

A photograph of four students in school uniforms sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. From left to right: a girl with long dark hair, a boy with short brown hair, a girl with long blonde hair, and a boy with short dark hair. They are all smiling and looking towards the right. The background shows a brick building and green foliage.

GROWING THE TOP

EXTENDING EXCELLENCE
IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY
OF STAND-OUT SCHOOLS

Evaluation of a Challenge Partners pilot programme

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“System-led improvement can really work: the way we were talking; the way we were taking ideas away, the way we really wanted to improve our own schools. That’s definitely a vehicle for the way forward.”

Quote from participant

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Foreword

It is vital for schools to share their experience of improvement and learn from excellent practice, to ensure our education system is world-class. This is not some elitist call to arms but a challenge which is even more important now as schools and trusts address a common issue: the widening disadvantage gap.

Challenge Partners is built upon the values of excellence, equity, courageous leadership, challenge, collaboration and innovation. The Growing the Top programme really exemplifies these values, as leaders from outstanding schools work together to share excellent practice and challenge each other to continue to improve.

Since its inception almost 10 years ago, Challenge Partners has taken a practitioner-led approach to supporting school improvement nationally. However, for the flagship Quality Assurance Review, and more widely within the self-improving school system, much of the focus has been on reducing disparity between the highest and lowest achieving schools. We are pleased to see in this report how the Growing the Top programme has a different focus: it provides an opportunity for the most stand out schools to share knowledge of what is working well in their schools and their sustained improvement journey to get there. But also an opportunity for successful leaders to use their combined experience and knowledge to discuss and tackle some of the trickier challenges that they face in their schools.

One of our firmly held beliefs is that we should constantly challenge the current definition of outstanding if we are to close the gap over time and that those schools with the knowledge of how to stand out should support those that currently do not. We refer to reducing this disparity in performance as the ‘upwards convergence’ of our schools, pupils and

teachers’ performance. We assert that there is a risk within any educational system if it solely focuses on the lowest performing schools and the top performing schools are left to drift and potentially move aimlessly downwards. It is important to stimulate the top to rise higher so that the whole system moves upwards.

We do this by establishing learning partnerships, engaging in research, stimulating innovation and through the process of peer review. By ‘stretching the top’ a momentum is created with the highest achieving schools driving the system forward.

Matthews and Killick’s report also clearly illustrates what we value at Challenge Partners, which is the importance of a third-party actor in owning and facilitating programme processes. There is real benefit in having someone who takes on the organisation and provides robust facilitation, so heads can focus on what is most important.

Finally, it is also interesting to read in the report how there are fundamental commonalities between these outstanding schools, despite their different contexts. The level of awareness and evaluation taking place in each of the schools as well as the similarity in challenges they are facing and aspiration for improving student outcomes, really demonstrates how despite an ‘outstanding’ label, the most stand out schools do not remain so by resting on their laurels. They strive to find opportunities to learn and develop and continue to challenge each other to improve.

I am delighted to be able to present the following report which exemplifies the work that Challenge Partners has done and continues to do to support development and improvement across the English education sector.

Dame Sue John

Thanks

About the authors

Dr Peter Matthews OBE, the external evaluator, is visiting professor at the UCL Institute of Education. A former teacher, senior civil servant and Her Majesty’s Inspector he has many years’ experience of evaluating schools and education programmes both in the UK and internationally. A wide range of publications include studies for the DfE, Ofsted, the OECD and organisations such as Challenge Partners.

Roisin Killick is an experienced programme manager at Challenge Partners with previous education experience in the UK, Spain, Mexico and Egypt. She has a master’s degree in globalisation and development, and as part of this, has conducted an extended research project looking at how the Mexican education system serves the country’s indigenous communities. She has been involved with the Growing the Top programme as internal evaluator, observing many of the trio visits and undertaking formative evaluation of the programme.

Acknowledgements

The Challenge Partners Growing the Top programme was conceived and directed by Dr Josephine Valentine OBE, Chief Executive of the Danes Educational Trust, with Dame Sue John, Executive Director of Challenge Partners. Growing the Top was managed by Liz Smissen, with Roisin Killick who also contributed substantial evidence for the evaluation.

The evaluators greatly appreciate the help and cooperation of the programme leaders, participating schools, and the facilitators who steered the school visits and discussions so adroitly. The report also benefits from the insights of Sir George Berwick and the editorial skills of Rita Bugler.

Introduction

This report evaluates how highly effective schools can learn from each other in their search for continuous improvement.

During the 2018-19 academic year, Challenge Partners instigated a programme for the most effective secondary schools in the Challenge Partners’ Network of Excellence with the aim of enabling them to learn from each other and from external sources. The schools worked in threes to share factors that were key to their success and to provide reciprocal consultancy on one or more further systemic challenges they faced.

In autumn 2018, Challenge Partners invited 24 of their outstanding secondary schools to join a new ‘Growing the Top’ programme.

Twenty-one partner schools that met specific criteria for ‘stand-out schools’ decided to participate in the programme. They were grouped in threes taking account of geographical spread and a mix of school types so that there was no more than one single sex or selective school in each trio.

Each school in turn hosted a one-day visit by the headteacher and another senior leader from both the other schools.

The intention of these day-long visits was two-fold: to present and display key aspects of their school that the host school(s) felt made important contributions to their success, and to invite the visitors to investigate and advise on a systemic challenge faced by the school. As part of the strong management of this programme, Challenge Partners provided an expert external facilitator for each visit.

The programme of three reciprocal visits across each trio was augmented by three whole cohort events for the participating leaders.

These conferences aimed to sustain the programme by providing networking opportunities together with a range of stimulating and informative inputs on the leadership of change in the business, research and other education communities.

This evaluative study uses evidence gathered from the beginning to the conclusion of the programme.

The study focuses on the design and implementation of the programme, the quality of the processes and mobilisation of knowledge, and the impact of the programme in stimulating positive change or refinement in the work of the participating schools. Did participation add value to the participating schools and leaders?

The research used mixed methods - a combination of surveys, case studies and individual testimonies – to arrive at its conclusions.

This report illustrates the rich knowledge and discussions which emerged from the programme. It evaluates a model which is both distinctively different from the peer reviews (Quality Assurance Reviews) undertaken annually by all Challenge Partners schools and which would be well worth replicating with other groups of high-performing schools. The project also catalysed the establishment of several tiers of learning communities within the cohort of the 21 stand-out schools.

Participants ¹

Aylesbury Grammar School, *Buckinghamshire*

Baylis Court School, *Slough*

Bosworth Academy, *Leicestershire*

Brentside High School, *Ealing*

Chesham Grammar School, *Buckinghamshire*

Claremont High School Academy, *Brent*

Hayes School, *Bromley*

Kingsbridge Community College, *Devon*

Langley Park School for Boys, *Bromley*

Lilian Baylis Technology School, *Lambeth*

Mulberry Academy Shoreditch, *Tower Hamlets*

Mulberry School for Girls, *Tower Hamlets*

Northwood School, *Hillingdon*

Royal Wootton Bassett Academy, *Wiltshire*

Rushey Mead Academy, *Leicester*

Sir Christopher Hatton Academy, *Northamptonshire*

St Albans Girls’ School, *Hertfordshire*

St Clement Danes School, *Hertfordshire*

The Charter School North Dulwich, *Southwark*

The Compton School, *Barnet*

Wren Academy, *Barnet*

Summary of findings

1. Twenty-one outstanding secondary schools embarked on the Challenge Partners Growing the Top Programme for Stand-out Schools (GtT or the programme) in autumn 2018 with high expectations. Their reasons for participating reflected common ambitions for driving further improvement, a readiness to share success and a desire to learn through collaboration with their peer leaders.
2. Towards the end of the programme in summer 2019, all schools agreed that participation had fulfilled or surpassed their expectations of how their schools would benefit. They spoke of the value of the ‘fantastic opportunity’ to spend time in other outstanding schools and collaborate in considering systemic excellence and ongoing challenges. In all trios, the visits either had led without delay to changes in the participating schools through adopting, or adapting to their own specific context the great ideas and practice from schools in their trio, or had influenced planning for implementation in September.
3. There was a positive response to the initial cohort meeting of all participants at which the programme was launched, the trios were formed, and contrasting inputs were presented by leaders in business as well as education, including the independent sector. A second meeting part way through the year was useful in bringing the groups together again to reflect on progress and what they had learned, but response to the speakers was more mixed. Most of the participating schools felt that the mid-programme meeting was less essential to the success of the programme. A concluding conference in the summer term provided an opportunity for each trio to present a summary of their collaboration to the whole cohort as well as further inputs, of which that from a former education policy adviser was of especial interest.
4. The school visits undoubtedly were highlights in which a great deal of knowledge was shared and created. Participating leaders particularly valued:
 - “*discovering very useful strategies’ worth adopting in our own schools*”
 - “*receiving ‘great ideas’ for tackling our own systemic challenge and finding that our issues were not unique*”
 - “*observing and learning about excellent practice*”
 - “*gaining fresh perspectives*”
 - “*reflecting on our own school improvement priorities*”
 - “*having valuable opportunities to learn from other leaders, teachers and students*”
 - “*having generated ideas and gained a renewed energy to improve further: growing the top!*”
5. Factors contributing to the success of the Growing the Top programme include the following:
 - the vision, design, organisation and support of the programme by the Challenge Partners team
 - the readiness of these outstanding partner schools not only to share their strengths but also expose aspects they wanted to improve
 - the openness, frankness and insights of fellow leaders in the programme, together with a non judgemental approach to what they saw
 - the quality of several conference speakers who stimulated thinking and reflected different organisational cultures
 - the valued contribution of external facilitators for the visit days, particularly facilitators who had substantial experience of school and system leadership.
6. Underlying these elements were; the trust that extended within the trios of schools; generosity in sharing; curiosity and a search for knowledge and understanding; and an appreciation of what the other schools were doing and achieving. There was much incidental evidence of the four ‘capitals’² which form part of Challenge Partners’ DNA.
7. It is doubtful whether quite such professional and productive relationships could be generated so quickly and effectively across schools which, although relative strangers to each other, were not already part of an established wider network having shared vision, aims and principles, and a culture of challenge and support. The Growing the Top visits had a distinctly different emphasis and flavour from the Challenge Partners’ Quality Assurance Reviews (QARs). As several participants said, the visits were not judgemental. Visiting leaders explored the strengths of host schools and reflected on frank information about their challenges. All participants – host and visiting leaders alike – benefited from the resulting discussion, analysis and brainstorming.
8. Aspects of strategic excellence included: teaching, learning and assessment; the development of staff, particularly through coaching; curriculum matters including the wider aspects of personal development and mental health, and a range of specific initiatives. Student-centred leadership permeated all these aspects. The dominant factor emerged as the learning culture of these outstanding schools: their character as learning organisations.
9. Systemic challenges majored on matters relating to differential achievement, equity and inclusion, focusing, for example, on boys and Black Caribbean students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as post-16 issues of student recruitment, retention and achievement. The programme unveiled many thoughtful insights into understanding and responding to the social-psychological challenges for these young people.
10. Ultimately, the value of the programme rests on whether participation and the sharing of knowledge results in improved education of students. There was significant evidence of schools leaving the visits with greater knowledge about the hallmarks of excellence in other schools and a raft of ideas that could be applied to shared challenges. Translating the knowledge into improvement strategies is the next step, and – before the end of the year – most schools had identified steps they had already taken or were planning to introduce that would make an impact. These intentions reflected the ‘reducing disparity’ and ‘growing the top’ concepts of the Upwards Convergence school improvement model, outlined later.
11. Participants intended to keep in touch with the schools they had visited, and several inter-school visits had been undertaken by other staff to follow up points of interest. The great majority of participants also considered that similar programmes would benefit from external facilitation and from being organised and managed by Challenge Partners.
12. It is evident that the Growing the Top programme generated a high level – one might say ‘leading edge’ – professional learning community of the 42 or more senior leaders involved, together with smaller and deeper learning communities within the trios and between the schools represented in the trios. Before the year’s programme was completed, significant inter-school partnerships were flourishing at the operational level, particularly involving subject specialists and other middle leaders who learnt from each other and developed their knowledge in greater depth. The ripples of the programme are spreading outwards and creating new nodes of knowledge.

2 Moral, social, knowledge and organisational capital

Recommendations

- 13. Replication** – The success of the programme in meeting its aims of sharing excellent practice and driving improvement through collaboration provides good reason to extend it to other schools. For a start, the participants would be keen to undertake another series of trio visits in the future, not necessarily annually, but with different partner schools. The participants recommended unreservedly that the programme would also be suitable for other outstanding education providers, particularly primary schools, but it should also be of value to special schools.
- 14. Phase specificity** – The programme worked particularly well because all the schools in each trio provided for the common age-range of 11-16 years. Schools professed to be satisfied with the composition of their groups of three. The fact that one member of several groups was a single sex or selective school added a different perspective and did not appear to detract from the value of the experience. All but one of the schools also had post-16 provision.
- 15. Cross-phase groups of schools** – The Growing the Top approach could benefit trios of schools in different sectors if the systemic challenge aspect was of common interest, such as year 6 to year 7 transition or SEND. In terms of sharing outstanding practice, there may be gains in cross-phase work as often happens within school networks. But most of the common systemic challenges, for example sixth form issues or the progress of adolescent boys, benefitted from having consultancy from others facing the same challenges.
- 16. Matching themes** – The programme showed that some challenges, such as boys' underachievement, were shared by more than one school. In other cases, what was a strength in one school – such as the personal development curriculum – was a challenge in another. Such factors could be taken into account in the formation of trios, establishing clear expectations for the involvement of schools and identifying what benefits should accrue from their engagement. On the other hand, there may be dangers in over-engineering the school groupings. Thematic focus groups could provide a purposeful way of following up and building on the programme and engaging more schools having similar interests or priorities.
- 17. Facilitation** – Most participants considered that similar programmes would benefit from external facilitation and being organised and managed by Challenge Partners. This applies particularly to schools new to such a programme, where the facilitator can maintain the focus and discipline needed in the programme of events and discussions. Facilitators who combine experience in the leadership of similar high performing schools to those of participants, with good chairing skills, are particularly valued. Their expertise, voiced when appropriate, can add value to the discussion of challenging issues or move the discussion on. Retaining the same facilitator for all three visits within a trio would generally be an advantage in the future.
- 18. Identification and preparation of facilitators** – A potential source of well-suited facilitators could be school leaders who have already experienced the programme. There may be merit in setting an expectation, or condition of involvement in the programme, that the headteacher might be called upon in the following year or two to be a visit facilitator.
- 19. Day visits** – Cross-school visiting worked very well but could be even better if:
 - agendas are agreed with the facilitator initially and then shared with the other two schools five working days before the visits
 - the agenda is accompanied by more detail about the systemic challenge to allow visitors to prepare
 - facilitation is proactive when needed, ensuring a balance between inputs and discussion
 - continuity is assured by identifying one facilitator to chair all three visits for a trio of schools
 - the contracting process is dispensed with after the first visit
 - management of the day ensures the full agenda is covered including reflective time and roundups at the end of the day, avoiding short cuts
 - the pairs of school leaders remain constant members of the programme and are not substituted or augmented
 - all visits could include seeing some classes that are pertinent to the area(s) of excellence or challenge.
- 20. Cohort meetings** – These could be limited to the beginning and end of the programme, although a mid-year meeting provides an opportunity for sharing things learned and applied from the early visits. The final meeting provides an opportunity to review the content of the year's GtT programme and its translation into next steps. Commissions associated with the programme could focus on commonly encountered challenges and provide a way of bringing interested schools together in the year after the programme. Stand-out schools could lead events which include other partnership schools wrestling with the same issues. Other initiatives might include visits to independent schools, international visits and alumni networking events.
- 21. Capturing the learning** – Notes of visits were taken in most cases by members of the Challenge Partners programme team, and some discussions were recorded. Looking forward, the production of a case study, perhaps written jointly by the facilitator or note taker and the school would provide a more substantive account of matters of wider interest, particularly in dealing with systemic challenge.
- 22. Sharing the knowledge** – Challenge Partners should consider how to use the information from this programme and share it both across the schools involved and also more widely across the Network of Excellence. Where there are matching systemic areas of excellence and challenges, Challenge Partners could facilitate introductions between these schools. The areas could be included in future leadership development days; again, there would be an expectation of involvement. There is also the broader question about how this could be shared to influence the system?

Background

Challenge Partners

23. Challenge Partners is a cooperative organisation subscribed to and owned by over 400 partner schools the length and breadth of England. Its mission³ is to 'reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children. Through collaboration, challenge and professional development, they are working to ensure every school community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.' Challenge Partners have 'collectively adopted four core aims that guide what they do:

- improve pupils' examination results at a rate above the national average and accelerate progress of the disadvantaged
- enable all our schools to improve at a rate above the national average
- create more national leaders and outstanding schools that fulfil the Teaching Schools criteria
- develop a world class, self-improving and sustainable system that contributes to national research and policy-making.'

The approach

24. Challenge Partners works through providing networks and programmes that facilitate successful collaboration and challenge between schools in order to underpin improvements in educational outcomes which would not be possible for a school or group of schools to achieve as effectively or efficiently on their own.

'Our work assumes that if we build a trusted practitioner-led network, identify the knowledge and skills of the best, and facilitate effective collaboration with the rest, then we reduce the variability in provision. And if we also link the best schools with external knowledge, we drive up the performance of all schools, leaders, teachers and pupils in the network and by harnessing the collective voice of member schools we empower them to influence national policy and practice for the benefit of all.' (Challenge Partners⁴)

25. Collaboration involves sharing knowledge within and across clusters of partner schools coordinated by hub schools which are often also Teaching Schools and multi-academy trusts. The challenge element includes a commitment by every partner school to both host and contribute staff to annual peer reviews - the Challenge Partners 'Quality Assurance Review' (QAR) - which contribute to school improvement and the professional development of participating senior leaders.⁵

The underlying principles

26. The work of Challenge Partners is rooted in a set of principles, the 'four capitals', regarded as key components of effective knowledge management. These are combined in a process that includes:

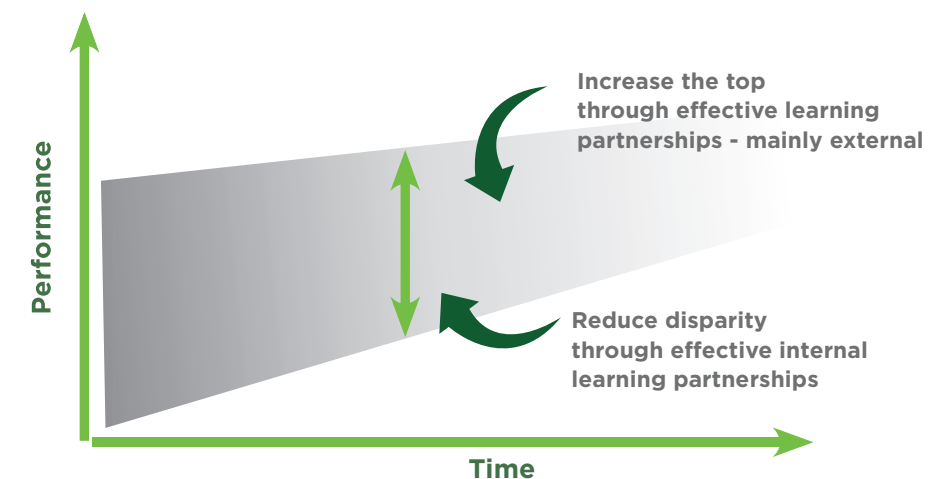
- defining the moral purpose and creating the moral capital
- auditing and capturing the knowledge capital
- equipping staff to have the social capital to share their knowledge
- providing the organisational capital to allow this to happen ⁶

27. These four principles come to the fore in collaborative school enquiries such as 'Growing the Top' in which openness, trust, receptivity, generosity, intellectual honesty and reflective enquiry are among the social attributes needed to make a success of sharing knowledge between schools.

The Upwards Convergence Model

28. The 'Growing the Top' programme stems from a powerful model for school improvement articulated over many years by Professor Sir George Berwick CBE: the Upwards Convergence model. **Upwards Convergence** is the term he uses to describe the theory of action for continuous improvement through improving on previous best through **growing the top**, on the one hand, and **reducing disparity** in performance, on the other, so as to close the gap between those that have the knowledge of how to be outstanding with those that do not.

Figure 1. Upwards convergence (Berwick ⁷)



Growing the top

29. While both Challenge Partners and the emergence of system leadership in a so-called self-improving school system have done much to reduce disparity through staff in the best schools sharing their knowledge with their less successful peers, less has been done to enable the most successful schools to network with colleagues in other outstanding schools and establishments and to undertake educational research. Growing the Top aimed to fulfil this need through a multi-dimensional programme that involves the most successful schools in sharing their knowledge as well as learning more about the leadership of other successful organisations and the fruits of relevant research.

³ <https://www.challengepartners.org/our-mission>

⁴ <https://www.challengepartners.org/our-approach>

⁵ Matthews, P. and Headon, M. (2015) Multiple Gains: an evaluation of Challenge Partners' peer reviews

⁶ Berwick, G. (2017) The Four Capitals, London: Challenge Partners <https://www.challengepartners.org/sites/default/files/files/CP%20-%204%20Capitals%20publication%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.challengepartners.org/sites/default/files/files/CP-Upwards-convergence-brochure.pdf>

The Growing the Top programme for stand-out schools

Programme concept and design

30. Challenge Partners perceived a need to provide a programme for their most effective schools, conscious that these schools tended to be net donors of knowledge and expertise to the other schools in their hubs and across the partnership. These schools recognised that they would not remain outstanding by standing still. Challenge Partners felt it would be useful for these schools to visit other outstanding schools to see how they implement their improvement strategies. It was decided to structure the visits to ensure that their value was fully realised. They intended the programme to be as inclusive as possible and enable participants to benefit without charge.



“Launched in 2018, Growing the Top is a challenging programme for secondary schools in the Challenge Partners ‘Network of Excellence’, which have outstanding performance but are driven to keep improving and learning from each other. Underpinned by Challenge Partners’ core philosophy, that it is important to stimulate the top to rise higher so that the whole system moves upwards (the upwards convergence model), this programme provides opportunities for schools to establish partnerships and share their journeys towards excellence. This is achieved through research, discussions and school visit days to identify and share systemic best practice. The programme also provides opportunities to hear from other sectors, including charities and business, to challenge prevailing thinking in the education sector.”⁸

⁸ <https://www.challengepartners.org/pilot>

31. The programme (outlined in figure 2) was designed to run over the course of one academic year, beginning with a cohort of secondary schools in 2018/19. It would use trained facilitators for the school visits. The facilitators would meet periodically for training and quality assure the programme.

Figure 2. Outline of the Growing the Top programme

Timing	Programme events
Spring/Summer 2018	Planning and pre-piloting the programme
Summer 2018	Identification of participating schools
Autumn 2018	On-boarding calls to each school by programme directors
	Programme initiation: first cohort event (18 October) Facilitator training
	Trio visits commenced
Spring 2019	Second cohort event (7 February) Facilitator training
	Trio visits completed
Summer 2019	Programme completion: third cohort event (13 June)
	Completion of evaluation report

32. The programme set ambitious objectives:

- to gain knowledge external to the UK education sector (a distinguishing feature of the programme)
- to facilitate a fellowship-type approach (distinguishing feature)
- to identify the key features of stand-out organisations and schools, and how these are sustained
- to share good practice through structured school visits
- to develop leadership through observation of other outstanding schools
- to provide validation beyond a school visit, which would feed into the system as would happen in other professions
- to capture best practice in the system.

33. Participation was by invitation, with the head teacher engaging in the programme on behalf of their school. Due to logistical constraints, the first intake was intended to include at least 18 schools and no more than 21. Twenty-four schools were invited to make allowance for any that may not have been able to commit for 2018/19. Specific criteria were applied for selection (invitation):

- Filter 1: Outstanding overall result in QAR 2017/18 and/or QAR 2016/17 and/or most recent Ofsted
- Filter 2: Progress 8 2016/17 and Progress 8 2015/16 is well above average or above average
- Filter 3: Attainment 8 2016/17 and Attainment 8 in 2015/16 above national average.

34. Participating schools were expected to involve the headteacher and another senior leader and to make a time commitment of 6 days per annum per person (3 whole cohort days plus 3 trio visit days). The host school determines which and how many staff and students they wish to involve in their programme for the visit. In the event, 21 outstanding schools participated in the programme. They were grouped in seven trios of schools. No schools within trios were near neighbours; one trio spanned over 200 miles. The participating schools included academies, single sex and mixed schools, selective and non-selective, with and without post-16 provision. A visit **handbook** was developed to support the achievement of the programme's objectives, quality, consistency, and outcomes. The handbook expressed clearly the purpose and intended benefits of the visit for the visitors and staff of the host school. Schools felt they had been well briefed. Challenge Partners went to some lengths to ensure that participants would be fully committed to the programme throughout the year. This culminated with an **'on-boarding' telephone call** to each headteacher by one of the programme directors before the initial whole-cohort event.

The design of school visits

35. A core part of the Growing the Top programme was trio visit days. Challenge Partners stated:
- “The purpose of the visit days was to provide the opportunity to:**
- i. **increase social capital, specifically the social skill set necessary for the sharing of knowledge and learning effectively**
 - ii. **share existing knowledge of how a school manages its growth**
 - iii. **develop new knowledge through collegial challenge of existing knowledge and collegial support in addressing current systemic challenges.”**⁹
36. Senior leaders from two schools jointly made one-day visits to each of their partner schools. A trained facilitator, usually with experience of leading an outstanding secondary school, chaired each visit day to ensure that the purpose of the day was achieved. The project team provided detailed guidance on the conduct of the visit day and the roles of the host, the visitors and the facilitator. The visit days were planned as two halves. The morning was intended to effect an introduction to the work of the host school and explore two areas which the school felt contributed to sustaining excellence. In the afternoon, they invited exploration of a systemic challenge and reflections or suggestions on what more they could do to meet the challenge (figure 2).

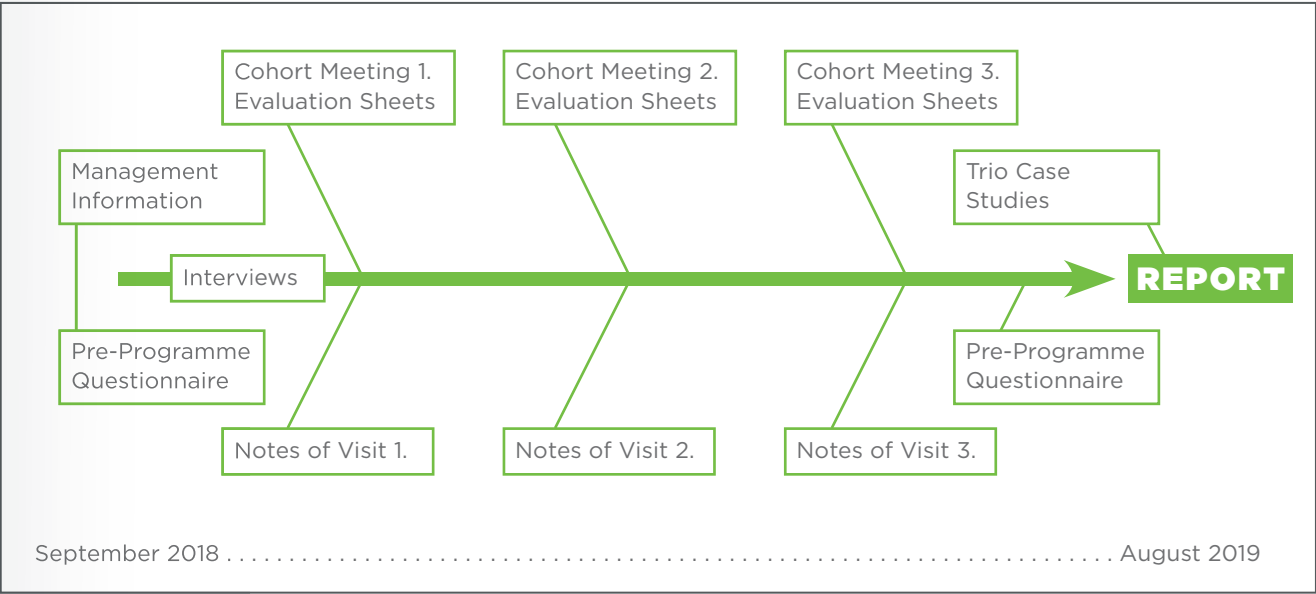
Figure 2. Outline structure of trio visit days

Morning elements	
Facilitated contracting, then an introduction to the school	In which protocols are agreed and the headteacher presents the school and its strengths and challenges
Consideration and discussion of two areas of excellence	In which visitors examine the areas of excellence through observation, presentations and discussions with key players
Afternoon elements	
Exploration and discussion of a systemic challenge	In which the challenge is described and visitors given opportunities to explore the challenge, establish facts and suggest evidence informed approaches
Round-up	In which host and visitors reflect on knowledge and understanding gained and state what they will take away from the experience

Programme evaluation

37. The evaluation of the pilot programme had both formative and summative components (figure 4). The evaluation also took account of evidence from the school visits, some of which is represented later in this report, and evaluations of the three conference days. The report draws strongly on self- and peer-evaluation by the participants.

Figure 4. Elements of the programme and evaluation plan



38. The evidence base included six categories of information:
- i. planning and management information including minutes of meetings, programme handbook, briefing and training material and criteria for inclusion of schools in programme (supplied by project team)
 - ii. evaluation sheets from the three whole cohort meetings together with material presented or used at the meetings and ‘what worked well’ (www)/‘even better if...’ (ebi) comments on the meeting
 - iii. interviews with programme leaders and participants and attendance of the evaluator at the cohort meetings
 - iv. pre- and post-programme questionnaires
 - v. notes of activities and outcomes from each school visit
 - vi. recordings of key discussions at during visit days
39. In order to capture learning from the school visits, Challenge Partners arranged for notes to be taken at most of the school visits and for the initial and final discussions of participants to be recorded. One evaluator attended and noted a majority of the meetings. The evaluation drew from transcripts of these records together with short questionnaires completed after every visit and at the beginning and end of the programme. The evaluators both attended cohort and planning meetings.
40. The evaluation covers the following main elements of the programme:
- i. programme overall
 - ii. design, management, structure and organisation of the programme
 - iii. cohort meetings
 - iv. school visit days, including the agenda, contracting and context
 - v. facilitation
 - vi. outcomes.

i. The programme overall

41. Schools started the programme with high expectations; most were clear what they wanted to achieve. They aimed, for example to:
- “learn about best practice which we can observe and apply to our own account”
 - “find ideas and different approaches and learn how other schools drive school improvement”
 - “understand how to ensure my context remains outstanding in all aspects, by learning from others whilst helping other schools to develop aspects of outstanding provision”
 - “gain insight, strategies and ideas to help us to continue to move school forward”
 - “continue improving as a school”
 - “see what excellence looks like in every area of school practice, and how can it be achieved”
 - “gain inspiration in support of our school’s improvement journey, improved outcomes and experience for learners and leaders”
 - “have a fresh perspective to challenge our thinking”
 - “improve and develop with a focus on disadvantaged students”
 - “be exposed to other outstanding practice to help us hold up a mirror to our practice - so we never become complacent.”

42. Towards the end of the programme, with 18 visits completed and responses from 14 of them, seven schools strongly agreed, six agreed and one tended to agree that “participation has fulfilled our expectations of what we wanted to get out of it.” The following perspectives illustrate their views of the value of the experience.
- “On our first visit, we gained practical examples that illustrated the discussion; opportunities for learning conversations with middle and senior leaders who were responsible for raising standards in a sustained way over time. One example was the Head of Languages who discussed the strategies for raising attainment over ten years.”
 - “It was really valuable to see the extracurricular provision, an example of genuine excellence in its breadth and reach. The opportunities the students have had, particularly in the arts, are very special.”
 - “We wanted to liaise with colleagues from other schools about outstanding practice and procedures in addition to gaining insight into our own areas of improvement - this has been achieved and surpassed our expectations; we have achieved a ‘fresh perspective’ as well as ‘challenged our own thinking’ on current procedures and best practice moving forwards.”
 - “The school visits included time to focus on our own effectiveness, strengths and areas of challenge.”
 - “Great visits; one or two of the talks were not as insightful as I would have hoped.”
 - “We valued the opportunity to observe the best practice in a contrasting educational setting; being challenged about improving key aspects of our practice; engaging in professional dialogue with colleagues in schools not normally connected with our own; hearing presentations from leaders in other sectors (academic, business, private sector).”
43. While the inter-school visits were at the heart of the programme, they were complemented by the thoughtful design, careful planning and expert facilitation of the visit days and by cohort meetings which periodically drew together all participating schools.

ii. Design, management, structure and organisation of the programme

44. The concept of making bespoke provision for outstanding Network of Excellence partner schools, many of which also lead Teaching School Alliances, was initiated by senior partners and developed into a well-thought-out programme by the project team at Challenge Partners. Schools agreed that the programme was well conceived and organised and that they were well informed about the programme and what would be required of them (figure 5).

Figure 5. Schools’ views of the management, structure and organisation of the programme (n=14)

	Agreement with proposition						
The programme as a whole	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{x}
The programme was well conceived and organised.	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
Schools were included on a fair and transparent basis	-	-	1	1	2	10	5.5
We were well briefed about objectives of the programme and what would be required of participants	-	-	-	-	5	9	5.6
The programme has delivered as intended	-	-	-	1	6	7	5.4

S = strongly T = tend to D = disagree A = agree

45. One school recorded concern at the basis for inclusion of schools. Inclusion was by invitation rather than transparent open application, which may have been the point at issue. But the selected schools had to meet the challenging criteria listed in paragraph 33..
46. Some views concerned the composition of school representation. One school fielded a third leader and there were some discontinuities of representation in a few other cases remarked on by facilitators. One school wondered whether the headteacher had to be involved since the programme would, in their opinion, ‘provide really good CPD for senior leaders with potential and interest in future headship’. [Such an avenue is already available through participation in QARs.] In practice, most host schools included a range of staff and students in their visit day programmes.
47. The programme intended that the headteacher and another experienced senior leader would represent the school throughout the programme. This would seem appropriate for a flagship programme. Since the programme involves the cumulative building of relationships and trust, continuity of representation would seem desirable. Other suggestions by schools included:
- opening the programme to other schools on the journey to outstanding
 - a two-day visit
 - ensuring that school and staff commitments are ‘set in stone’
 - possibly sharing the context and systemic challenge ahead of the visit day so that more time is devoted to problem-solving.

iii. Cohort meetings

48. The cohort meetings were held in auspicious venues in London, the first in the autumn and the second in February. The final, round-up meeting in June 2019 is not included in this evaluation. Comments on the first conference ranged from ‘it was very useful’ to ‘superb’. For most schools the second conference felt less relevant, apart from discussions in trios, and they did not take so many ideas from it.

Figure 6. Summative views on cohort meetings

	Agreement with proposition						
Cohort meetings	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{x}
Meeting as a cohort was unnecessary	5	4	2	2	1	-	2.3
The content of cohort meetings was relevant, varied and challenging	-	1	-	3	5	5	4.9

49. There were several unequivocal views about what worked well in cohort meetings, together with some suggestions for improvement. The initial cohort conference launched the programme successfully. Participants felt it was important to meet each other and establish their groups, although they would have preferred more time for this. They valued networking with colleagues in Challenge Partners. They considered that the speakers had interesting things to say. Participants particularly liked hearing about leadership from beyond the maintained education sector which different respondents described as ‘stimulating’, ‘thought-provoking’ and ‘invigorating’. They valued hearing more about the Growing the Top programme and how the processes, particularly inter-school visits, would work. There was an opportunity to meet facilitators, although it turned out that facilitators would not be linked with particular trios.

50. The second cohort meeting, held after most schools had been involved in at least one visit, was generally considered less relevant. It provided another opportunity for the representatives of the trios of schools to meet and there was some animated feedback to and by host schools on valuable aspects that had emerged from the early school visits. The presentations, were felt by some to be less relevant to this specific and discerning audience. It was acknowledged that different inputs appealed more to some participants than to others. In neither conference was there much opportunity to reflect on content and how it might be applied to the school context and translated into next steps.

51. After two cohort days and most visits had been completed, schools’ comments included the following:

What worked well

- “Some of the presentations were very useful, especially in terms of hearing about systemic excellence in other sectors and it was valuable to know updates in terms of the process and outcomes. It was valuable also to network with other colleagues on what they found useful.”
- “Opportunity to hear from leading individuals/organisations outside education;- this was invigorating”
- “Networking opportunities; varied speakers; opportunity to discuss talks with school colleagues outside of the school setting”
- “The first whole cohort gathering was important to meet each other and establish groups. All speakers had interesting things to say. However, some speeches were of limited relevance. We did like hearing from non-educational organisations about leadership and development as this is not common to CPD we have been involved in before.”
- “Very stimulating and thought-provoking presentations from speakers within the sector and outside of it. Presentations focused on “softer” and more complex aspects of high performance rather than the more obvious ones.”
- “What we felt was that the first meeting was great but needed more time in trios.”
- “Some very interesting and thought-provoking speakers.”
- “The initial cohort meeting was very useful (various inputs on talent spotting etc).”

Even better if . . .

- “I wonder if it might be useful to have a more international dimension to feed into these questions of systemic excellence (although conscious of cost).”
- “Little opportunity formally to reflect on content, apply to our school context and translate into next steps.”
- “The second meeting was less necessary and could have been shorter. Perhaps half days may be more manageable for participants too.”
- “The second meeting was not needed; The third meeting which is yet to come needs shorter and sharper speakers not hour long - it is just too much. Also, I know it’s important but filling out lots of reviews can be quite taxing - maybe a collection of verbal comments as a plenary.”
- “Perhaps just one meeting at the start of the process and one at the end would be better.”
- “Difficult as different speakers interest different people.”
- “More opportunities needed for schools to work with each other to improve hard outcomes.”

52. A final cohort meeting was held after all visits had been completed. In addition to two well-received visiting speakers and other contributions, the school trios took time to reflect on the programme and the value of the trio visits. Each trio prepared a five-minute summary of their findings and presented these to the whole conference. Their presentations are summarised at the end of this report. The presentations tended to be more cohesive when one presenter represented the collective voice of the group than when all schools contributed.

iv. School visit days

53. The programme intention was:

“to share existing knowledge of how a school manages its growth and sustains excellence; developing new knowledge through collegial challenge and collegial support in addressing the current systemic challenge of the school. Everyone should have something to take away.”

54. The **agendas** for school visit days all followed the same structure which contained the five elements shown in figure 7, with periods of discussion slotted in after each main element. (See figure 2 for the overall structure for the visit day). Schools devised their specific agendas for the day, usually in consultation with their ‘designated facilitator’ and circulated these to the two other schools in the trio.

55. Facilitators found it important to have a clear structure, which enabled them to bring proceedings back on course if they veered off. There were some challenges when, for example, a school changed the prepared schedule on the day or did not demonstrate matters that were sufficiently thought-provoking to stimulate new thinking or knowledge.
56. Having a structure for visits worked well. It resulted in a full, rich and concentrated day; a few schools suggested extending the visit to two days. All schools prepared a rich programme to enable visitors to explore strengths and challenges in depth. Some participants would have liked more time for discussion, or to visit classes, or to reduce the mid-day break – which tended to be used for discussion over lunch anyway. But these requests for more time were balanced by evidence that in some visits, discussion and the ‘wrap up session’ at the end of the day were foreshortened in response to logistical factors.; a single day had the advantage of concentrating minds and reducing costs. As one trio school reported:

“The organisation of the first day did not allow for long enough to reflect and share ideas - this was rectified for the subsequent visits but some were keen to bring the first visit (our own) to a close so we perhaps did not get the same time for insight from our peer schools as the next two visits.”

57. Each visit day started with **contracting**, which brought the leaders of host and visiting schools together to effect introductions, agree protocols for attitudes and behaviour during the visit, agree confidentiality and an exploratory, non-judgemental approach. All Challenge Partners schools receive an annual peer review, the Quality Assurance Review (QAR), in which senior leaders take part alongside the peer reviewers. All participants had been trained as reviewers (establishing an ethos of collaboration and trust between schools) and taken part in such reviews as host or part of the review team. This experience was mentioned by some when discussing the nature of the Growing the Top visit. Contracting was especially valuable on the first visit in each trio, but the need diminished after the first visit, since ground rules and common understanding had been established.

Figure 7. Retrospective overview of visit days by participant schools Context

	Agreement with proposition						
Elements of the visit day	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{x}
Contracting was appropriate, necessary and undertaken well	-	1	-	1	4	8	5.3
‘Context’ provided a clear and concise introduction to the school and included the outline of systemic excellence.	-	-	-	-	5	9	5.6
Arrangements for our focus on systemic excellence within the school provided informative evidence and insights.	-	-	-	-	5	9	5.6
Arrangements for our focus on systemic challenge , allowed us to understand, investigate and offer advice on the issue(s)	-	-	-	-	8	7	5.4
The wrap-up summarised our learnings from the day, gave an opportunity to question and develop our thoughts further, and identified ideas that visitors and host could take from the day.	-	-	-	1	5	8	5.5

58. At an early stage in the visit, the school presented its context, vision and values and introduced the two areas of excellence and the systemic challenge that would be explored during the day and what the arrangements would be. Generally, the headteacher talked about their school and its improvement journey and successes with passion which sometimes ran over into later discussions in the day. The context session is essential but can call for tight chairing. There is evidence that the second and third schools to be visited reviewed their own programmes after the first visit, when they realised how much had been included in the day. As one said:

“We discovered less is more on these days and deliberately became less ambitious in the extent of areas we tried to cover (particularly in the afternoon) to allow more time for deeper reflection.”

59. The intensity of the visit agenda programmes was reflected in comments about trying to pack too much into one day, shortage of time for reflection and a desire for more time for lesson visits. One school suggested having 2-day visits. Suggestions for improvement included:
- reducing time for contracting after the first visit
 - trio to review action taken and impact after all visits had been completed, at the end of the programme
 - more time for lesson visits
 - tighter structures and knowledge of challenges beforehand, particularly detail of the systemic challenge - which would give participants more time to reflect on solutions
 - not cutting visits short
 - an opportunity to review the progress of the day at 12:00 and perhaps plan something different for the 13:00 to 14:00 slot.

60. All schools appreciated the efforts of host schools to lay on very interesting and stimulating programmes. Host schools had gone to considerable lengths to prepare for the visits, involving leaders – particularly curriculum leaders, other staff, and students. Activities included presentations, interviews, focus group meetings, tours of the school, observation of particular subjects or groups and much discussion.

v. Facilitation

61. The visit days were facilitated by very capable educators most of whom were successful system leaders and part of the Challenge Partners family. The decision to provide a credible facilitator, particularly for the first visit in each trio, was a key factor in the success of the visits.

62. Facilitation was welcomed by host schools as well as by the visiting leaders. As one said: “I was surprised at how much it helped.” Another host head welcomed the presence of the facilitator, who shouldered the responsibility for ensuring that the day ran smoothly. The standard of facilitation was generally high, as perceived by participating schools (figure 8). All facilitators did an effective job, although some engaged in the professional dialogue more than others. Schools generally felt their professional engagement added value.

Figure 8. Participating schools’ perceptions of facilitation (n=14)

	Agreement with proposition						
The facilitator	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{X}
Set clear and agreed boundaries and ethics in ‘contracting’	-	-	-	-	1	13	5.9
Remained impartial, influencing the work of the group but not dominating it	-	-	-	2	2	10	5.6
Understood the group dynamics, involving members and making them feel good about being involved	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
Was trusted and effective in creating an open and honest environment	-	-	-	-	2	12	5.9
Was attuned to what was going on and intervened when appropriate	-	-	-	1	2	11	5.7
Gave confidence that they could deal with difficult situations or people	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
Was skilled in observing, listening, reading body language, understanding human behaviour and intervening sensitively	-	-	-	1	3	10	5.6
Was successful in maintaining the focus and momentum of discussions	-	-	-	1	2	11	5.7
Ensured that both the school and visitors could express what they had gained and would take away from the visit	-	-	-	-	3	11	5.8
Added value to your experience of the day	-	-	-	1	4	9	5.6

63. Schools identified the following characteristics of effective facilitation of the Stand-out School visit days:

- helping the host school manage the day and achieve outcomes, moving us on when needed
- well balanced and non-judgemental, keeping the agenda moving forward
- bringing own ideas and experience to the table when appropriate or needed
- demonstrating professionalism and clear communication
- bringing views together and capturing the outcomes of the day
- following the guidelines closely.

64. Facilitators were commended for their openness and impartiality. They sustained the momentum of the day. As one school said:

“The facilitator had a sense of getting the job done.... The facilitator also ensured that all individuals had an adequate amount of time to share ideas. Without a facilitator the discussions and ‘wrap-up’ could be skimped or dominated by one or two individuals.”

65. Although all facilitators followed the tight guidelines, a few visits were less structured and in some cases the day finished rather inconclusively without the host and visiting school being able to reflect on the things they had learned and would take away. It was not possible to link each facilitator with all three visits in a trio, but schools and some facilitators would have preferred this. Facilitators found it helpful for a member of the central team to be present, both in terms of the programme structure and to show the importance of the programme to Challenge Partners.

vi. Value of the visit days

66. Structured, well planned facilitated visits to other outstanding schools were at the heart of the programme. We have seen the extent to which they fulfilled schools’ expectations of the programme. Their summative responses capture many of the features that account for success as well as providing a wish list for consideration in the future. These are clustered into aspects that worked well and ‘even better if’.

Figure 9. Features of the trio visit days

	Agreement with proposition						
Features of the trio visit days	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{X}
The time we spent in the other outstanding schools was time well spent.	-	-	-	-	6	8	5.6
The benefits of hosting visitors from two schools outweighed the work involved.	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
Staff and students welcomed the opportunity to show and explain the school.	-	-	-	-	3	11	5.8
The composition of our trio of schools worked well for us.	-	-	-	-	3	11	5.8

67. The following aspects were among those highlighted by participants as working well:
- the extent to which schools were transparent and willing to share
 - challenge from other highly successful schools
 - the school visits; staff presentations; opportunities to meet students and see if rhetoric matches reality
 - hosting, which was important as it allowed the team delivering the improvement strategies to reflect upon their practice. *“It is always incredibly useful to see your school through the eyes of others.”*
 - flexibility in the programme: all schools are very busy places and so the professionalism of all in rescheduling where necessary was much appreciated; time to discuss and reflect
 - opportunity to:
 - visit high performing schools
 - have structured dialogue with senior leaders from the two schools
 - examine areas of excellence in some depth
 - visit lessons and other aspects of provision with a supportive commentary from school leaders
 - challenged to think through different approaches to systemic challenges
 - enable colleagues and students to share their successes with external visitors
 - visiting other schools and seeing excellent practice and bringing back to our own school; great meeting with like-minded professionals; time to reflect
 - the positive engagement of all schools in the process through being open, honest, reflective and supportive when discussing challenges
 - hosting visitors from two schools was really beneficial and did not/does not increase workload
 - have a good mix of schools in our trio - with some commonalities but also significant differences.

68. Several schools saw little to improve about the school visits. As one said. . . *“Even better if? We really can’t think of one.”* Schools offered some suggestions. The first concerned having a common facilitator for the trio (see previous section). In terms of personnel, the view was also expressed that the same school representatives should attend each visit (which was not always the case). Both these suggestions would further promote trust, sharing and collegiality. In some cases, the host head was not present for the whole day; for one visit, not present at all. On occasions when programmes had two parallel activities, some headteachers ‘took themselves off to do other things’. The on-boarding call provides an opportunity to secure the commitment of the headteacher to be a fully involved participant actively involved in the hosting as well as visiting activities. Equally, it is important to involve the same accompanying senior leader for all elements, in the interests of consistency and continuity.
69. Another body of thought felt that having more information about the upcoming systemic challenge would enable visitors to prepare better for this and thus be more helpful to the host school. This may have merits if the information would lead to prior preparation but could be nugatory work if it did not. One responding school went further, suggesting the production in advance of a research summary to add greater depth to discussion of the challenge. This might meet the interest of the school that wished for *“more focus and sustained examination of how key aspects of each school could be improved.”*
70. The value of intensively exploring a challenging issue potentially could be enhanced further by holding one or more ‘Commissions’, of the type experienced in NCSL ‘Fellowship Programmes’ for NLEs. A Commission would undertake concentrated work on a systemic challenge faced by a number of schools and recommend strategies for responding. The Commission could include a wider range of schools that had particular interest in the challenge concerned.

71. Most visits included a tour of part of the school, conducted by students or staff, but did not necessarily include visits to lessons. Some schools would have liked greater opportunity to visit lessons and see the school at work, commenting: *“we should have liked greater time looking at teaching as this is where they make the difference”*; and *“less on context, more on the teaching!”*

vii. Outcomes and a foretaste of impact

72. Visit participants completed an end of visit response before leaving the host school. These responses were indicative of the immediate value perceived by participants before reflecting at length on the merits of the experience. The aggregate responses (figure 9) indicate the value of the experience and especially its contribution to school improvement thinking as well as to building social capital.

73. The impact of the programme can be gauged in part through knowledge acquired during the course of the programme and in part through commitments to embody lessons learned into school improvement strategies for the following school year. These questions were asked in the summative evaluation. Very positive indications emerged that the programme had added to leadership thinking and that many aspects of what had been learned would be or already were being implemented. Surveys undertaken at the end of visits (figure 10) and the end of the programme (figure 11) show very positive views of impact in almost all school responses.

Figure 10. End of visit responses

End of visit responses (n=97): response scale 1 (disagree) to 10 (agree): rank order	Mean	Mode	Median	SDev
1. I am leaving today with some tangible ideas of how my school could improve on its previous best.	9.3	10	10	0.95
2. I had sufficient opportunity to deepen professional relationships with colleagues in my trio.	9.0	10	9	1.11
3. Existing knowledge on school improvement has been shared today.	9.0	10	9	0.99
4. New knowledge on school improvement has been developed today.	8.8	9	9	0.97
5. I have increased my ability to share knowledge effectively with others.	8.3	8	8	1.33
6. I had sufficient time to reflect on learnings.	8.2	10	8	1.46

74. In general, host schools gained significantly from the visits and from the questions and reflections of peers. Ideas and hypotheses were shared and knowledge was generated and exchanged. Benefits to host schools as well as to visitors were recorded at the ‘wrap-up’ meetings at the close of each visit.

Figure 11. End of programme reflective responses (n=14)

	Agreement with proposition						
Areas of excellence	SD 1	D 2	TD 3	TA 4	A 5	SA 6	\bar{X}
We believe there was significant interest in our areas of sustained excellence	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
The questions and observations of our peers validated the effectiveness of our strategies	-	-	-	-	4	10	5.7
The questions and observations of our peers caused us to think about further refinement of what we are doing	-	-	1	3	3	7	5.1



Overall

75. At the end of the programme, participant pairs were asked to report any significant developments in aspects of the work of their schools prompted by participation in the Growing the Top programme. The responses show that the programme plainly has generated and shared new knowledge around the participating schools, leading to a rich yield of improvement strategies. All have the potential to raise achievement, either among specific groups of students or students in general, with the prospect of further reducing disparity and growing the top. The range of aspects explored in depth via the programme shows the rich opportunities for tapping into the expertise of others (figure 12).

Figure 12. Summary of themes chosen as a. contributions to excellence, and b. systemic challenges. (School names have been replaced with the names of elements)

Host school	a. Systemic excellence	Part B. Systemic challenge
Chromium school	- Use of data, assessment, tracking and monitoring - Raising standards and quality assurance	- Progress of boys (KS3 and 4)
Cobalt school	- Sixth form and curriculum	- Consistency of tutoring and delivery of PSHE
Hafnium school	- Feedback Coaching	- Developing middle leaders
Iridium school	- Curriculum and CPD (Middle Leaders) - Vertical tutoring	- Sixth form progress and retention of students
Iron school	- Teaching, learning and assessment systems - Enrichment and Year 8 Baccalaureate	- Student independence; stretch and challenge
Lanthanum school	- Oracy development - Building the school community	- Sixth form performance - Quality First Teaching and Intervention
Manganese school	- Distributed leadership and PIPs - 4th Way professional learning & coaching	- Securing excellent outcomes in a growing school with well-being for all
Molybdenum school	- Personal development programmes (i-Learn and the personal development curriculum)	- Quality first teaching in KS3 for pupils with SEND
Niobium school	- Learning and self-evaluation processes - Arts and enrichment	- Improving performance in subjects needing fluent academic reading and writing
Osmium school	- Specialisation of SLT teams for support and intervention & teaching and learning	- Sixth form development
Rhenium school	- Inclusion - Improving outcomes for disadvantaged children	- Challenge with high achieving students - Sixth form outcomes
Rhodium school	- Inclusion, assessment, teaching and learning and curriculum planning	- Improving progress in English and maths - Sixth form issues
Ruthenium school	- English; teaching and learning - Student welfare and support; Key stage 5	- Closing the gap for disadvantaged students
Scandium school	- Excellence in teaching, learning and assessment - Reducing the disadvantage gap	- Consistent curriculum vision - Cross-curricular links & interleaved assessment
Tantalum school	- Subject learning, curriculum & planning (Ma, MFL) - Building desired student dispositions	- GCSE achievement in English and history
Technetium school	- School culture & 'growing their own' staff - School Charter for students ('the whole child')	- Pressures on recruitment and work life balance - Exam focus
Titanium school	- Our learner - Attainment, intervention, vertical tutoring	- Recruitment and retention
Tungsten school	- Pastoral care, mental health & well-being - Super curricular & leadership opportunities	- Variability in post-16 outcomes
Vanadium school	- Student achievement in mathematics - Student achievement post-16	- Student achievement in English
Yttrium school	- Driving standards: data-tracking, standards board - Professional and subject development	- Demographic gaps (Black Caribbean boys and disadvantaged students)
Zirconium school	- Sharing excellent practice: teaching and learning - strategies for teacher professional development	- Progress of boys

76. Before the end of the year's programme, most schools could identify readily initiatives that were **already being implemented**, many of which amount to substantially more than quick fixes. Examples include:
- a. a school that now has an early warning key stage 5 'alert'; commencing interventions to support disadvantaged pupils in key stage 3; and refinement of year 10 options and access to RE
 - b. a school that is adopting an Associate Leadership Programme; reviewing existing behaviour management IT systems; introducing the use of Rapid Improvement Plans and establishing a Standards Board
 - c. the school introduced an intervention programme with boys, involving mentoring and training in effective revision skills
 - d. coaching our middle leaders in leadership and programming meetings that give them opportunities to showcase how they are "leading departments"
 - e. links with another school, trading support in English and history with support in improving modern foreign languages
 - f. looking more insightfully at text selection for English in key stage 3
 - g. better marketing of 6th form destination data, and "detailed discussion of the use of data in a cultural way particularly in line management"
 - h. reviewing how we train and oversee middle leaders across the school with the intention of implementing a new approach next term; reviewing assessment, feedback and marking; and "we have **undertaken a review into our own area of improvement to see if we can incorporate advice given by visiting colleagues**. We have produced materials to raise the standards of presentation and Student Response to Marking in books and folders - consistently - across all subject areas."

- i. reviewing how to market our Sixth form, identifying a USP and considering: changes to our selection procedures as well as the courses on offer; asking governors to help us find high quality links with businesses, and use of other "carrots" including internship
- j. total review and redesign of our PSHE curriculum and delivery model
- k. revamping of rewards system through systematic change across the school; forging a tradition and expectation to encourage student engagement in school extra-curricular community activities including volunteering, sports, music, drama.

77. Participants also identified examples of initiatives being planned for **introduction in the next school year** triggered by other schools in their trios. Examples include:

- l. A focus on specific teaching and learning priorities, such as oracy, as well as further work with pupil premium pupils at key stage 3 and the organisation of GTT-type visits across the hub
- m. revision of Quality Assurance management, and review of the nature and structure of CPD
- n. considering how the benefits and principles of vertical tutoring can be achieved through the planned development of our house system
- o. intending to start GCSE-related units for GCSE History in year 9; restructuring leadership of performance arts provision to boost further extracurricular opportunities
- p. adoption of a new concise and clear, marking policy, and reinvigoration of our Student Voice system as a Student Parliament to raise the profile of student involvement in terms of leadership and influence across multiple areas of school improvement
- q. observing start of lessons; changes in display, staff CPD, curriculum modelling, enrichment ideas and sixth form offers
- r. Move from setting to mixed ability grouping



Example:

"We shall change our CPD calendar and use of meeting times to allow for more subject-specific training for A level teachers; a result of our visit to one school where they suggested that A-level staff need to be given more time to become specialists in teaching the syllabus and knowing the nuances of the specification."

78. Soon after visiting them, several schools sent staff on additional visits to host schools in the trios ("fact-finding missions") to learn more about implementing particular initiatives. Examples include:

- associate programme
- teaching and learning excellence
- oracy
- the structure of pastoral teams
- attendance of key groups
- mathematics and MFL provision
- post-16 education
- defining the learning skills and attributes of students

The final endorsement

79. If further evidence of the efficacy of this programme were needed, over two-thirds of responding schools were clear that they would be keen to undertake this type of exercise with different outstanding schools in the future. They were equally sure that they would want Challenge Partners to broker the activity. For example, one school commented:

"We would welcome the opportunity to visit and liaise with other outstanding schools in the future; we would be very interested in visiting other MATs through this format also. The development days in London as part of GTT have been invaluable - meeting in trios at these, and hearing speakers' insight on GTT as organised by Challenge Partners, would be an important part of this type of exercise in the future."

Final trio reflections: Stand-out Schools speak for themselves

Trio 1.

Scandium school
Yttrium school
Lanthanum school

“What came through really strongly was the level of research, evaluation and analysis that went on in each of these three schools. We felt this was key to what made all the schools outstanding as well as being crucial to sustaining excellence.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The pursuit of excellence in teaching, learning and assessment• Reducing the disadvantage gap• Driving standards: data-tracking, standards board• Professional and subject development• Oracy development• Building the school community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consistent curriculum vision• Cross-curricular links and effective interleaved assessment• Demographic gaps (ethnicity, Black Caribbean boys and disadvantaged students)• Sixth form performance• Quality First Teaching and intervention

All three schools had bought into the philosophy, openness and transparency that was needed for this programme. All said how great it was when we were in the other schools. “The visits were so important in terms of our journeys. They gave us so many insights and ideas to go away and try.”

Take-aways: “All schools came away with something and gave something. Key examples included:

- ideas about key stage five, the improvement of learning behaviour in the sixth form, and the development of sixth form study facilities
- introducing an associate programme for developing leaders across the school
- setting up a ‘standards board’ where progress data is discussed on a regular basis
- understanding strategies that one school uses to accelerate the attainment and progress of disadvantaged students
- using a rapid improvement plan to target and intervene where something is not delivering
- focusing on oracy
- adopting elements of teaching and learning programmes and mentoring in action.”

Partnership development: “We have organised extra visits of senior leaders to each other’s schools, shared emails and policies and got things moving in the right direction. Continuing the inter-school relationships has worked really well. We wonder whether this style of (GtT) programme would work for heads of departments, visiting their counterparts and looking at sustaining excellence and systemic challenges. A facilitator would be needed but it could work. We may reconvene in two years’ time to review change.”

Surprises and delights: “We liked living and breathing the ethos of other schools in different locations. We are surprised at how much we have learned from each other in such a short time. Schools very local not always so keen to share. This low-cost approach is a great way to drive school improvement.”

Advice for future cohorts: “Be open. Preparation is key. Don’t overload the programme; less is more. Ask as many questions as possible while you are there in another school. Ensure your staff and students who will be meeting visiting leaders are briefed and properly prepared.”



Trio 2.

Titanium school
Zirconium school
Hafnium school

“We left each school buzzing with ideas. The visits had an immediate impact on us all. We felt galvanised, laying ourselves bare, having the opportunity to ask questions but also to listen. This has left us wondering how to instil the same belief in the people who are going to be driving some of the ideas going forward.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ‘Our’ learner (the school’s learning culture)• Attainment, intervention, vertical tutoring• Sharing excellent practice: teaching and learning – strategies for teacher professional development• Student leadership• Feedback and coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruitment and retention• Progress of boys• Developing middle leaders

Take-aways: “We gained a huge amount by getting out of our local areas and learning from each other. We got a terrific amount from each visit, including:

- how to be a school of great learners as well as great grades
- focusing on feedback and coaching
- changing our leadership model to include a middle leaders’ website for sharing ideas and practice, more frequent meetings and coaching of middle leaders
- improving strategies for CPD, recruitment and retention; appointing the best and keeping the best
- the importance of spending enough time with individual pupils and staff.

Partnership development: We are planning follow-up visits and discussing how these might work. For one of us, a new leader in a newly outstanding school, it was great to get positive feedback from other professionals and have something of real value to share with them.

Further challenge: For all of us, a challenge lies in how to get other leaders and the rest of the staff as excited about ideas as when we saw things at our partner schools. This is high on our agendas for next year. We cannot implement everything ourselves. The power of conversation and individual attention was illustrated when visitors listened to the headteacher of one of our schools spending time with a student and parent discussing options and career opportunities based on a well-informed understanding of the student.”

Advice for future cohorts: “The Growing the Top” model works extremely well. It is good to go to great schools in other geographical areas. Schools should try and share presentations in advance as ‘pre-prep’ opportunities. The visits are motivating and provide a lot to reflect on, both during the visit and back in our schools. The key issue for us as a group is how best to get other staff involved as we develop and implement news strategies stemming from the programme.”

Surprises and delights: “The immediate short-term impact that had us enthusing about ideas as soon as we got on the train. We were also impressed with the high quality of Central London venues for project meetings.”

Trio 3.

Vanadium school
Niobium school
Tantalum school

“Although geographically dispersed, our schools turned out to have many principles, values, approaches and policies in common, despite very different contexts. Each school has its own individual language and approaches, but when you dig down, you find we have common fundamentals. These were reflected throughout the organisations, right down to what students and staff said and did. Very heartening. Perhaps this shows you have to have universally strong values to succeed and remain successful over time.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student achievement in mathematics• Student achievement post-16• “The Intelligent School”: learning and self-evaluation processes• Arts and enrichment• Strengths in subject learning, curriculum and planning (mathematics and MFL).• Building desired student dispositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student achievement in English• Improved rates of progress post-16• Improving performance in subjects requiring high fluency in academic reading and writing (examples from English and history)

Take-aways: “The schools concentrated on how they applied (largely common) broad principles in pursuing excellence reflected above, citing for example:

- focusing on broad and fundamental improvements, so as to improve the life chances of students, not so much on superficial or crude accountability measures
- the importance of trust and openness, being confident to expose and explore challenges
- looking for values-based and enduring improvements rather than quick fixes
- providing opportunities for leaders of the future to rehearse and showcase their strategies and practice
- using research
- revisiting inclusion and diversity issues
- renewing a focus on learning and cognitive science.”

Partnership development: “The growing the top model enables us to face outwards, particularly from within multi-academy trusts. Our schools are developing connections with staff and leaders at different levels to pursue aspects common to all three schools and planning for exchanges of staff in particular areas.”

Further challenge: “We would have benefited from pre-reading around our areas of systemic challenge so as better to prepare for contributing to the search for solutions to these challenges.”

Advice for future cohorts: “Our advice is three-fold:

- engage with openness and trust
- be bold in declaring what challenges your school
- involve staff at all levels, as applicable: middle leaders, other teachers, and teaching assistants.”

Trio 4.

Chromium school
Molybdenum school
Tungsten school

“It was fascinating collaborating with outstanding leaders and visiting great schools in other parts of the country. We embarked on the programme with no preconceptions and were able to learn things we had not been aware of and see practice we had not known about before.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of data; assessment, tracking and monitoring procedures Raising standards and quality assurance processes Personal development programmes (i-learn and the personal development curriculum) Pastoral care, mental health and wellbeing Super curricular and leadership opportunities at post-16 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress of boys (KS3 and 4) Quality first teaching in KS3 for pupils with SEND Variability in outcomes at post-16

Take-aways: “It was very valuable to have the perspective of other professionals on areas of systemic challenge, bringing their experience and ideas to bear on issues similar to our own or sometimes very different.”

“Our main take away related to self-evaluation: reflecting on what we can do in our own schools after visiting these other outstanding schools and rethinking our ideas.”

“It was valuable to see other systems, materials and displays, and talk to colleagues who could feed into our areas of challenge.”

Partnership development: “Relationships and familiarity developed as the programme progressed and the context of the other schools became clearer. Greater openness, trust and - perhaps honesty - emerged and we were introduced to colleagues who could feed into our areas of challenge. Looking ahead, our implementation of new ideas and strategies will benefit from contact with those who originated them.”

Further challenge: “The geographical dispersion raised the question of extending visits by another half-day or day. Taking a third member of staff on a visit enabled one school to cover more ground.”

Surprises: “One surprise was to find that we do face similar challenges regardless of location and can learn from each other in diverse schools.”

Trio 5.

Manganese school
Technetium school
Rhenium school

“We were highly motivated and completed the three visits within a few weeks. We felt free to focus on things that were really important to us and having a facilitator worked really well. We were blown away by different things in each of the schools while having some common challenges.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributed leadership and personal improvement plans (PIPs) ‘4th Way’ professional learning & coaching School culture and growing their own staff School Charter for students Inclusion Improving outcomes for disadvantaged children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Securing excellent outcomes in a growing school whilst embracing well-being for all Pressures on recruitment and work life balance Exam focus Challenge with high achieving students Sixth form outcomes

Take-aways: “We readily identified features in the other schools that impressed us, including the following examples:-

“When you go to Technetium school, you are blown away by the school site and facilities. These are used to the full to provide opportunities for the boys and develop the culture of what it means to be a student at that school. The sense of identity is recognised by a character development Charter system.”

A strong sense of identity was also a feature of Rhenium,

“where there is an intense focus on inclusion and the individual learning needs of students within a culture and environment of high ambition and aspirations.”
“We were impressed with the approach to staff engagement at Manganese, particularly the emphasis on personal improvement plans which, together with individualised professional development, makes a positive contribution to the challenge of recruitment and retention.”

Partnership development: “Partnership working was energised by the shared interests of the three schools in, for example, developing character and resilience, staff recruitment and retention, and encouraging all pupils – particularly high attainers – to achieve as much as they can. Specific approaches have been gleaned and introduced in each other’s schools.”

Surprises and delights: “A major surprise was the degree to which vision and strategies had parallels across the three schools in vastly different contexts: a country school where the majority of students are bussed in from a catchment spanning 22 miles; an inner London school with 95 per cent of students eligible for free school meals, and a school in a prosperous London suburb.”

Trio 6.

Iron school
Ruthenium school
Osmium school

“System-led improvement can really work: the way we were talking; the way we were taking ideas away, the way we really wanted to improve our own schools. That’s definitely a vehicle for the way forward.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Teaching, learning and assessment systemsEnrichment and Year 8 BaccalaureateEnglish; teaching and learningStudent welfare and support; Key stage 5Specialisation of SLT teams for support and intervention & teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Student independence; stretch and challengeClosing the gap for disadvantaged studentsSixth form development

Take-aways: “All the school leaders were of a similar mindset and had similar vision, committed to being pupil-centred. The staff in all three settings were very clear about their roles and the clear lines of accountability in all the schools. In constructing their programmes, each of the host schools involved staff at different levels reflecting highly distributed leadership and a desire to for as many staff as possible to gain from the experience. Prominent themes of interest to visiting schools included:

- the importance of recruiting, developing and retaining good teachers
- making sure of good distributed leadership
- having a ‘unique selling point’ for the sixth form in an over-provided market
- using the sigmoid curve approach to strategic renewal
- approaches to pastoral systems
- teaching approaches in core subjects.”

Partnership development: “The contacts we have made and ideas and policies we have shared are providing the basis for linking people at different levels across the schools. This has started with work on English. We plan to meet again next year to review progress stemming from the programme.”

Further challenge: “The challenge will be linked to the impact of this programme: how well we get on and implement things.”

Advice for future cohorts: “Ensure your time in discussion focuses on systems, procedures and approaches; be receptive to receiving advice and challenge from the visiting leaders. It would be profitable to know about systemic challenges early enough to do some pre-thinking and do your very best for each school. We discussed the possibility of including the most appropriate senior leader to contribute to particular challenges.”

Things that delighted and surprised us: “similarities in our approaches and strategies, which also made us think about how we implement policies (such as coaching).”

Trio 7.

Cobalt school
Rhodium school
Iridium school

“We learned about how our schools responded to very different contexts and were impressed with the openness, trust, flexibility of all leaders involved. The visits provided great opportunities to explore different structures and systems in different environments and see how they matched in our own schools.”

Keys to excellence presented	Systemic challenges explored
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sixth form and curriculumInclusion, assessment, teaching and learning, and curriculum planningCurriculum and CPD (middle leaders)Vertical tutoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consistency of tutoring and delivery of PSHEImproving progress in English and mathsSixth form issuesSixth form progress and student retention

Take-aways: “We were very fortunate that two of the schools had challenges relating to sixth form, which was our huge strength, and vice versa for our PSHE and tutoring. We all found excellent ways in which we could develop; thus the take-aways were clear at the beginning. One thing which became apparent to us all was how much energy we gained from the experience: renewed motivation not just to accept things that possibly we were doing very well but could be doing a lot better. We were all impelled also to tackle the take-away ideas and move on.”

Partnership development: “First we saw great potential for filtering down to other leaders. We also discussed how we could be more precise about what our visits would cover if we went back to those schools, perhaps having niche programmes to go deeper into particular issues.”

Further challenge: “We discussed having pre-visit information about each systemic challenge, which could add value to the visits. We also said that the amount of challenge that you wanted for your own school was very much about internal motivation.”

Advice for future cohorts: “We discussed the potential benefits of matching strengths and challenges together. We also discussed the question of deciding which individuals to involve, and the importance of having reflection time on the visits to have time to think about what you are seeing.”

Surprises and delights: “We all knew that we would enjoy the programme and find it very interesting when we signed up to it but we didn’t think we would get as much out of it as we did. The success of the experience owed much to the openness of the whole programme and the quality of facilitation. We had not expected the degree of change it has brought about in our own schools. We have completely revamped our PSHE programme for September, which would not have happened otherwise.” A second school has changed much of their sixth form provision after a visit. The third reports that from next year, largely influenced by Growing the Top, there will be: *“No more setting. Shorter lessons. Half the number of formal assessments each year. Y9 options moved back to Y10. New weekly PSHE and Citizenship programme. New daily literacy time. New teaching and learning policy. New Assistant HTs leading each key stage. New attendance and behaviour policies. New teaching and learning CPD staff team. New CPD programmes developed. New student leadership programmes. New student charter awards (mini Duke of Edinburgh’s awards from Y7). All of this linked to school values.”*



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