EVALUATION OF THE ACCELERATING IMPROVEMENT IN KNOWSLEY: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS INITIATIVE

SUMMARY REPORT

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OCTOBER 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pathways to Success (PtS) initiative aimed to raise standards, especially in literacy, across the primary and secondary phases in Knowsley, Merseyside. The project commenced in February 2018 and concluded in July 2019 (eighteen months). It was funded through the Department for Education's Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF) and coordinated by the Knowsley Education Commission, set up in November 2016. The programme involved 26 primary schools and four secondary schools, designated as the 'Pathways to Success' schools. The project focused on an area with exceptionally high levels of disadvantage and a poor record of student achievement over a number of years, particularly for students at age sixteen. Participating schools were able to access support from an external part-time PtS Adviser, development sessions organised at school level and centrally, and modest additional funding to implement a locally-authored Accelerated Improvement Plan overseen by an Accelerated Improvement Group. Three key approaches were used to effect change: intensive work in classrooms to improve practice in teaching and its impact on learning in Years 5-9; leadership capacity building through professional development; and school-to-school support.

The evaluation design was informed by existing research and guidance on evaluating complex area-based initiatives (Ainscow, 2015) and school-to-school improvement efforts (Rudd et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2012; NfER, 2014). This includes evaluations of the City and London Challenge programme (Ainscow, 2015; Hutchings et al., 2010), Schools Challenge Cymru (Carr and Morris, 2016); and school improvement partnership programmes in Scotland (Menter et al., 2010; Chapman et al., 2015) and Wales (Hulme et al., 2018).

Table 1 Logic model of Knowsley Pathways to Success programme

CONTEXT	AIMS & OBJECTIVES	INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES
Area with exceptionally high levels of disadvantage; Poor record of student achievement for a number of years, particularly at age 16.	To improve literacy, leadership and collaboration between schools, making the transition from primary school to secondary school effective and efficient.	Funding and expertise to support 26 primary schools and four secondary schools in Knowsley; Pathways Advisers as coaches and critical friends.	Support from Pathways Advisers Improvement Hubs and outstanding practitioners; Introduction of initiatives shown to accelerate education attainment and outcomes for our children and young people.	Self-evaluation against bespoke Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP); Accelerated Improvement Group (AIG)	Increased teacher confidence and expertise; Over the longer-term, improved performance in national tests and examinations, at both the primary and secondary levels.

Evaluation questions

Following a process of competitive tendering, in September 2018 a team from Manchester Metropolitan University was commissioned to evaluate the *Accelerating Improvement in Knowsley, Pathways to Success* initiative. The evaluation addressed the following questions:

- How well was the programme implemented?
- What was the impact on participants and the Knowsley system?
- What are the implications for replication, scaling up and sustainability of the programme?

Evaluation activities

The evaluation draws on the following data sources:

- *Pathways Advisers* - Semi-structured interviews with the 12 Pathways Advisers assigned to support between one and five of the 30 PtS schools.
- *School case studies –* Semi-structured interviews with 17 school staff leading improvement activities in a sample of eight PtS schools – two high schools and six primary schools.
- *Online survey* – distributed to 56 staff across the 30 PtS schools identified as leading PtS activity in their school, with a response rate of 57% (32) with 28 respondents from primary schools and 4 respondents from secondary schools.
- *School testimonials* – a review of 41 school testimonial documents submitted by 24 Pathways to Success schools between June and December 2018.

Analysis of GCSE school performance data shows that 3 out of 4 of the PtS secondary schools demonstrated a yearly improvement in English outcomes from 2018/19. KS2 school performance data (year 2019) for the Key Stage 2 National Test shows that 24 out of 26 primary schools that participated in the PtS programme reached the expected standard in all three topics: reading; grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS); and maths (based on the 'average scaled score'). It is important to note that all participants (Advisers and school staff) were cautious to avoid over-claiming impact during the PtS initiative. It is difficult to attribute causality in socially complex settings and many felt the assessment of impact was too soon to fully capture the diverse gains made by the initiative.

Main findings

How well was the programme implemented?

1. School testimonials describe communication between the Advisers, Board and schools as effective, frequent, useful, consistent and beneficial. All returns indicate that school staff felt supported throughout their engagement with the PtS initiative.
2. Advisers reported that not all schools appeared well informed in the early stages in regards to expectations and programme details. All Advisers indicated that early activity in the spring and summer of 2018 was invested in relationship building.
3. Advisers maintained regular contact with PtS schools largely through monthly face-to-face contact, supplemented with email or telephone communication. Contact was largely with the headteacher and members of the Senior Leadership Team, and less frequently with classteachers, pupils and support staff.
4. Advisers were responsive to context and adjusted strategies to address local and emergent needs. Advisers sought to align the AIP with the school development plan to avoid overloading participating schools.

5. Effective Advisers used a coaching model. School staff valued coaching and professional dialogue above prescriptive approaches. School staff need to perceive a high degree of ownership over agreed priorities and the direction of change.
6. Advisers drew on their professional networks to support curriculum change in Knowsley. It was acknowledged that curriculum development in the absence of teacher development would be counterproductive in the longer-term.
7. Flexibility is needed within multi-academy trusts (MATs) to advance bespoke local strategies for improvement, with Adviser support and monitoring.
8. The majority of survey respondents (96%, n=27 primary respondents and 3 (75%) secondary respondents) reported that the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) supported efforts to improve outcomes in literacy, and the quality of teaching and learning. The AIP was less successful in promoting school-to-school collaboration.
9. Participants rated the Pathways to Success development sessions positively. Twenty-six (22) out of the 32 respondents who attended the Pathways to Success development sessions found them to be useful (18) or very useful (8).
10. All schools set up an Accelerated Improvement All schools set up an Accelerated Improvement Group (AIG) by the spring term of 2019. The AIG principally focused on within-school improvement efforts rather than school-to-school collaboration.
11. The PtS programme required participants to provide regular monitoring reports. According to Advisers and school staff, the formal reporting process did not always serve a developmental purpose.

What was the impact on participants and the Knowsley system?

12. Survey respondents reported that the PtS initiative had a positive impact on teacher development and classroom practice.
13. Over 90% of primary survey respondents and 3 out of 4 of the secondary school respondents valued PtS Adviser input in all the following areas: professional development of staff; developing a culture of collaboration; suggesting resources for teaching and learning; observing classroom practice and reviewing assessment practice. Areas that were not supported by PtS Advisers or were not regarded as useful by a minority of respondents (>33% of primary respondents and either 1 or 2 of the secondary school respondents) were support with staffing issues, working with governors, and promoting practitioner enquiry.
14. Advisers and senior staff reported that the PtS initiative supported schools to move from a position of insularity. Input from an external Adviser promoted connectivity and an outward outlook.
15. School testimonials record that staff valued opportunities for collaborative professional learning. Such opportunities were frequently brokered by Advisers and included participation in training sessions delivered by other schools, and attendance at *Pathways to Success* events.
16. Senior staff within case study schools reported positive early assessments of impact in terms of classroom practice, pupil outcomes (including engagement and attendance) and teacher development.
17. Advisers interpreted their role as helping schools to order priorities for action. Advisory work is valued that sharpens the focus for improvement action and accelerates the pace of desired change.
18. A number of Advisers worked with schools to improve how performance data was used to support improvement action. While schools were data-rich, optimal use not always made of available data. A focus on data gathering for monitoring purposes was not consistently supported by a focus on data analysis for targeted development.

19. Staff within case study schools reported the following key challenges: supporting staff release time; coping with staff absence; equitable access to Adviser time and expertise; competing demands on staff time.
20. All participants (Advisers and school staff) were cautious to avoid over-claiming impact during the PtS initiative. It is difficult to attribute causality in socially complex settings and many felt the assessment of impact was too soon to fully capture the diverse gains made by the initiative.
21. Participants across all data sources noted the ambitious timescale within which to achieve the aims of the programme. While endorsing a commitment to raising standards and expectations, participants regarded the time-limited nature of the initiative, 18 months, as a significant challenge.

What are the implications for replication, scaling up and sustainability of the programme?

22. The quality of the Adviser and advisory support is central to this model of school support. In appraising their experience of support, most participants focused on the role of the *Pathways to Success* Adviser and the quality of the relationship with this person. Fifteen out of 24 schools offering testimonials described advisory support as positive, excellent and invaluable.
23. Bespoke school support through dedicated Adviser time is expensive in the short-term but may hold greater potential for impact in the longer-term by helping schools to articulate a Theory of Change.
24. Changes to the curriculum and the professional development of literacy leads were regarded as sustainable changes that would endure beyond the PtS initiative.
25. Only one respondent (school testimonial) suggested that emergent gains were wholly resource dependent. While additional funding was not core to the improvement effort it was regarded as helpful in gaining buy-in. Additional resource can be a catalyst if schools are receptive to change.
26. School staff responding to the survey reported that they plan to sustain the changes after the PtS initiative in the following ways: embedding curriculum change and changes in teaching practice into day-to-day activity, maintaining action plans, implementing an exit strategy devised with their PtS Adviser, re-structuring the leadership team, ensuring new systems, appointing a literacy coordinator, and practices are part of the school's monitoring cycle and school development plans.
27. Advisers identified three key features of support that were critical in creating conditions to support positive change: 1) strong central support and communication from the Board as the coordinating body; 2) strong relationships between school leaders and Advisers that are regarded as independent of the local authority; and 3) the provision of active support by sharing practical strategies to effect change. In addition, senior staff within case study schools indicated that progress was dependent on the willingness of senior staff to engage with external scrutiny, and the receptiveness of the school community to change.
28. The most sustainable gains reported by school staff include fostering a different culture around teaching and learning and a stronger culture of collaboration within and between schools. School-to-school collaboration and the replenishment of resources were regarded as less sustainable. Turnover among core staff was commonly cited as a threat to sustainable progress.
29. School testimonials suggest that prospects for sustainability are strengthened by professional dialogue and school-to-school learning. Teacher development, especially the development of middle leadership capacity, was positively associated with schools' capacity to sustain change beyond the duration of the funded project.

The evaluation findings outlined above are based on a range of primary and secondary data sources gathered across the academic session 2018/19, with an additional survey to secondary schools in September 2019. The findings do not rely on a single method of data collection or a single point of data capture. It should be acknowledged that findings based on analysis of school participants' accounts (generated through interviews, survey responses and returned school testimonials) may be open to response bias i.e. differences between respondents and non-respondents. The overall warrant of the findings presented in this report is based on the transparency of the evaluation process, sustained engagement with participants, and the range of opportunities extended for participation over one academic year. (For full details of the methodological approach and evaluation instruments, see the Final Report).

Summary

Overall, the evaluation provides strong evidence that the Pathways to Success initiative was positively received by participants, who attest that the initiative had demonstrable impact in terms of its stated objectives. Participant accounts suggest that the PtS initiative has made considerable progress in some settings. The initiative has injected new ideas and processes into the system. It has supported local capacity building and encouraged school ownership of improvement strategies.

A key feature of the model of support is the provision of bespoke support by experienced external Advisers. Participants commented favourably on the frequency of contact and the high quality of support offered. Most school testimonials described the experience of working with an Adviser as 'positive', 'excellent' and 'invaluable'. While the level of challenge was described as 'intense', school leaders valued the bespoke and responsive involvement of a credible and trusted colleague. At its most effective, advisory work used a coaching approach to support staff in the assessment of each school's needs and the collaborative design, review and implementation of a manageable action plan. The Accelerated Improvement Plans and Accelerated Improvement Group were largely regarded as helpful in progressively sharpening the focus for improvement and increasing the pace of change. AIPs helped school staff to articulate issues, and to jointly formulate and review the effectiveness of local improvement strategies, consolidated by the accountability of close monitoring.

The most apparent progress has been in terms of fostering a more collaborative professional learning culture in participating schools. The PtS initiative has supported and valorised teacher development, especially the development of middle leaders and literacy leads. The impact on learner outcomes is less evident at this early stage. Analysis of GCSE performance data shows that 3 out of 4 of the PtS secondary schools demonstrated a yearly improvement in English outcomes from 2018/19. All participants (Advisers and school staff) were cautious to avoid over-claiming impact during the PtS initiative. It is difficult to attribute causality in socially complex settings and many felt the assessment of impact was too soon to fully capture the diverse gains made by the initiative.

School staff indicated positive outcomes in terms of pupil attendance and engagement, increases in reading for pleasure and teacher expectations. Sustaining the rate of progress upon conclusion of the initiative will be influenced by the leadership capacity in schools, and the capacity of the local authority to provide strong area-level support, particularly opportunities for professional learning through school-to-school working.

Figure 1. Summary of impact

Perceived impact

➢ Teacher development, especially the development of middle leadership capacity
➢ Reported improvement in pupil attendance and engagement, increases in reading for pleasure in some contexts
➢ Curriculum adaptation to meet locally identified need
➢ Improved monitoring and action planning, including use of data

Accelerants

➢ Calibre and credibility of Advisers and Accelerated Improvement Board
➢ Frequency and quality of advisory support
➢ Responsiveness of support to local contextual conditions
➢ Coaching model that promotes local ownership
➢ Support for teacher development, particularly middle leaders

Challenges

➢ supporting staff release time for professional development & collaboration
➢ coping with staff absence and staff turnover
➢ competing demands on staff time and commitment
➢ timescale within which to achieve aims

Sustainability

More secure

➢ shifts in school culture, stronger culture of collaboration within schools
➢ curriculum change supported by professional learning

Less secure

➢ school-to-school working
➢ replenishment of resources

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SCHOOLS - SECONDARY
All Saints Catholic High School
Kirkby High School
St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic High School
The Prescot School
SCHOOLS - PRIMARY
Eastcroft Park Primary School
Evelyn Community Primary School
Halsnead Community Primary School
Hope Primary School
Huyton with Roby CofE Primary School
Mosscroft Community Primary School
Park Brow Community Primary School
Prescot Primary School
Ravenscroft Community Primary School
Roby Park Primary School
Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Primary School
St Albert's Catholic Primary School
St Aloysius Catholic Primary School
St Anne's Catholic Primary School
St Brigid's Catholic Primary School
St Columba's Catholic Primary School
St John Fisher Catholic Primary School
St Joseph the Worker Catholic Primary School
St Laurence's Catholic Primary School
St Leo's and Southmead Catholic Primary School
St Luke's Catholic Primary School
St Margaret Mary's Catholic Junior School
St Marie's Catholic Primary School
Westvale Primary School
Whiston Willis Community Primary School
Yew Tree Community Primary School