progress on this issue, and we made sure that colleagues did not feel that anything we did would stigmatise our FSM pupils in any way."

The audit has shown that although FSM-eligible pupils make very good progress and have a higher CVA score than non-FSM-eligible pupils, there is still a gap in Year 11 attainment. The school carried out a rigorous and comprehensive review of many data sets including performance and progress data; attendance data; behaviour interventions; SEN and gifted and talented (G&T) representation; participation in extra-curricular activities, including music and arts; destinations of Year 11 leavers; and student positions of responsibility across the school. The purpose was to highlight any areas where there was a significant gap between FSM and non-FSM performance or involvement. The SLT was fully on board with the approach, and Rachel said:

"This is a really great school in that it is not afraid of this type of forensic analysis"

Key messages from the analysis, included the following:

— There were gaps between FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils in their attendance levels, rates of internal fixed-term exclusions, and participation in some extra-curricular activities.

— There were no gaps between FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils in representation on the G&T register, positions of responsibility across the school, or participation in extended school activities.

— The SLT looked at the attainment gap on entry in Year 7 (through KS2 test scores and their own cognitive ability test (CAT) scores) between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. Although this differed across different cohorts, it was often quite significant

Rachel commented:

"We have decided that although our FSM pupils make at least as much progress as our non-FSM pupils, five years is not enough time to close the gap that they arrive with completely "

She concluded that the school needed to work with the three main feeder primaries that provide around 60 per cent of pupils to try and address this attainment gap earlier.

The exercise had also collected examples of existing good practice to support, motivate, and raise the aspirations of FSM-eligible pupils across the school, including:

— highlighting FSM-eligible pupils in teaching staff plans and on class lists, and also for lesson observations to monitor levels of engagement

— analysing student results by looking at the performance of FSM and non-FSM groups, including termly KS3 data collection, allowing student progress leaders to identify gaps and putting appropriate intervention strategies in place for FSM-eligible students

— making support for FSM-eligible students a priority in the school improvement plan

— raising the profile of FSM-eligible students by beginning staff meetings with a presentation of the images of FSM-eligible students in a particular year group

— providing additional resources (for example loans of ICT equipment or text books), subsidising trips or offering lower cost music lessons for FSM-eligible pupils

— targeting FSM-eligible students for Aim Higher visits to raise aspirations for further and higher education

The review that the school has undertaken has also resulted in a series of further proposed actions that will be taken to help to close gaps in the future, including the following:

— To respond to the Year 7 attainment gap, the school has decided to appoint two additional maths teachers to work with its three main feeder primary schools and Year 7 groups. Their role will be to support whole-class teaching, develop practice, deliver one-to-one support and small-group interventions, deliver after-school or Saturday sessions, and train and coach staff across the four schools. Accountability and line management will be held with a member of Walthamstow's maths faculty.

— The school is ensuring faculties consider the type of home learning that is set when reviewing policies to ensure FSM-eligible students are not disadvantaged in terms of access to resources or use of computers.

— The school is investigating further with middle leaders the reasons behind some of the other FSM gaps, for example, in internal exclusions and participation in extra-curricular activities.

The Hayesbrook School and Swan Valley School

The Hayesbrook School is an NSS in Kent. It is an 11-18 boys (mixed sixth form) non-selective school with just over 900 boys on roll. As an outstanding school, it converted to academy status in December 2010. Around a third of secondary students in the area go to selective grammar schools. The majority of Hayesbrook boys come from white working class families, with nine per cent eligible for FSM, and a higher than average proportion of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school's KS2 to KS4 CVA score in 2010 was 1026.0. Debbie Coslett has been executive headteacher for two years (and joint headteacher and executive headteacher for six years before that) and became an NLE in 2006. In 2009, Ofsted reported:

> 'Students' achievement and well-being is central to the supportive ethos of the school and improvement planning. Consequently, students make excellent progress overall from Key Stage 2 to 4 and good progress in the sixth form. They have positive attitudes to school, value learning and are proud of their achievements... Comprehensive systems for tracking students' progress ensure underachievement is identified quickly and addressed by effective, personalised interventions... Effective early intervention, including specialist teaching, prevents problems becoming established as barriers to learning.'

Ofsted survey report 2009

Debbie recognised that the progress of her FSM-eligible pupils was not as good as that of her non-FSM-eligible pupils, and that there was a gap that needed to be closed. Supporting the motivation and engagement of disadvantaged pupils and raising their self-esteem were priorities. The school has an well-used reward system (for example, leading to privileged access to the newly laid Astroturf pitch), has high expectations for all pupils and uses role models widely. Vertical tutor groups allow older pupils to mentor younger ones. Boys eligible for FSM are flagged in mark books and on analyses, which include RAG ratings of progress against Fischer Family Trust (FFT) targets, whether pupils are subject to early interventions, and prior attainment scores.

The school's family learning programme has been successful in increasing attendance, engagement, and relations with specific families. A group of 40 families was selected, including those of all the pupils eligible for FSM. The programme kicked off by inviting all the families to attend a Fulham FC game. This was followed by a mixture of learning sessions, outward-bound activities, and other visits funded by the school. There were two learning sessions on maths, English and ICT, at which pupils and their parents participated together to help parents support their children in their learning. A visit to the science museum was the first trip to London that some families had ever made (a journey of 35 minutes by train from Tonbridge).

The feedback from parents was very positive, especially about the way that the programme had developed the relationship with their children:

> "These are the best child–parent-based activities we have ever taken part in. We enjoyed working together and learning new things, meeting new people, building friendships and having new shared experiences."

Parent

> "These events have allowed me to experience things with my son that we would otherwise not have been able to."

Parent

The school also reported how the engagement with the parents had improved, helping it "to address some of the invisible barriers around the school site". The programme was a way for the school's pastoral support managers to meet the parents and pupils together. The pastoral support managers had subsequently established strong links and were now the first point of contact at the school for many of these pupils.

As part of its work as an NSS, Hayesbrook School has been supporting Swan Valley School.

Swan Valley School is an 11-16 community school in an area of socio-economic deprivation in north Kent, with higher levels of pupils eligible for FSM than average (25 per cent). There are just over 600 pupils currently on roll. After a chequered past, the school is now improving. It was part of the National Challenge. Current headteacher Nigel Jones took up post in 2003. In 2009 Swan Valley was inspected by Ofsted and graded 'satisfactory'. Over the last two years, results have increased from 14 per cent to 34 per cent of pupils gaining 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths and a KS2 to KS4 CVA score in 2010 of 1009.0 – the best-ever results. Pupils eligible for FSM currently make faster progress between KS2 and KS4 than their peers.

Debbie Coslett has been working at the school, bringing with her a range of staff from Hayesbrook School. The staff include five curriculum leaders, and the deputy head with responsibility for inclusion.

Some of the key strategies and interventions that have been successful in supporting the school to improve results include:

— a targeted strategy of one-to-one support for vulnerable pupils and increased engagement with parents

— winning the confidence of pupils and identifying a target group to support and push hard to improve their results; other pupils saw the support this group was receiving and wanted to be part of the targeted group

— putting data and tracking systems in place to identify interventions (eg, specialist literacy support), and subsequently evaluating their impact

— going back to the data to demonstrate to staff which pupils should be receiving targeted support

— establishing an SEN register ("no good being supportive if you don't know who you are supporting") and empowering the special educational needs co-ordinator by modelling good practice and enabling her to have access to senior leaders and the necessary systems

— reinforcing a culture which would ask the question "what can I do to help move things forward for these children?"

— establishing a process of departmental reviews to evaluate performance

Over the last six months, Hayesbrook has supported the appointment of a consultant senior leader to add capacity to the SLT and lead on elements of school development, and to act as a coach and mentor.

Both Hayesbrook and Swan Valley staff put the success of intervention down to the honest and open relationship between the two schools, and the receptive response to support from Swan Valley:

"We would not have made the improvements that we have without the support of Hayesbrook and Debbie Coslett."

Nigel Jones, headteacher, Swan Valley School

Three key lessons emerged for successful engagement between an NLE and partner school:

— The relationship has to be trusting, and the partner school has to be receptive to the support: "Is there a willingness to utilise the support?"; the NSS has to see itself as wanting to learn and also reflect on its own practice.

— There needs to be clarity about the role of the NLE – what precisely is their role, and what do they need from the partner school?

— The head of the partner school has to understand and see that the NLE has a job to do: "respectful recognition of what the NLE needs to do and an acceptance of the need for sharp, relentless questioning".

The Ofsted monitoring visit in January 2011 reported that:

'Students' attainment has risen significantly at Swan Valley over the last few years as a result of the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and careful tracking and intervention, particularly in KS4. Staff morale is high and the students are very proud of their school... A close working relationship between [Hayesbrook and Swan Valley schools] has boosted the quality of teaching and learning in several curriculum areas. A successful consultant senior leader has been seconded and is assisting the school in evaluating and planning for a new curriculum and monitoring the progress of a good quality development plan.'

Ofsted monitoring letter, January 2011

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