

# Sustaining success: high performing government schools in London





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## Education Development Trust

At Education Development Trust, we have been improving education around the world for 50 years. We design and implement improvement programmes for school systems, and provide consultancy services deploying specialists internationally. Our work is informed by our continually refreshed body of research which focuses on the bright spots in education, from education authorities as diverse as those in Vietnam, Kenya, England, New York and Dubai. Bringing about real change that alters the aspects of a national system that, for many reasons, aren't working so well at the time, requires knowledge and ability to design and implement changes to any of the levers that can impede great educational outcomes. So the ability to affect policy, practices, pedagogy, behaviour, funding, attitudes and more is a prerequisite for a company that can truly claim to transform lives through improving education. As highly informed agents of change operating in low- to high-income countries with their varying internal contexts, we not only design but also show and enable, so when working with us, everyone involved, from policymakers to school leaders and teachers, is able to apply their new knowledge to drive sustainable system reform. Our expert knowledge, programme design and implementation expertise is also deployed in delivering Ofsted-rated outstanding careers services in England, and in owning and managing a family of independent schools. We are a not-for-profit and we are driven by our values of integrity, accountability, excellence and collaboration.

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## About the authors

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## Foreword

There is a widespread consensus that ensuring better quality teaching and learning in government schools worldwide is one of the key challenges facing humanity in the early 21st century. Ensuring that children go to school everywhere is of course important, but it is not enough; we must also guarantee that all children learn well in a safe environment. Through the creation and sharing of our research, we seek to contribute to an evidence-informed 'global dialogue' about these important questions of how we can deliver high levels of school quality.

In our research we like to accentuate the positive and make sense of success stories. As educators there is much we can learn from the systematic analysis of the work of effective schools and the policies used by improving education systems. Our global programme of education research has this focus on 'bright spots' at the levels of both the school and the national system.

In this particular series of reports, we focus on promising and interesting stories from England which has been a hotbed for innovation during recent years.

In the first phase of reports within the series, four key themes have been highlighted:

### **1. School leadership action leading to the rapid improvement of government schools**

Policymakers and educators in many countries wrestle with the problem of how to improve government schools, particularly those serving relatively disadvantaged communities. These issues have preoccupied policymakers in England in recent years. We have sought to make sense of the experience of schools that have achieved success against the odds,

There are about 20,000 government-funded schools in England, all subject to inspection by the national school inspectorate, known as Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). Ofsted is well-known in England for its robust no-nonsense approach to the evaluation of school quality. We identified about 100 schools that had been on a remarkable journey. These schools went in less than two years from being in the worst Ofsted category for quality to being graded as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Our report on the *The Rapid Improvement of Government Schools in England* made sense of these examples of transformation, identifying the importance of school leadership and the practical steps taken by school leaders to bring about rapid change.

### **2. The role of data in system-level school improvement**

*The World Development Report, 2018*, produced by the World Bank, highlighted the need for measurement that shines a light on learning. We agree: educational data is the fuel for the engine of school improvement. By itself data changes nothing but, properly used, data can stimulate beneficial change at every level: from the dialogue between a teacher and an individual student to the decisions made by national policymakers about priorities for educational reform. The first step to improving systemwide learning is to put in place assessment systems that



measure whether schools are delivering good learning outcomes. Assessment data can stimulate a professional dialogue about how well different groups of students are doing and why schools serving very similar communities often achieve very different academic outcomes. Experience from England supports this analysis and provides a case study about systematic tracking of learning outcomes and the use of the resulting data as a guide to action at every level of the system. *England's approach to school performance data – lessons learned* tells the story of how the national Education Management Information System has evolved in England in recent years.

### **3. The potential and limits of school autonomy**

There is much talk in many countries about the power of school autonomy as a means of unleashing school improvement. However, many individual schools and school leaders lack the capacity to take full responsibility for every aspect of the management of a school. Perhaps we need to re-frame the discourse and think about autonomy at the level of a group of schools. The government in England established a new form of government-funded school in 2002 known as an 'academy'. The academies were often previously low performing schools in areas of high social disadvantage. Soon many academies came together in formal federations known as Multi-Academy Trusts or MATs. Within MATs autonomy rests at the level of the school group rather than the individual school. Perhaps this provides a model for the decentralisation of decision-making? We explore these issues in our report: *The case for autonomous school federations: Lessons from multi-academy trusts in England*.

### **4. Lessons from London**

The improvement in student academic outcomes in London since 2000 has been remarkable. At the beginning of the century London schools were generally seen as the worst in England, based on test results and inspection findings, but today London schools are widely acknowledged as the best in England. At Education Development Trust we have been analysing the London success story for several years. In our latest report- *The continued success of London Schools*- we offer international policymakers new insights into one of the world's most impressive stories of school improvement.

Of course, we are not recommending that people in other countries simply copy English practice. There have been mistakes in England and every country must chart its own route towards educational improvement. Nevertheless, we are confident that policymakers worldwide will find that these *global dialogue* reports provide food for thought and grounds for optimism.

#### **Patrick Brazier**

Chief Executive  
Education Development Trust



## Introduction

London schools continue to constitute an extraordinary 'success story'. By common consent, the government school system in London achieves extremely good results compared to the rest of England, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds do particularly well.

This was not always the case. As recently as 2001, the region of inner London achieved the worst results in England using national tests for 16 year-olds as the measure. By 2013 the picture had changed totally and students in inner London were doing better than students in all regions outside London.

### **London schools continue to do well**

In 2014 we sought to document and provisionally explain the London transformation. Since 2014 much has happened in England including some important changes to the way that school performance is measured. Here, we look at the performance of London schools using the new performance measures and ask the question: are London schools still doing well and outperforming the rest of England? The answer is an emphatic 'Yes'.

Using the new measures of 'Attainment 8' and 'Progress 8', 16 year-olds in London achieve better results than those in every other region of England and make more progress compared with their prior achievement as measured by national tests for 11 year-olds. London is more equitable than the rest of England in terms of educational outcomes at school. The gap between the performance of all students and students from economically disadvantaged households is narrower in London than anywhere else in England.

In addition to examination results, we have looked at other measures of school quality and outcomes. Again, the picture today for London is very positive. The government inspection agency, Ofsted, consider London schools overall to be more effective than schools in other regions of England. The percentage of schools rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted in London has steadily increased in recent years. By 2017 86 percent of London schools were good or outstanding, according to Ofsted, compared to 76 percent in England overall.

Today, school leavers from London government schools are more likely than their counterparts in the rest of England to go to university. Disadvantaged London students are much more likely than other disadvantaged young people to go to university. Inner London, which is the more disadvantaged part of Greater London, has the highest level of higher education participation in England. Many more disadvantaged students from London- both from inner and outer London- win places at 'top universities'- the elite Russell group of colleges- compared to the rest of England.

### **Revisiting our earlier explanation of the success**

In 2014 we attempted, in a highly tentative way, to explain the success of London's schools using a mixed method approach. Using a review of the literature, data analysis and a qualitative enquiry into the perceptions of London stakeholders, we identified four promising developments that had taken place in London:

- the London Challenge programme, which used high performing schools and their headteachers as a key resource for the improvement of other schools
- the Teach First programme of graduate teacher recruitment which sought to recruit academically successful graduates to teach in disadvantaged London schools
- the impact of the introduction of 'academies', a new form of government-funded school intended to transform schools with a long history of failure. This was a national initiative, but early academies were particularly prevalent in London
- the enhancement of the school improvement function in some of the Local Authorities which operate at district level in London

Our 2014 analysis also identified four themes that characterised the London discourse about school improvement during the years of apparent transformation:

- the quality of leadership at all levels of the education system, especially school leadership
- the power of data and data literacy as a means of challenging underperformance and identifying effective practice
- the importance of high-impact professional development for teachers based on coaching relationships and classroom-based professional learning
- sustained political support and consistent policies maintained over many years.

### **The views of key stakeholders**

In the summer of 2018 we talked to 11 expert witnesses, with different perspectives, about the London story. Overall, they endorsed our earlier analysis. Their majority view was that there had indeed been a radical change in school quality in the first decade of the century and this had been sustained in the second decade of the century. The explanatory factors for London's continuing success that they identified included: success in recruiting and retaining great teachers, highly effective school leadership and the impact of well-designed school improvement interventions.

Many witnesses spoke particularly positively about the immediate and long-term consequences of the London Challenge. This particular intervention, in the eyes of several witnesses, had created capacity for continuous improvement and had been designed in order to achieve long-term sustainability. Several witnesses also spoke positively about the beneficial impact of the academies programme in London. These new schools had, in their view, both transformed particular schools and injected energy and optimism into the school system more generally. The best Multi-Academy Trusts provided new leadership and leadership development opportunities.

The period of school reform initiatives in London ended after the financial crisis of 2008 and the general election of 2010. London Challenge ended in 2011. And yet, since then London has continued to maintain impressive outcomes. Our witnesses suggested that there was a degree of capacity and momentum within

the school system in London that has maintained the improvement trajectory beyond the period of the initiatives. Key factors that support this momentum for continuous improvement included:

- strong capacity in terms of teacher optimism and sense of collective efficacy
- a good professional learning infrastructure
- a mature mix of school-to-school competition and collaboration.

The stakeholders we interviewed also recognised that, in addition to the importance of specific government policies, student and parental aspirations and the distinctive ethnic make-up of the city of London has made a difference. There has been a debate in recent years about the impact of the aspirational culture of some ethnic groups in London. A possible new narrative emerged from our discussions. Students from a migrant background are often highly motivated but this is not enough. Aspirational students need to have their talents nurtured by skilful teachers in the context of schools that are both orderly and nurturing. Schools in London benefit from both some aspirational student attitudes but these have been skilfully harnessed by some highly effective schools.

## Chapter 1

# Sustaining success: the story so far





# The improvement of government schools in London since the beginning of this century is a remarkable story.

In the late 1990s it was widely acknowledged that the performance of students in London's schools was poor – particularly in the more deprived region of inner London. Yet by 2013 the city was outperforming all other regions in England on the government's flagship measure of performance: results in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the national examinations for 16 year-olds. The story of improvement in London's schools attracted lots of attention and was analysed in a series of reports published 2014-15.<sup>1</sup>

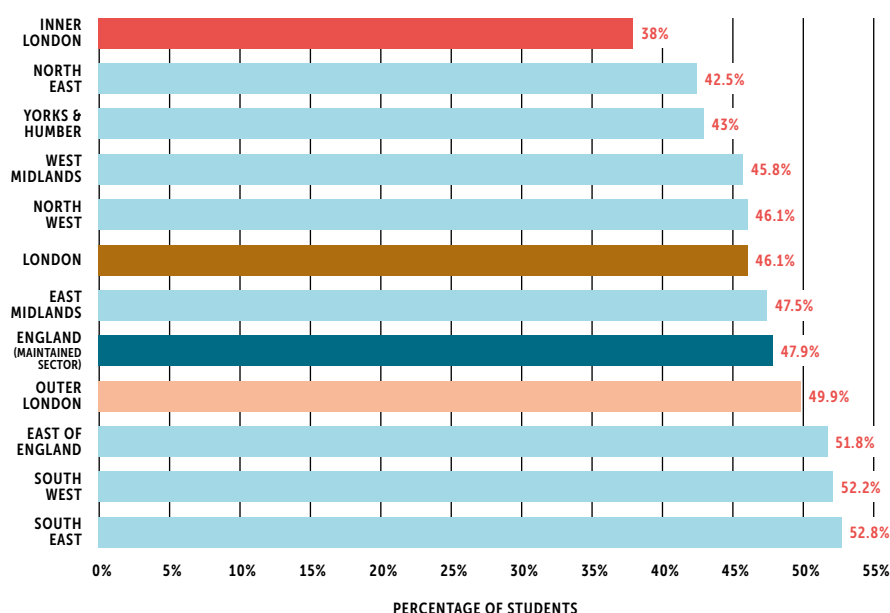
Here we re-tell the story of the transformation of the schools in London since 2000; we also attempt to go further and bring it up to date. After a flurry of analysis and commentary a few years ago, there has been relatively little research into London school performance since 2015. This report seeks to address this and explore what has happened in London over the past few years – to investigate whether the capital's schools have maintained their successful performance in relation to other parts of England, and if so why. The report also aims to identify any lessons about how success has been sustained so that other school systems might learn from London.

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## The period of transformation: 2001-2013

Our previous research<sup>2</sup> highlighted the dramatic change in performance outcomes in London schools from 2001 until 2013. As can be seen from Figure 1, in 2001 inner London was the worst performing region in the country in terms of GCSE outcomes (GCSE is the examination for all 16 year-olds in England), while outer London was performing in line with the national average.

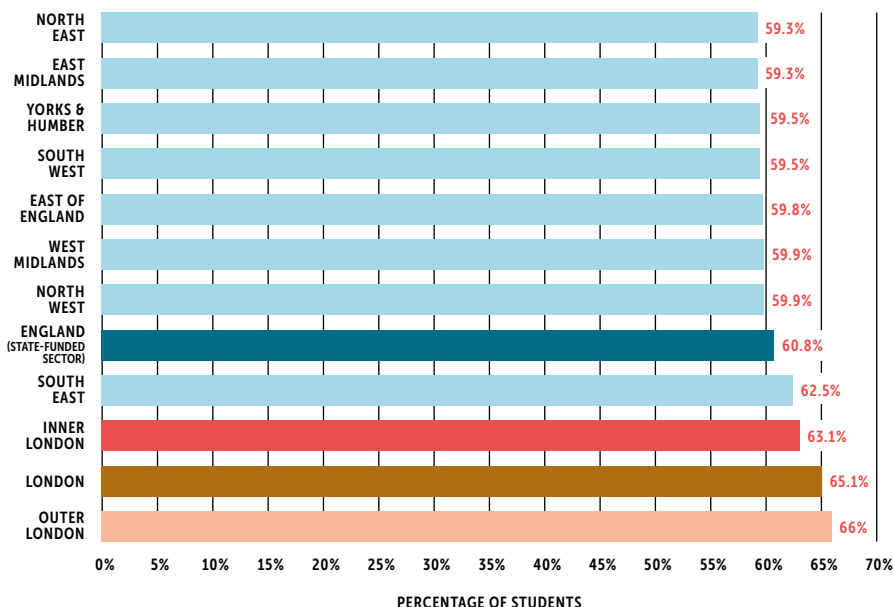
FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING FIVE OR MORE GCSES GRADE A\*-C IN 2001 <sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> These publications including Baars et al., 2014; Burgess 2014; Greaves et al. 2014; and Blanden et al. 2015 <sup>2</sup> Baars et al., 2014; McAleavy & Elwick 2016 <sup>3</sup> DFES, 2002

By 2013 the situation had changed dramatically: outer London was the best performing region in the country, closely followed by inner London (see Figure 2). Although results in these national tests have improved across the country as a whole during this period, London's results improved at a greater rate year-on-year.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 2: PROPORTION OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING FIVE OR MORE GCSES GRADE A\*-C, INCLUDING ENGLISH AND MATHS IN 2013 <sup>5</sup>



## Changes since 2013

For this report we seek to explore whether London had continued to maintain its level of performance since 2013 and to reflect on the possible reasons for any continuing pattern of success.

Much has changed since 2013: two national general elections, a new Prime Minister and no fewer than four different cabinet ministers for education in England (Michael Gove until 2014, Nicky Morgan from 2014-2016, Justine Greening from 2016-2018 and Damien Hinds from early 2018). Policy changes since 2013 have included a further expansion of the academies programme and a decline in the school improvement role of the Local Authorities.

Measuring the performance of schools in England has been made more complex by changes to the accountability regime in England. Since 2010 the government has changed the headline accountability measures in some important ways. From that year, the analysis of school performance in tests for 16 year-olds was re-structured with a new emphasis on the so-called EBacc: student performance in five core curriculum areas. Further changes were introduced from 2016, with two new measures: 'Attainment 8' and 'Progress 8'.<sup>6</sup>

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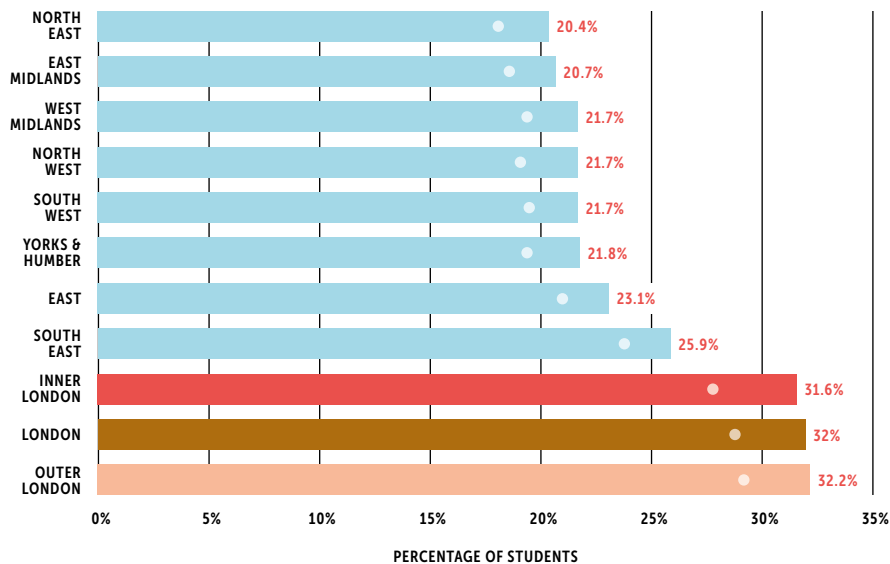
<sup>4</sup> Hansard, 2013 <sup>5</sup> DfE, 2014 <sup>6</sup> Attainment 8 measures pupils' attainment across 8 qualifications including: maths (double weighted) and English (double weighted, if both English language and English literature are entered); 3 qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure; 3 further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or technical awards from the DfE approved list. (DfE 2018a). 'Progress 8 was introduced in 2016 as the headline indicator of school performance ... It aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary school to the end of key stage 4. It is a type of value-added measure, which means that pupils' results are compared to the progress of other pupils nationally with similar prior attainment.' (DfE 2018a)



Here we show that using the new performance measures, London schools continue to perform extremely well compared to other schools in England. Comparing the percentages of pupils who achieved all components of the English Baccalaureate award<sup>7</sup> we can see that London outperformed other regions (see Figure 3) in 2016/17.

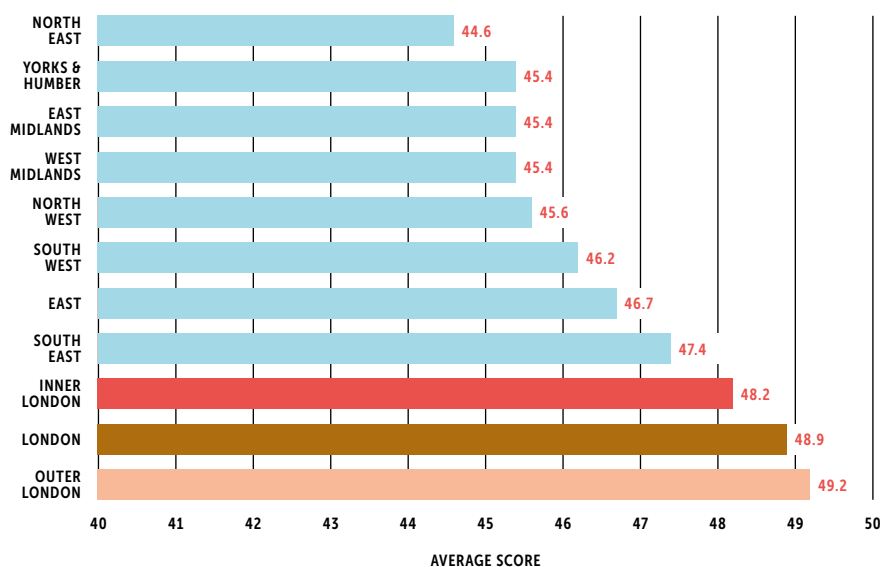
The circles in Figure 3 below, represent the percentage passing the higher (5-9) threshold. The bars represent the lower (4-9) threshold.

**FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING GOOD GRADES IN ALL THE SUBJECT AREAS OF THE ENGLISH BACCALAUREATE<sup>8</sup>**



As can be seen in Figure 4, based upon the average Attainment 8 score per pupil in 2017, London dramatically outperforms other regions in England using this new headline measure.

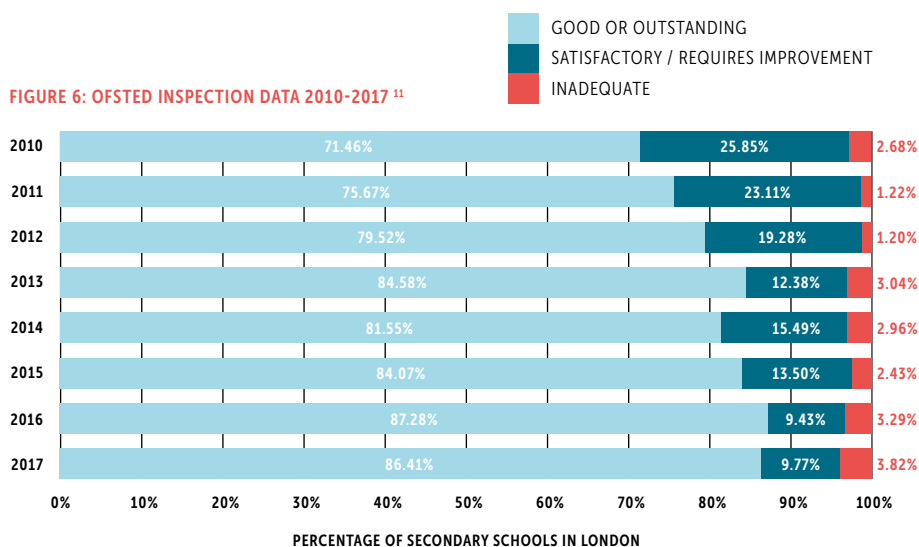
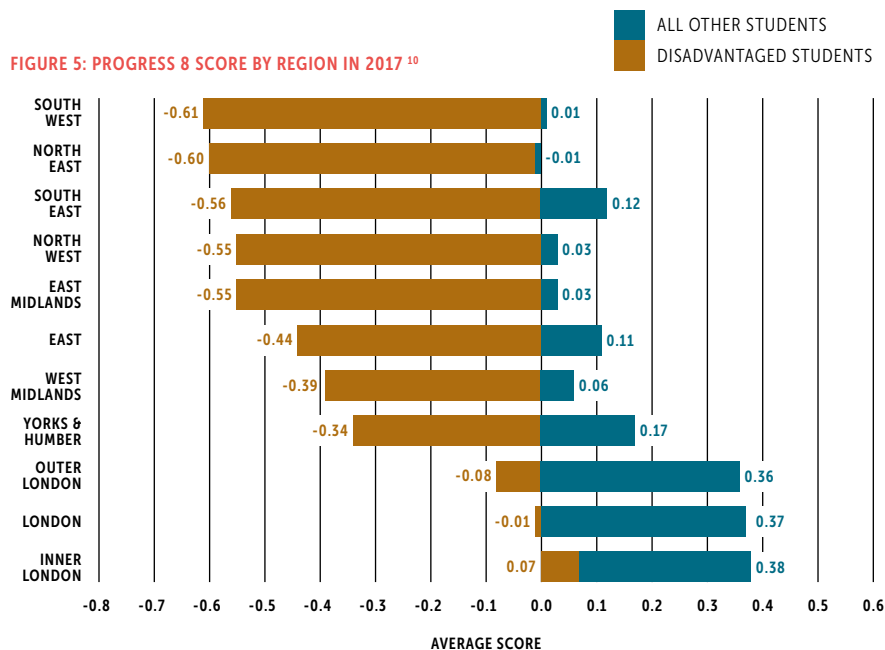
**FIGURE 4: AVERAGE ATTAINMENT 8 SCORE PER STUDENT IN 2017<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>7</sup>A combination of subjects that the government thinks it is important for young people to study at GCSE' (DfE 2017) <sup>8</sup>DfE, 2018b <sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Figure 5 shows the Progress 8 scores from 2017, by region – in particular highlighting the performance of disadvantaged pupils (tan points) and all other pupils (blue points). London again outperforms other regions across both measures and inner London is the only place in the country where disadvantaged students achieve a positive Progress 8 score (i.e. disadvantaged pupils in inner London perform better than the average for all pupils with or without disadvantage across the whole country). This suggests that London secondary schools are much more successful than secondary schools elsewhere in ‘adding value’ for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

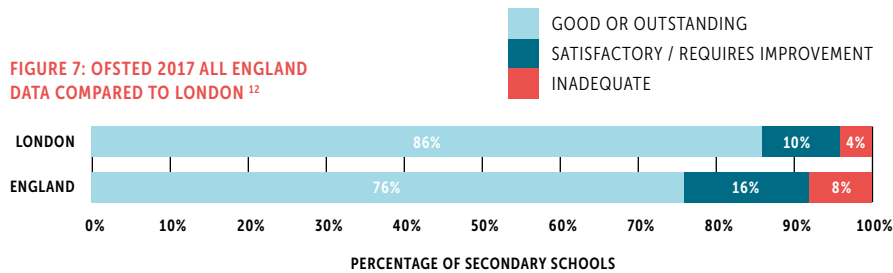
London secondary schools are much more successful than secondary schools elsewhere in ‘adding value’ for students from disadvantaged backgrounds



<sup>10</sup> Ibid. <sup>11</sup> Ofsted Data View, 2018a (2010-2012 data was accessed on the original release of Data View in January 2017. Data View was relaunched on 29 January 2018).

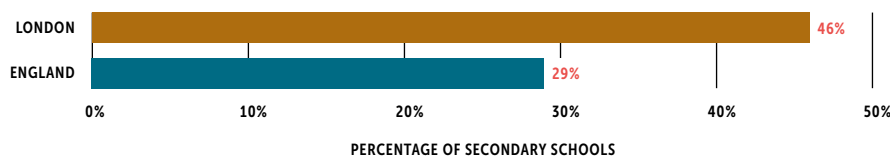
In addition to school performance data based on exam results, schools in London also have impressive outcomes in Ofsted inspections. Figure 6 shows that the percentage of schools rated as good or outstanding in London has steadily increased since at least 2010 and has been maintained at the high level of 86 percent over the last two years (this compares particularly favourably with the average figure for England, which was 76 percent in 2017 – see Figure 7).

The percentage of schools rated as good or outstanding in London has steadily increased since at least 2010

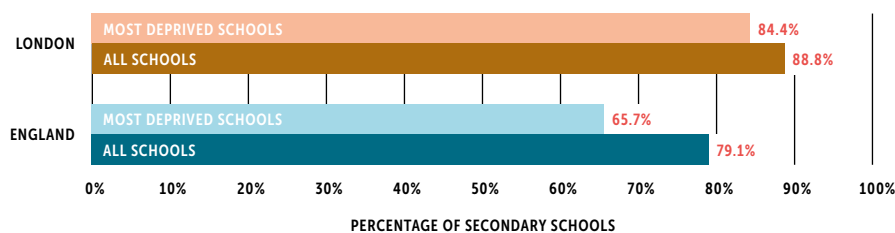


London also continues to outperform England as whole when comparing schools that Ofsted have judged outstanding for their quality of leadership – see Figure 8 – and when comparing the performance of the most deprived schools – see Figure 9.

**FIGURE 8: PERCENTAGE OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS JUDGED BY OFSTED AS OUTSTANDING FOR THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP <sup>13</sup>**



**FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS JUDGED BY OFSTED AS GOOD OR OUTSTANDING <sup>14</sup>**



<sup>12</sup> Ofsted, 2018a <sup>13</sup> Ofsted, 2018b <sup>14</sup> Ibid.

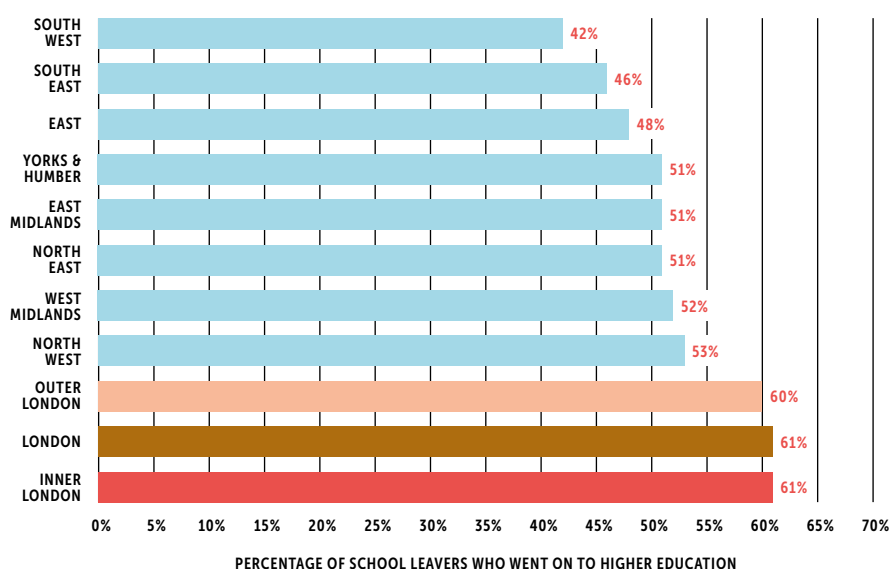
Another important type of data relates to student destinations, and in particular the percentage of secondary school leavers who go on to university or equivalent higher level study. Again, the results remain impressive when comparing London with the rest of England. Pupils from London are more likely to go into higher education (HE) after leaving school than those from other parts of the country, as can be seen in Figure 10 (based on destinations data for the academic year 2015/2016), by a significant margin. These pupils are also more likely to go to the more selective institutions that form the so-called Russell Group of universities (Figure 11) and, furthermore, London disadvantaged pupils are also more likely to attend these selective institutions compared with similarly disadvantaged students in the rest of England. Research from the Education Policy Institute suggests that the disparity in HE destinations between disadvantaged and other students is least evident in London when compared to other regions.<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning of the century there was a widespread sense of crisis regarding teacher recruitment for London schools. Although as we shall see many commentators today remain concerned about the need to ensure a good supply of teachers to London schools, the gap between teacher vacancies in London and the rest of England narrowed and disappeared between 2001 and 2017 (see Figure 12). In addition to this positive pattern in terms of the quantity of teacher supply, many of the experts we interviewed for this report were of the view that today's London teachers were often of a higher quality than those in the rest of England.

In summary, using a range of measures the outcomes from London schools remain markedly better than those in the rest of England, and disadvantaged students appear to particularly benefit from being educated in London schools. London students overall do better in key examinations, attend schools that achieve better inspection grades and have more positive destinations as school leavers.

Pupils from London are more likely to go into higher education (HE) after leaving school than those from other parts of the country

FIGURE 10: STUDENT ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION <sup>16</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Education Policy Institute, 2018 <sup>16</sup> DfE, 2017

FIGURE 11: ENTRANCE TO RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES –  
DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS COMPARED AGAINST ALL OTHER STUDENTS <sup>17</sup>

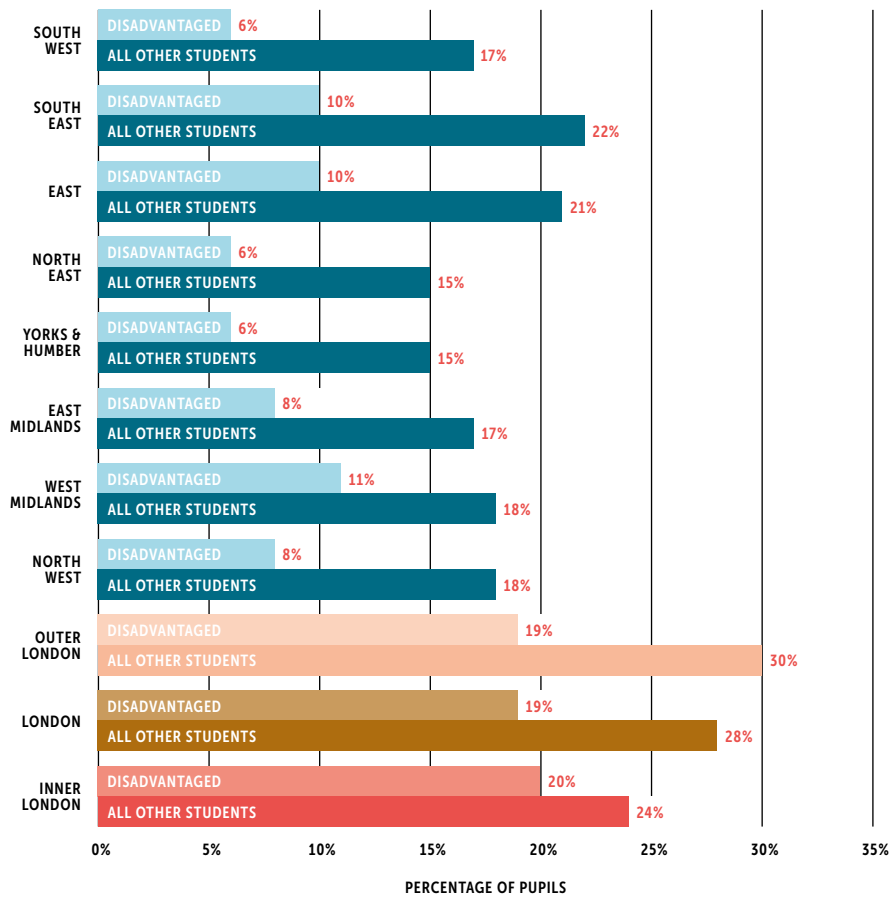
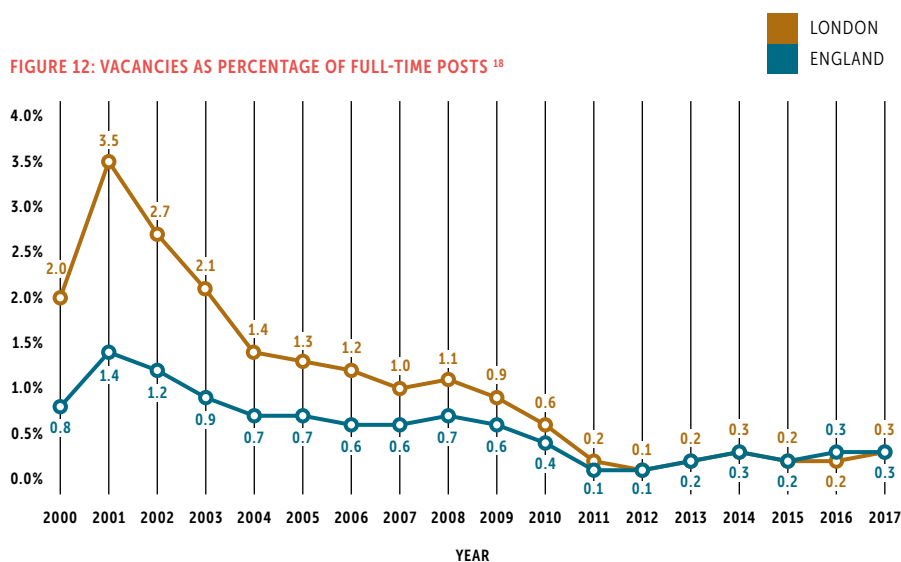


FIGURE 12: VACANCIES AS PERCENTAGE OF FULL-TIME POSTS <sup>18</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Ibid. <sup>18</sup> DfE, 2018c









## Chapter 2

# Making sense of the transformation and explaining the success





## Education Development Trust under its previous name, CfBT Education Trust, published a mixed-methods research report in 2014, in partnership with the Centre for London, investigating London's rapid school improvement.<sup>19</sup>

We also published a summary report based on this research intended for an international audience.<sup>20</sup> We analysed the existing literature and data and interviewed 'expert witnesses' who had participated in London education, together with focus group discussions with London teachers.

Our findings emphasised that there was no single 'magic bullet' that caused London's success. We highlighted four key school improvement interventions which, in the eyes of our expert witnesses contributed to the improvement of London schools.

Our findings emphasised that there was no single 'magic bullet' that caused London's success

### The key school improvement interventions

#### London Challenge

From the perspective of our witnesses, London Challenge was a particularly important programme in London's school improvement process. The programme's first phase (2003-2008) targeted secondary schools, and the second phase (2008-2011) continued to work with secondary schools but also extended the programme's reach to primary schools.

The London Challenge targeted whole districts within London identified as causes for concern, as well as specific underperforming schools – termed 'Keys to Success' (KTS) schools – across the city. The programme involved a range of school improvement initiatives, many of which made use of the expertise of the best practitioners and best schools, with an emphasis on school-to-school knowledge transfer.

Much of the school improvement activity centred on building relationships between high-performing and underperforming schools. This involved the sharing of expertise and training for leaders and teachers in underperforming schools, with the package of support for each school tailored and brokered by a London Challenge adviser. In particular, the programme developed the concept of system leadership by pioneering the use of expert headteachers to mentor the headteachers of underperforming schools. An independent evaluation found that KTS schools improved at a faster rate than the national average using a range of metrics.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Baars et al., 2014 <sup>20</sup> McAleavy and Elwick, 2016 <sup>21</sup> Hutchings et al., 2012

### Teach First

In the years prior to London's improvement there was substantial anxiety about the quality and supply of teachers in the city. The recruitment crisis was tackled in multiple ways, one of which was the Teach First initiative. Launched in 2002, it placed high-achieving graduates in schools serving low-income communities in London over an initial two-year programme. In addition to the immediate impact of placing highly talented young teachers into schools in some of the city's most deprived areas, our research indicated that it helped to improve more generally perceptions of government school teaching as a desirable profession. By 2013 many participants in Teach First had achieved leadership positions in London schools.<sup>22</sup> Based on its perceived success in London, Teach First has become a national programme with projects in many parts of England.

### The academies programme

From 2002 onwards the government introduced a new category of school in England: the academy. These new schools were removed from the control of district-based Local Authorities and were managed by independent trusts. Some academies were members of a larger organisation, known as a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). Initially there was a relatively small number of academies but many of them were concentrated in London. Some of the most highly regarded MATs were based in London. Most of the early academies replaced schools with a long history of failure. The academies programme was considerably expanded after the election of 2010. Several of our key witnesses saw the academies as a force for good, particularly the first phase of academies. Some London academies achieved a reputation for excellence. In the view of some witnesses the academies encouraged traditional government schools to 'raise their game'.

In the view of some witnesses the academies encouraged traditional government schools to 'raise their game'

### Improved support from local authorities

Our research identified the role that improved performance at district level played in London's improved educational outcomes during the period prior to 2013. In the view of several witnesses, highly effective leadership in some local authorities contributed to school improvement in local schools. The most effective local authorities tended to develop a successful 'challenge and support' model for school improvement, with a focus on support for strong and accountable school leadership, utilisation of data, early intervention and challenging underperformance.

## The key school improvement themes

Our analysis of the London story suggested that schools in London had benefitted from four aspects of education reform and, in different ways, these four themes characterised each of the London school improvement interventions.

<sup>22</sup> DfE, 2018d

### The importance of leadership across the education system

We considered that London schools benefitted from particularly good leadership at every level of the system. There was a consensus among London stakeholders that the overall management of the London Challenge programme was extremely impressive. The best Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Authorities also seemed to us to benefit from highly skilled leadership. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of good leadership was at school level, where, according to Ofsted data, London schools were more likely than schools elsewhere to have outstanding headteachers. The best headteachers were given system leadership responsibilities and were given structured opportunities to build the capacity of other headteachers.

### The power of data

We were struck by the role that data and data literacy played in the improvement of government schools. In different ways data was used to challenge underperformance and in particular to ensure that education professionals had high expectations for their students regardless of background. Each of the four highlighted interventions were characterised by an emphasis on the smart utilisation of data. Crucially, data was used not only to identify areas of weakness in the city's schools but also to identify 'positive outliers' and to target support. London Challenge used consistent data-based criteria to identify underperforming schools and undertook pioneering work in the area of data benchmarking within so-called 'families of schools'. Our research indicated that the benchmarking of schools against the performance of other schools with similar characteristics was an important factor in the success of the programme.

### The importance of the right professional development

School improvement interventions in London recognised the importance of teacher professional development but rejected the traditional professional development model whereby training took place at off-site workshops and was delivered by experts who were no longer practitioners. Instead, the reforms made the school itself the main setting for professional development, with a greater emphasis on 'on the job' coaching by high-performing current practitioners. This shift towards school-based learning encouraged a greater focus on context-specific learning, and was coupled with stronger connections between performance management and professional development; systematic observation and monitoring at school level were used to inform teachers' professional learning.

### The significance of sustained political support

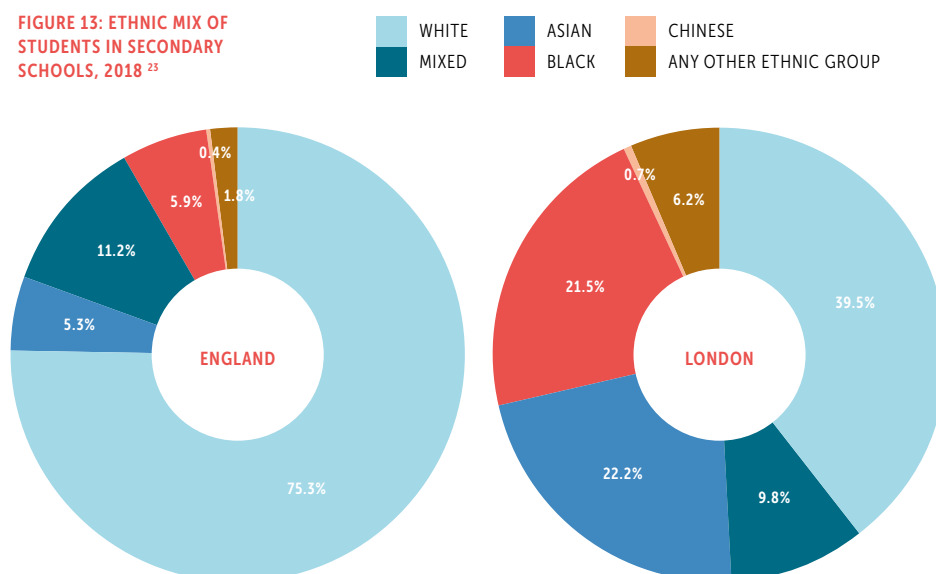
The London reforms at the beginning of the century were championed consistently at the highest levels of national government. In international terms London Challenge was highly unusual because it was sustained over many years by different education ministers. The 2010 general election led to a change of government but many of the interventions continued. Teach First and the academies programme continue to this day.

The reforms made the school itself the main setting for professional development, with a greater emphasis on 'on the job' coaching by high-performing current practitioners

## The debate about ethnicity

Since the publication of our initial research some commentators have undertaken interesting analytical work considering the question of ethnicity. The ethnic mix of London schools is different to other regions of England. There are much higher proportions of pupils from different ethnic groups in London than any other region – with approximately 60 percent of pupils in London from non-white backgrounds compared to around 20 percent in England as a whole (see Figure 13).

**FIGURE 13: ETHNIC MIX OF STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, 2018** <sup>23</sup>



In 2014 Simon Burgess of the University of Bristol undertook an important statistical comparison of the academic performance of different ethnic groups in London and the rest of England.<sup>24</sup> His conclusion was that the academic progress of different ethnic groups in London was broadly in line with the performance of the same groups in the rest of England. The greater concentration of relatively high performing groups in London contributed to overall successful performance of the London school system. Burgess concluded that the parents and students of London deserved more credit for the relatively high performance of London schools and that too much attention has been given to the impact of policy interventions. Research by Education Datalab has also proposed that the distinctive ethnic mix in London contributes very substantially to the London success story.<sup>25</sup>

The academic progress of different ethnic groups in London was broadly in line with the performance of the same groups in the rest of England

<sup>23</sup> DfE, 2018d <sup>24</sup> Burgess, 2014 <sup>25</sup> Treadaway, 2018

It may be helpful not only to consider ethnicity as a distinct factor but also to think about the interaction between student background and school effectiveness. Student academic performance is shaped by several factors including the interaction between the attitudes and values students bring from home and the quality of the learning experiences they have at school. Ethnicity can be a powerful social force but it does not, by itself, determine levels of learning in a mechanistic way. Students, whatever their background, need to be taught by skilful teachers in a safe, nurturing school environments. The relative effectiveness of schools also makes a difference and in a multi-cultural society one dimension to school effectiveness must be the capacity to help students from different backgrounds to thrive.

The significance of school effectiveness in a multi-ethnic world appears clear from the 2018 OECD<sup>26</sup> analysis of the performance of students with a migrant background in PISA 2015. The OECD conclusion was that, in a majority of countries, students from migrant families are at a significant disadvantage at school despite the fact that they are typically better-motivated than their peers. One finding of this important study was that while in most countries, immigrant students expressed greater motivation to achieve than other students, they significantly underperformed compared to the other students. On average in OECD countries 51 percent of first-generation immigrant students failed to reach baseline academic proficiency in reading, mathematics and science, compared to 28 percent of students without an immigrant background.

The overall pattern of underperformance by migrant students in PISA 2015 hid some very marked variations at country level. Immigrant students in Germany and Finland were more than twice as likely as other students to fail to achieve basic academic proficiency in core subjects. By contrast, in Australia and Canada there was no difference in the academic performance of immigrant students compared to other students. The clear implication is that some school systems are much better than others at supporting ethnic minority students and better at harnessing the high levels of motivation that often characterise immigrant students.

These findings from PISA are surely relevant to the analysis of the London success story. Students from some ethnic groups may well have more aspirational values than others but it does not follow that they will do better at school. The effectiveness of the school system is also a determinant of academic success.

The proposition that London schools have improved in terms of internal functioning and are not simply the lucky beneficiaries of a well-motivated intake, is supported by Ofsted data. Inspectors consider that overall London schools are more effective than schools elsewhere and that the leadership of schools in London is much more likely to be outstanding than in the rest of England. This was not their view 20 years ago. In 2017 Ofsted graded 86 percent of London schools as good or outstanding while only 76 percent of schools in all England achieved these grades.<sup>27</sup> According to Ofsted data, there is an even more marked gap between the quality of school leadership in London today compared to leadership in the rest of England. Ofsted consider that many more

Some school systems are much better than others at supporting ethnic minority students and better at harnessing the high levels of motivation that often characterise immigrant students

<sup>26</sup> OECD, 2018 <sup>27</sup> Ofsted, 2018a

schools in London compared with the rest of England benefit from outstanding leadership. The Ofsted data supports the idea that relative school effectiveness is an important explanatory factor when seeking to make sense of the impressive outcomes in London schools.

## The views of our expert witnesses in 2018

As part of the research for this report we undertook a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with 'expert witnesses' and an analysis of available data and literature.

In total 11 expert witnesses were interviewed as part of this investigation, with a broad range of viewpoints: 2 serving headteachers, 1 former headteacher and university academic, 1 chief executive of a Multi-Academy Trust, 1 former senior adviser to a pan-London authority, 3 data experts, 1 current civil servant, 1 former civil servant and 1 senior officer of a trade union.

Our experts were for the most part very positive about the state of the government school system in London, although they were in many cases also concerned by threats posed by the constant challenge of teacher recruitment and current government policy regarding the national funding formula for schools which is not favourable towards London schools.

Two of our witnesses made the point that the achievement of London schools continues to compare extremely well when the schools are benchmarked against others both in this country and beyond, and the performance of disadvantaged students is particularly creditable:

*If you look at attainment data, then London out-performs every other region and it's more comparable to some of the high performing international jurisdictions that we see, like Singapore and Hong Kong and Canada. It's very different, in terms of, education attainment for all pupils and for disadvantaged pupils.*

*For a number of years it has had by far the highest number of outstanding schools and schools that perform well [...]. [Inner London schools] perform well in urban environments working with very diverse school populations, and are still performing better than anywhere else, particularly for the poorest, most disadvantaged children.*

### **'Complex factors that came together into something brilliant': The expert witnesses and the debate about the importance of ethnicity**

When asked about the question of the relative causal importance of ethnicity versus school improvement our expert witnesses expressed different views. One data specialist was strongly of the view that most of the better performance of London students, especially secondary students, compared to those elsewhere could be explained in terms of the culture of the ethnic groups found in London and the ethnic mix in other parts of England.

Our experts were for the most part very positive about the state of the government school system in London

*The hard bit is disentangling how much of the change is due to improvement and how much of the change is due to changes in demographics. We'd probably say at key stage four [that is the performance of 16 year-olds] we think maybe as much as 90% is explained by the change in demographics, in primary it is more like 70%. Those are ballpark figures.*

Another data expert disagreed, while recognising that ethnicity was a factor. For her the London improvements were 'driven by lots of reasons that are both demographic but also relating to policy interventions over the last 15, 20 years'. This same expert questioned the way different ethnic groups were being labelled within the London school improvement discourse. Blanket generalisations about the nature of white or non-white groups of students were unhelpful:

*Not being white is not a homogeneous group. We're talking about lots of different cultures and backgrounds, and migration status. They don't all have the same starting point.*

While proposing a more nuanced approach and recognising the multi-causal nature of the London changes, this expert did acknowledge the significance of London's distinctive pattern of ethnicity and additional advantages derived from the dynamic economy and cultural life of the capital:

*We see more ethnically diverse pupils in London and they tend to do better, than white, British pupils. Because we have large cohorts in London, that inevitably is one of the factors that's driving high attainment. Then there is also the aspirational effect in London, that is probably driven by the access to culture, to the world of work, to opportunity in areas that you don't have elsewhere in the country.*

Most of those witnesses with a background in policy or practice accepted the importance of ethnicity but rejected the monocausal view that better outcomes could simply be explained in terms of the aspirations of parents and students from particular ethnic backgrounds. London was ethnically diverse in the 1990s when the schools achieved generally disappointing outcomes.

*I think there is something about aspiration and ambition, and for me, it's maybe more about recent migrants and parents, what they are wanting for their children. But I don't think it explains it fully, really. As I say, because I think that's always been the case.*

Some witnesses also pointed out that while teachers in London had the advantage of having some particularly aspirational parents and students, they were, in many cases, also confronted by higher levels of deprivation than teachers elsewhere and some particularly challenging behaviour and attitudes on the part of some students. High levels of knife crime and gang violence, as well as high levels of ambition, are found in many inner London communities.

One former civil servant pointed out the paradoxical fact that in the 1980s and 1990s the ethnic diversity of London and preponderance of recent migrants was cited as the primary reason for the relative underperformance of London schools:

Most of those witnesses with a background in policy or practice accepted the importance of ethnicity but rejected the monocausal view that better outcomes could simply be explained in terms of the aspirations of parents and students from particular ethnic backgrounds



*I think we forget that 15 years ago, people used to say to me, "Well, London schools will never match national averages because they've got disproportionately many poor children, they've got disproportionately many new arrivals, they've got disproportionately many kids who speak English as another language, they've got disproportionately many ethnic minority children." All of these things were, at that time, given to me as reasons why London schools could never match the national average.*

This witness rejected the monocausal ethnicity explanation and posited a more complex model of change: London has always been an ethnically diverse city but today London's teachers are more adept than their predecessors at harnessing the aspirational values held by some, but not all, parents and children from minority ethnic backgrounds. For him, London teachers had become more skilful at supporting disadvantaged students from different ethnic backgrounds.

*So, I think what has happened is, not just in London but in other places as well, people have said, "Well, I don't accept that these children can't achieve, and we are going to work out how to make sure that they do achieve, and we're going to work out how to capitalise on the energy and vibrancy in order to overcome the things about deprivation and other languages, etc., which so far have been holding them back."*

For this expert witness one of the strengths of London Challenge was that it forced professionals to change their expectations of students from different backgrounds. This change in professional behaviour was a powerful force for change in his opinion.

A similar point was made by an expert with a background in cross-London educational policy. She explained how London schools had become skilled at engaging with complex communities, characterised both by the presence of some highly aspirational parents but also by high levels of youth crime and disadvantage:

*[London schools] have to cope with some quite complex social problems. Youth violence, knife crimes. I think sometimes people outside think, "Oh, London schools have it easy." I don't think they do. I think they have found a way of working in quite complex local communities sometimes, where they are making a school in that kind of setting work well for those children.*

Some of our witnesses emphasised the challenging nature of some of the student population in many London secondary schools, and the need to avoid too rosy and simplistic a view of a uniformly well-motivated and ambitious student body in today's inner London schools. One pointed out that as recently as the 1990s London was ethnically diverse, with many aspirational parents, but many London schools were also seriously chaotic places. The first stage of the improvement journey was the imposition of much more effective discipline. This created the opportunity for teachers to teach and to focus professionally on pedagogy rather than 'crowd control'. Another witness, who is a serving headteacher, stressed the importance of getting discipline right and described how there remains a latent risk of serious disorder and indiscipline in London schools today, due to the challenging attitudes of some of the student population. In the best schools, she believed, there is now an orderly climate conducive to learning that is a consequence of the skill and persistence of the professionals.

The first stage of the improvement journey was the imposition of much more effective discipline. This created the opportunity for teachers to teach and to focus professionally on pedagogy rather than 'crowd control'



# Analyse and Evaluate

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out? Record  
our results.

Explain your  
results using  
science.



In summary, although there were some dissenting voices, the majority of our witnesses made sense of the London transformation in terms of a complex web of causation, with ethnicity as just one of several forces that together drove the change. As one serving civil servant told us, the London story was the result of 'complex factors that came together into something rather brilliant'.

### The legacy of London Challenge

Several of our witnesses believed very strongly that the reforms of the period 2000-2010 were extremely well-designed and that the dividends were still being paid almost a decade later. As one witness said:

*Interventions were made in the early 2000s which have a persistent effect now.*

Although as we have documented there were several London initiatives in the period 2000-2010, London Challenge was singled out by many of our witnesses as the flagship successful reform. Despite the fact that this programme finished in 2011, many of those we spoke to in 2018 cited the continuing influence of London Challenge as a key driver in the sustained improvement in London's performance today. If they are correct then London Challenge represents, at a global level, a particularly successful example of educational reform.

The London Challenge was a combination of approaches which together focused on school improvement in London<sup>28</sup> and encompassed twinning relationships between high-performing and low-performing schools, a particular focus on key districts of the city, and a series of activities which aimed to improve leadership and professional development. Our interviewees suggested that in reality many of its aspects continued in some form or another after 2011. One experienced former headteacher, who had played a prominent role within London Challenge and then went on to a senior position in higher education, spoke of the transition after the end of London Challenge:

*I don't think there was a complete cliff edge. The London Challenge funding stopped, but, because we'd all worked on sustainability in different ways, there were other organisations and other opportunities to continue to learn.*

One of the strengths of London Challenge, in the view of our experts, was its emphasis on capacity building and sustainability. One interviewee who had been heavily involved throughout suggested that this question of sustainability had been a top priority for the civil servants working on design of the programme. He went on to say that "a huge amount of what we did was about getting behind the efforts of people locally" and that many activities and institutions originally set up through London Challenge were able to carry on because people valued them and having seen their value were willing to support them once the initial funding had ended. Witnesses cited, for example, the Challenge Partners programme as an instance of a sustainable intervention that was developed through London Challenge and is still thriving today.

The method of working adopted by the London Challenge prioritised practitioner expertise and the expert practitioners remained after the end of the programme. One witness talked about how the London Challenge had helped key staff to

London Challenge was singled out by many of our witnesses as the flagship successful reform

<sup>28</sup> Ogden, 2013: 22

become 'more self-confident, more capable, more willing to do the difficult stuff, more willing to collaborate with one another, all of which is sustainable stuff'.

As another interviewee noted, this high level of buy-in from stakeholders, particularly those working in schools, was a crucial factor in the legacy of the initiative:

*Certainly a lot of the programmes were then sustained by other organisations and people, but the biggest thing was the teachers, and the middle leaders, and the senior leaders in the school were all working on something sustainable then, as well. Certainly around the area I worked in, in learning and development, that's all we kept saying: "We have to come up with something that will help all of us for the future"*

We were told how, as a result of a consistent focus on sustainability, several of the reforms introduced between 2000-2010 have now become embedded within the London school system. The fact that young teachers who lived through London Challenge have often gone on to leadership positions has helped this 'internalising' of the principles:

*It seems to me that a lot of the learning from London Challenge has almost become systemic, or it's fully rooted in the unconsciousness of London's leaders because it may be middle leaders then who've now become the heads in London schools ... there is an unconscious and systemic knowledge in London of how to work with their student populations in the right way, how to support them, how to meet their needs (former regional policymaker and academic).*

### **Agency and collective efficacy**

When asked to compare the work of the teacher workforce in London with elsewhere, many of our witnesses talked about a collective sense of optimism and agency. While considerable attention has been given to question of student attitudes and mindset, and possible links with ethnicity, much less commentary has considered issues of teacher attitudes and mindset. Is it possible that there is a particularly strong sense of agency and collective efficacy on the part of London teachers compared to those elsewhere? Several of our witnesses described a collective professional culture today in London that is conducive to peer-to-peer learning and professional growth. From their perspective, the main energy driving the mobilisation of professional knowledge and school quality comes from within the profession:

*You bring a group of London teachers and system leaders together, and there is a level of hubbub and chat and energy that is quite tangible. I know it sounds a bit cheesy, but I did find that to be the case. To me, that's the sort of energy you want to be encouraging and nurturing really.*

*[London] tends to have people, quite young people as well who are quite committed to going into education because they want to make a difference and challenge disadvantage. I am not saying that doesn't happen anywhere else, but I would say there is quite a 'can do' [attitude].*

Several of our witnesses described a collective professional culture today in London that is conducive to peer-to-peer learning and professional growth



*You have got a whole pool of leaders and practitioners who are really interested and engaged in how you do school improvement. They set a bar for one another [...]. There is an expectation that you take an interest in the practice of great teaching. [...] You will attract a large group of teachers on a Saturday at a ResearchED conference, or after school, people coming together. There does seem to be an appetite just to network and come together. You do see that, I would say, at all levels really in London.*

### **A particularly talented teacher workforce**

One important theme that emerged from our interviews was that, despite some current challenges, London has been successful in attracting, and to some extent retaining, talented teachers and trainee teachers. They contrasted this with the situation before 2000 when London had been, as one witness said, 'the hardest place to get teachers'. There was a view that the status of London teachers had changed radically since then.

There was a perception from our interviewees that teachers in London were typically younger, more motivated and generally of a higher quality than those elsewhere in the country. This was for many witnesses an important factor in the success of London schools:

*Your access to talent is much greater and your ability to recruit people who are strong. It's much easier to do that in London, and that allows you to have higher expectations of your staff as a whole, because if you say that your maths teacher isn't good enough, you're in a strong position to find another one.*

*London attracts young, vibrant, enthusiastic people who are intellectually interesting, so there's probably more of them in London schools than there are outside of London. Staff are probably just of a higher quality in London than outside of London.*

### **Major opportunities for leadership development**

Our witnesses considered that school leadership was a vital determinant of school improvement and that London was benefitting from the work of an impressive generation of school leaders who had developed their expertise in London. The experts suggested that the fact that some more experienced teachers leave London because of property prices is both a problem and an opportunity; a problem because some talented people are lost to the London system, and an opportunity because this turnover provides early promotion opportunities for relatively young teachers. Overall the result is an energetic and relatively youthful cadre of middle managers providing the 'engine room' for school improvement.

While in some other areas talented young teachers may have to wait before promotion, the dynamic nature of the London school labour market can provide early opportunities for leadership. Our interviewees suggested that often people were promoted in London sooner than they might have expected to be elsewhere:

*There is perhaps less of a sense of serving time in London, and maybe people getting to senior positions earlier.*

The fact that some more experienced teachers leave London because of property prices is both a problem and an opportunity

Professional development – with an emphasis on enabling staff to move into middle and senior leadership positions – was a focus of the London Challenge strategy and a former civil servant who had worked on the programme noted that this was specifically designed to cater for the unique model of staffing in London, as well as recognising the long-lasting benefits from such an approach:

*The amount of investment that went into leadership training and middle leadership training which has made that slightly different staffing model sustainable and workable in London schools ... those differences now play out in a positive way for schools.*

In addition, another interviewee noted that London provided teachers with more opportunities to develop and move forward, partly because of the vacancies in leadership positions and partly because of the geography of the city and the fact that there are so many schools within an accessible area:

*There are many opportunities to develop your career in middle leadership and senior leadership. So I think not all parts of the country are that lucky to have that sort of number of approaches to system leaders.*

One witness described how the current generation of London school leaders had benefitted from a particularly nurturing professional environment and mentoring relationships with more experienced staff:

*When I talked to colleagues in [named London borough] recently, it was very notable how many felt that they had been encouraged, people that had maybe been a deputy in an individual school, and they were now executive head of a federation of schools. They had been gradually encouraged, nurtured, supported and progressed over the years.*

Another witness highlighted how the best MATs in London had provided new routes into leadership posts and learning about school leadership.

*The performance of really strong multi-academy trusts in London I think does help that leadership development. Because it gives that framework that you can develop your career, that you can move around between schools. And I think that is your asset with some of the stronger multi-academy trusts ultimately in London if they do offer that career development, leadership development framework.*

### **Extensive opportunities for professional learning based on school-to-school collaboration**

Our witnesses thought that the professional culture in London was collaborative and professional learning was facilitated in London by the physical proximity of so many schools and good transport systems.

*I think that given London is a very urban area, there is more opportunity for schools to work collaboratively and we know that when schools are geographically located near to one another, they're more likely to collaborate. We know that collaboration can breed good practice and dissemination of best practice. The sharing of teaching staff etc., so I think London does benefit from having more schools that are more geographically located near to one another.*

The current generation of London school leaders had benefitted from a particularly nurturing professional environment and mentoring relationships with more experienced staff

Just as important as proximity, collaboration has been facilitated by a relatively mature professional culture that was able to encourage simultaneously both competition and partnership of different types.

*Schools in London are probably on the whole a little bit further on than in many areas in terms of how they collaborate with each other.*

Some thought that London had embraced earlier than the rest of England the potential benefits of different forms of formal school-to-school partnership:

*I think the federations and those sorts of structures, which I think were more extensive in London before they were in other parts of the country, so they do seem to have played a valuable role in people being able to spot talent and new leaders coming through. I think those structures encouraged them. It's not ultimately about the structures, but I think you need enough of a network and a structure to enable people to be spotted, encouraged, and given opportunities to progress. I think that's quite important to try and keep that going.*

Witnesses talked about an ecosystem of schools, teaching school alliances, academy trusts, universities and cultural institutions in London that provided a resource bank for many forms of professional learning. New networks have emerged recently such as the ResearchED group of teachers interested in engagement with high quality educational research. Although ResearchED has since gone national and indeed international, its genesis was in London where this collaborative community of teachers interested in educational research is particularly strong:

*There are events that go on around London that schools can access more easily. So I think that probably leads to a stronger engagement with research that is sometimes possible or easy for schools elsewhere in the country.*

*You have got quite a rich tapestry, I suppose, a rich network. You could almost see it like an ecosystem, where you have got a wider variety [of opportunities].*

### **Diversity, disruption and innovation**

Several witnesses expressed a view that today the London school system, seen collectively, is innovative, and perhaps more innovative than other parts of England. Some seemed to think that the greater prevalence of academies in London than in other places had added to the momentum for change and improvement. The precise impact of academies on outcomes is contested. One complex issue, which is difficult to measure, is the extent to which the existence of a new academy galvanises other local schools to 'raise their game'. One civil servant thought that this was often the case and she described how academisation created, in her view, a beneficial disruptive force, creating local pressure on the wider community of schools.

*I think that does undoubtedly cause other heads to go, "Oh, actually we need to raise our game now. We need to keep on our toes."*

Another expert- with a specialism in research and data- talked about how her research indicated that the early academies in London had been particularly successful.

**The greater prevalence of academies in London than in other places had added to the momentum for change and improvement**

*The ones that were opened pre-2010 [...] were, basically, set up to turn around failing schools. [...] They improved, on average, quite significantly. Because many of them were in London, in those first few years of the academy's programme. That will have contributed to the overall improvement that we've seen in London.*

One serving headteacher considered that the best of the London academies were models of best practice that showed how disadvantaged students could, if taught well, achieve outstanding results.

*I think there are beacons. There are examples of real excellence [...] some of the Harris schools, King Solomon Academy, schools like that, which have got really remarkable outcomes for the kids, and those are a real model and example to other schools.*

In the view of another witness, who had a senior pan-London policy role for many years, the diversity of school types in London encouraged both healthy competition and professional learning. The existence of very different schools nearby, with different models of teaching and learning, provoked reflection and innovation:

*There is just this fantastic array of diversity within the school system. I mean, I am personally very committed to the comprehensive system, but you also get a very interesting array of different types, whether it is ethos, culture. They might all be committed to good outcomes, but they have got quite a different approach.*

The diversity of school types in London encouraged both healthy competition and professional learning

## Chapter 3

# Conclusion: sustaining success





## The interviews we conducted with expert witnesses in 2018, and our reading of the recent wider literature, broadly confirmed important aspects of our analysis in 2014.

Key stakeholders continued to identify the following factors as important in underpinning the academic success of London government schools:

- the ability to recruit and to retain a particularly talented teacher workforce
- the quality of leadership and leadership development opportunities in London
- the 'disruptive' power of new types of government school, such as academies and free schools, to stimulate improvement.

The key resource for school development is the collective expertise within the schools themselves rather than the work of external school improvement agencies

### A self-improving system

While much of the analysis of 2014 stands, many years have now past since the conclusion of London Challenge, the major government-funded intervention that ran 2003-2011. In our view, London today constitutes a form of 'self-improving' school system. The key resource for school development is the collective expertise within the schools themselves rather than the work of external school improvement agencies. We consider that one of the greatest achievements of London Challenge was that it built school-level capacity so that the momentum for improvement continued to build after the end of the intervention.

The system today is highly diverse; there is no single blueprint for how a successful London school should operate. This diversity is a great strength because it fuels a very lively professional discourse in London about effective teaching and learning. One of the most impressive characteristics of the London system is a professional culture that involves high levels of both school-to-school competition and school-to-school collaboration.

### Making sense of the role of ethnicity

Witnesses in 2018 recognised, to a greater extent than in 2014, the power of student and parental aspirations and the importance of the distinctive ethnic make-up of the city. For one witness, this was the paramount factor. Most witnesses advocated a multi-causal view within which ethnicity, policy and school effectiveness intersected and all played a part in explaining the success story. Some witnesses stressed that while London had advantages, such features as gang culture in parts of London made the city a more challenging place to teach than many other parts of England.

A possible new narrative emerged from our discussions suggesting that it is not always helpful to discuss ethnicity as a standalone, autonomous factor. The evidence from the OECD<sup>29</sup> analysis of the experience of migrant students is also consistent with this new narrative which recognises that students from a migrant background are often highly-motivated but this is not enough: aspirational students need skilful teachers and schools that are orderly, nurturing and academically challenging. The best London schools provide such an environment for learning.

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### The significance of data literacy

Expert witnesses in 2018 said little about the power of data, which was a major theme highlighted in our earlier research. Our view of this is that data literacy is no less important than before but perhaps it is now taken for granted as a key dimension of a system seeking to achieve continuous improvement. The significance of data literacy in London schools was reinforced by Allison<sup>30</sup> who compared schools outside and inside London. Underperforming schools outside London were characterised by weakness in terms of teacher efficacy and a lack of confidence about the importance of the use of data.

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### Challenges facing London schools

There have been far fewer government initiatives with a focus on London in the period 2013-2018 compared to the earlier years of the century. What matters now, according to our witnesses, is the need not to undo the achievements of recent times. The key risks that they consistently identified were in two areas:

- the recruitment and retention of teachers when teacher salaries may be falling behind those in other professions and London house prices make teaching elsewhere more attractive;
- the perception that London schools have done badly from the new funding formula for government schools in England.

One issue that has changed is the political perspective. Whereas London in 2000 was seen by national politicians as a problem requiring solution, in 2018 London is seen by the government as a best practice model for the rest of the country. For the Department for Education the focus now is on learning from London and seeking to transform outcomes in other parts of England, including the designated 'opportunity areas'. It was for this reason that London has been divided for the purpose of organising the work of the Regional School Commissioners: Greater London forms part of three regions in order that effective practice in London can be shared more widely across much of southern England.



In 2018 London is seen by the government as a best practice model for the rest of the country

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<sup>29</sup> OECD, 2018 <sup>30</sup> Allison, 2018

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## Conclusion

Our investigation confirms that the London government school system continues to perform well. While in many other countries urban schools and students from immigrant backgrounds underperform, the multi-ethnic population of London schools outperform students in the rest of England. In our view the credit for this should be given both to the students and to the education professionals who provide an environment where the students can thrive. While every school system is unique there is much that policymakers from around the world can learn from the way London schools have built and sustained success.

## Appendix 1: A commentary on and review of the research literature

As Husbands noted in 2014,<sup>31</sup> the debate around the causes of London's academic success follows the well-established debate in social science discourse between structure and agency as the drivers of social change. The structural approach to London's success considers outcomes to have been determined by factors outside of the control of the education system, most notably the ethnic composition of pupil intake in the city. This approach reflects a wider view of education outcomes as being the result of social conditions, such as class, ethnicity and gender, and consequently considers policies which engender changes at a school level to be inconsequential in the quest to raise education outcomes.

The main opposing position to the structural approach to London's success stems from the position that humans are capable of agency and of overcoming structural influences. This approach holds that, whilst structural factors should be understood when examining London's educational context, they are not the primary explanation for the rapid improvement in London's academic performance; we should instead look to changes in schools' and teachers' behaviours and the educational policies which precipitated these changes.

### The role of pupil demographics, ethnicity and school composition

Some commentators have argued that London's success cannot be explained by policy interventions but is owed instead at least in significant measure to the changing composition of London's school population.

This viewpoint has been strongly advocated by Burgess, who argued that "If London had the same ethnic composition as the rest of England, there would be no 'London Effect'".<sup>32</sup> He posited that the progress of pupils in most ethnic groups in London is no faster than elsewhere, and that London's success can be explained in its entirety by the fact that it has a higher proportion of high-performing ethnic groups than the rest of the country. This explanation is linked to a view that the children of immigrants tend to place higher values and expectations on education and consequently work harder and achieve better results. Burgess acknowledged that the argument struggles to disentangle the impact of ethnicity and immigrants- given that many children from ethnic minorities are not migrants- but nevertheless he argued that, however the situation is viewed, being non-white British or a recent immigrant has a positive impact on educational attainment. Furthermore, he suggested that any improvement in the attainment of white British pupils could be attributed to the opportunities London's integrated school system affords them to interact with higher-scoring ethnic minority pupils. In more recent research, Burgess and Heller-Sahlgren<sup>33</sup> argued that Burgess' original hypothesis was supported by their analysis of PISA data which found that immigrant students in the UK have substantially more positive attitudes towards education than native British children, and that this explains why the same data shows more positive attitudes towards education in London than elsewhere. They argued

that, once pupils' immigration status is adjusted for, the 'London effect' in attitudes disappears, just as the 'London effect' in attainment does when ethnicity is accounted for.

This focus on pupil characteristics as the source of regional variations in educational attainment was supported by Treadaway, who argued that differences in school effectiveness between the North and South of England were in fact minor, and that differences in results can be attributed to pupil characteristics and the number of subjects schools entered which count towards Progress 8 measures.<sup>34</sup> The impact of ethnicity was also observed in the DfE's recent analysis of regional variations in early years attainment, which found that regional variations are minimal once background characteristics – such as ethnicity and socio-economic status – are accounted for, although this could arguably be the result of the processes behind the 'London effect' taking place later in the school system.<sup>35</sup>

### The role of policy initiatives

Several studies have highlighted the positive contribution of specific government policies, particularly the school improvement programme known as London Challenge – and its successor, the City Challenge. In its evaluation of the London Challenge, Ofsted<sup>36</sup> noted the rapid improvement of primary schools which joined the programme, highlighting that between 2008 and 2010 these schools, seen collectively, had gone from below-average to above-average on value-added measures. The report praised the clarity in leadership from civil servants at the national ministry and senior staff of London Challenge. Ofsted the support provided to schools by experienced advisers, and the embedded use of data that marked the programme. It also noted that school improvement was sustained once programme involvement ended, due to schools' continued participation in professional development schemes.

Similarly, NFER<sup>37</sup> found that leadership provision across the City Challenge programmes was well-regarded, as was the way the programme used existing local resources and expertise, the bespoke support offered to schools, the operation of school-to-school collaboration, the opportunities to work beyond local authority boundaries and the use of coaching for headteachers. The leadership provision was in particular perceived to have had a positive impact on pupil attainment, the quality of teaching and learning, Ofsted ratings and the quality of professional development. The evaluation highlighted the NLE/LLE model as particularly effective, arguing that it helped to develop leadership capacity and raise standards at the underperforming edge of the system. Hutchings et al.'s subsequent analysis found evidence that attainment in schools which participated in the 'Keys to Success' programme improved more rapidly than comparable schools.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Ofsted<sup>39</sup> argued that the Challenge programmes were marked by high accountability, skilled leaders, focused use of performance data, effective school-to-school support and the employment of radical structural solutions where schools were consistently underperforming.

<sup>31</sup> Husbands, 2014 <sup>32</sup> Burgess, 2014:3 <sup>33</sup> Burgess and Heller-Sahlgren, 2018 <sup>34</sup> Treadaway, 2018 <sup>35</sup> Dunatchik et al. 2018 <sup>36</sup> Ofsted, 2010 <sup>37</sup> Rudd et al., 2011 <sup>38</sup> Hutchings et al., 2012 <sup>39</sup> Ofsted, 2013

It has also been noted that some of the structures established by the London Challenge were sustained after the intervention officially ended. For example, the NLE and LLE model has continued, as has the teaching schools model and the wider notion that professional development should be rooted in schools and adopt a peer-to-peer approach.<sup>40</sup>

### A complex interplay of factors

Some commentators have suggested that London's success cannot be attributed to one causal factor – whether policy interventions or ethnic diversity – but to multiple factors.

Blanden et al.<sup>41</sup> concurred with Burgess's identification of pupil characteristics as an influential driver of London's success, but argued that ethnic diversity cannot explain the success in its entirety. They considered that, while variations in the ethnic composition of pupil groups can explain some of the regional variation in education outcomes, it only accounts for around one sixth of the improvement. For ethnicity to be considered the main causal factor, it would be necessary to demonstrate that there had been more substantial changes to ethnic diversity in London over time and/or changed effects of ethnicity on attainment. Blanden et al. argued that these factors were both at play, but that their contribution to improved attainment was small.<sup>42</sup>

Blanden and colleagues also argued that the London advantage for disadvantaged children is not as recent a phenomenon as is often assumed, but was evident in primary and secondary schools from the mid-1990s.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that policies initiated in the early and mid-2000s cannot provide comprehensive causal explanations as the improvements in attainment preceded their introduction. The majority of the variation, they suggested, can be attributed to improved prior attainment, that is, pupils performing better in primary school. Their analysis found that the 'London effect' is small at age five and grows between ages five and eleven, suggesting that analyses which focus on secondary school interventions miss part of the picture. London's success should therefore be primarily attributed to gradual improvements in school quality from the mid-1990s onwards rather than to pupil characteristics. The authors do not posit the reasons for this improvement but assert that any explanation must start from the mid-1990s and have a strong effect on primary schools.

Blanden et al.'s conclusions were similar to those reached by Greaves et al.,<sup>44</sup> who argued that ethnicity accounts for roughly half of the improvement seen in London schools between 2002-2012, but noted that disadvantaged pupils in London were still 17% more likely to achieve 5 A\*-Cs compared with elsewhere after ethnicity was controlled for, suggesting that ethnicity cannot fully account for the London effect. Greaves et al. also identified the changes in 'prior attainment' of pupils at primary school as a major driver in improved secondary results, highlighting the substantial improvement in the Key Stage 2 results of disadvantaged pupils seen between 1999-2003 which then translated to improved GCSE results five years later. They hypothesised that this trend may be due to the piloting of 'national strategies' in primary literacy and numeracy in the late 1990s, but emphasise that the causes require further investigation. This supports Wyness'<sup>45</sup> finding that the 'London advantage' emerged in Key Stage 2, suggesting that schools are a major driver of the phenomenon.

Recent analysis undertaken on behalf of the Department for Education has confirmed that, although the impact of demography and socio-economic characteristics can be identified in London's improved educational performance, the 'London effect' remains observable after these factors have been taken into account.<sup>46</sup> The Propensity Score Matching technique was used to analyse London pupils' educational performance and found that the majority of ethnic groups in London – including White British pupils – perform better in London than elsewhere in England, indicating that ethnicity cannot be the sole factor involved. Furthermore, the author highlights the fact that the gap between the proportion of non-White British pupils in London and non-White British pupils outside of London remained relatively stable between 2003 and 2013; for London's improved performance to be attributable to ethnic diversity, an increase in this gap, proportional to the rate of educational improvement, should have been observable. In terms of what might explain the remaining 'London effect', the report suggests that the qualifications taken by pupils in London may be a factor; the analysis demonstrated that the attainment gap between London and the rest of England did not grow between 2006 and 2015 when GCSE equivalent qualifications are included, implying that the gap at least partly results from London pupils' choice of more traditional GCSEs.

<sup>40</sup> Kidson & Norris 2014 <sup>41</sup> Blanden et al., 2015 <sup>42</sup> Blanden et al., 2015 <sup>43</sup> Ibid. <sup>44</sup> Greaves et al., 2014 <sup>45</sup> Wyness, 2011 <sup>46</sup> Allison, 2018





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