



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Closing the gap: how system leaders and schools can work together

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

Executive summary

Work to close gaps in attainment between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers is a high priority for schools. There is targeted funding, through the Pupil Premium, and accountability, through the greater scrutiny from the new Ofsted framework. At the same time, the role of system leaders has never been more important. The growth in teaching school alliances and the steady rise in the numbers of national leaders of education is at the forefront of the move to a 'self-improving school system'.

This report summarises the outcomes and learning for other system leaders from a National College action research project which took place during 2012. The project worked with national leaders of education (NLEs) and teaching school alliances, organised into regional clusters, to examine how they could work with and support other schools to close gaps in attainment and support the progress of pupils eligible for free school meals. Linked to the report are more detailed case studies which describe the schools, the work which was undertaken, and the impact and learning.

The report is organised into five sections.

Section 1 briefly summarises significant announcements, resources, and policy developments in relation to schools' work to close gaps in attainment since the publication *System leadership: does school-to-school support close the gap?* (Rea, Hill & Sandals, 2011), for example:

- Department for Education (DfE) performance tables now include a section on narrowing the gap.
- Funding for the Pupil Premium increased to £600 per child in 2012/13 and will rise to £900 per child in 2013/14. Eligibility for the Pupil Premium for 2012/13 was extended to pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.
- The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has revised and re-launched the teaching and learning toolkit which had been developed with the Sutton Trust and Durham University.
- The new Ofsted inspection framework now asks inspectors to make specific judgements about the performance of different pupil groups, the school's work to close gaps, and whether it is making effective use of the pupil premium funding.
- In September 2012 and February 2013, Ofsted published survey reports about schools' use of the Pupil Premium.

Section 2 explains the methodology for the action research and how the regional clusters were organised.

Section 3 describes how the national support schools initiated the work with other schools, the focus on closing gaps, and the interventions and strategies which were used. The action research project included a range of engagements between NLEs, their national support schools, and other schools; the most common was a one-to-one engagement between two schools.

The individual action-research projects covered a range of school improvement priorities. These varied from whole-school priorities to address issues for underperforming pupils, to specific areas of focus designed to improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the schools had reviewed the learning toolkit (EEF, 2013) materials published by the National College, case studies from Ofsted and other research evidence to identify possible strategies (see the references to these materials in Section 1).

Examples from the case studies are used to explain the work which was undertaken, along the lines of the following two examples: one about the project's focus on data, the other about the project's use of sixth form mentors.

Tollgate Primary School

The first engagement was through a whole-day in-service training (Inset) day to support Year 5 staff in the participating schools to review and compare their data. They were asked to bring their own pupil-level data with free school meals (FSM) pupils identified. This extract from the presentation explains the content of the Inset day:

Our first meeting with the teachers revolved around them finding patterns within their own class data, [and] once this was achieved, we focused our attention on key day-to-day pedagogical awareness of how to raise attainment of these children.

Dunraven School

Dunraven selected Year 12 students to act as mentors [to Year 6 pupils at a local primary school] who were themselves FSM students or had encountered barriers to their own learning. An English specialist trained and supported the mentors, using principles informed by Dunraven's speech and language communication team, so that the mentors had an understanding of the concepts necessary to enable the [primary school] pupils to progress in their writing skills.

The Dunraven students spent each Wednesday afternoon with their Year 6 partner pupils. The work of the pupils and the mentors was monitored weekly and the mentors also received regular guidance from a literacy support teacher.

In terms of the work that was undertaken, projects have been grouped under the following five themes to assist the reader in following through to particular case studies that may be of interest:

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support.
2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice.
3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils.
4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning.
5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning.

Section 4 uses examples from the case studies to illustrate the impact which was observed, both in terms of impact on targeted groups of pupils and whole school impact. It describes some of the main barriers and challenges which were faced by NLEs and national support schools.

The action-research projects had a variety of ways to measure the impact of their work. Most projects had a target group of pupils, eligible for free school meals or from disadvantaged backgrounds, and reviewed the progress that these pupils made or how the gap between their progress and that of their peers changed over the course of the project. Several projects looked at other outcome measures, such as pupil attendance, engagement in learning or changes in motivation and behaviours. A number of projects worked with pupils who had data available from end-of-key-stage tests or GCSE exams during the projects. Several projects sought feedback directly from the pupils involved, either through pupil interviews or surveys.

In terms of whole school impact, the work on closing the gap sometimes provided a model which could be undertaken in other areas of the school as in the example below.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

The work had been presented to both senior leadership teams, and both schools were considering how other departments might use a similar approach in supporting their specific student groups. It was felt there had therefore been a whole-school impact in terms of the approaches to action research at the schools.

For other schools, the work to close gaps in attainment had exposed whole-school issues that required attention from the national support school. The partnership with the NLE had in some cases resulted in significant improvements, for example a stronger understanding of rates of pupil progress, how to better support targeted pupils, and a raising of the profile of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Section 5 sets out some strategic steps which NLEs believed it was important for system leaders to take in working with other schools to close gaps in attainment. This is the learning from the project for other NLEs about 'what to do' in terms of interventions and strategies. There are eight strategic steps, and these are explained in detail in the report:

- Ensure work on closing gaps is part of the initial terms of engagement.
- Identify and unpick the data to analyse the progress of pupil groups.
- Audit the effectiveness of past and current interventions.
- Discuss barriers with staff and pupils: what do they think are the priorities?
- Raise the profile of research and potential solutions: use the evidence on what works.
- Identify the tools and strategies needed.
- Build leadership capacity to make sustainable improvements and strengthen the school's own performance capability.
- Develop a plan and demonstrate the links to the school's core aims.

Section 5 also summarises the leadership learning about how the NLEs went about their work to support other schools, and sets out a number of leadership skills and behaviours which NLEs believed were important for system leaders to adopt in undertaking closing the gap work with other schools. This captures the learning for other NLEs about 'how to go about it'. The leadership learning is organised into four stages:

a) Getting started

Building trust could be helped by clear and transparent communication and ensuring a joint approach to the project: both schools had things to learn, and there was a shared purpose to supported targeted pupils; it was important that the schools were seen to learn together. NLEs and system leaders needed to ensure they did not make assumptions about the capacity of the school with which they are working, for example by presuming that the school had the ability to interpret and the use the data which they had generated. NLEs needed to be sensitive to the school's situation and demonstrate empathy with their challenges and context.

Michael Faraday School

Both schools shared the same demographic profile and both the NLE and the partner head had identified the problem of an increasing number of children joining their respective schools with limited language, very poor ability to express themselves, and in need of speech and language support. Although both schools were aiming to provide a rich and creative curriculum, they were aware that that certain children needed targeted provision to help develop their confidence and language.

b) Engaging staff and digging deep

At this second stage, NLEs' advice was that the important skills were in getting underneath the obvious, and really developing a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses as this would have a strong bearing on its capacity to close gaps. An important set of skills was to be able to articulate clearly the need for the work to all staff, the impact on pupil's life chances, and set the aspirations for the achievement of pupil groups using comparative data. NLEs would begin to role model the behaviours of collaborative enquiry, talking to staff about their successes and barriers, and enable opportunities for staff from the schools involved to have a genuine peer engagement about learning and the barriers faced by specific pupils.

Halterworth Community Primary School

Teachers may initially need support to frame their work with pupils and with each other in terms of a language of learning, but over the course of the project they should become more confident. The role of the NLE is likely, therefore, to move to providing challenge to help to focus and sharpen their analysis.

c) Driving the work forward and making it happen

As the project and support got properly underway, NLEs needed to use their skills to maintain momentum and address challenges as they emerged. It might be necessary to deploy knowledgeable practitioners from the national support school (for example a specialist leader of education (SLE) or literacy co-ordinator) to overcome challenges. There were likely to be occasions when the NLE needed to stand back and look strategically at the support and the project. Was it proceeding according to plan? Had other priorities emerged which meant a change of tack was necessary? Had the focus on gaps exposed other whole school priorities? Maintaining the regular cycle of meetings, checking against plans, recording outcomes, and tracking regularly the outcomes in relation to specific pupils would all be important. All of this was likely to require strong reserves of patience and tenacity. Wherever it was possible, demonstrating progress, looking for positive changes in practice and therefore securing some quick wins to maintain support would be important.

Little Ilford School

In this project, the NLE started at a macro level (understanding the school's data and challenges), and moved to a micro level (being engaged with a cohort of boys and a head of department), before standing back and becoming more distant as the senior leadership team recognised and took ownership of the whole-school nature of the challenges relating to FSM boys and the quality of formative feedback.

d) Staying the course and creating sustainable change

The key role for all NLEs was to make the changes sustainable by building the capacity of other schools to continue their own improvements. This was equally applicable to work to close gaps in attainment. Raising the profile of work to improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, coaching

senior leaders, identifying leadership capacity in staff, co-constructing tools and processes which would help the school continue the work; these were all important aspects of building sustainable change. Equally important was to set the work into whole school policies and practice, or establish ways of working which could be used in other ways across the school. Throughout the engagement, the NLE and staff needed to model a culture of high ambition and expectations for all pupils.

This final section then comments on how work to close gaps in attainment might be distinct from other NLE support work, and makes a series of recommendations about the roles of system leaders in supporting schools to close gaps in attainment as follows:

For NLEs and NSSs

- NLEs should be encouraged and enabled to see work to close gaps in attainment as central to their role.
- NLEs should be encouraged to share effective practice across their region, or across other alliances or networks of schools, on how they have worked with other schools to close gaps.
- NLEs within teaching school alliances should be encouraged and incentivised to adopt cluster support to schools to close gaps, and consequently become hubs of outstanding practice to support other schools to close gaps.
- NLEs should be encouraged to use their own plans for spending the Pupil Premium to support other schools to strengthen their funding plans. In doing so, NLEs will need to demonstrate that their own plans are of the highest quality.

For the National College and the Department for Education

- Continue to develop case studies and materials for NLEs and system leaders about how they can work with other schools to close gaps. There is potential in the use of the forthcoming 'Closing the gap: test and learn research project' to demonstrate how NLEs can work with other schools effectively.
- The proposals for NLEs to undertake reviews of schools whose use of the Pupil Premium funding has not been effective is a powerful opportunity to demonstrate to the system the impact that NLEs can have in helping schools to close gaps in attainment. This opportunity needs to be seized by both NLEs and the College, to demonstrate that NLEs are credible partners in work to close gaps and can have a significant impact. The identification of NLEs with a track record of supporting schools to close gaps and with the credibility to undertake this work will be an important step in achieving this.
- Ensure NLEs have appropriate tools and materials to enable them to support other schools. The Ofsted toolkit is a good start and needs expanding to focus on teaching and learning, the impact of interventions and internal consistency.
- The National College should work closely with the Education Endowment Foundation to communicate the effectiveness of the learning toolkit.
- Continue to remind NLEs, system leaders and schools that most of the strategies and interventions to close gaps are about effective school improvement.

1: A stronger focus on closing gaps: developments since 2011

In November 2011, the National College published a report on system leadership and closing the gap, *Does school-to-school support close the gap?* (Rea, Hill & Sandals, 2011).

The report reviewed how national leaders of education (NLEs) sought to close gaps in attainment in their own schools, and how they supported other schools in closing attainment gaps. The report was based on interviews with NLEs, case study visits to national support schools (NSSs) and the schools they were supporting, and data analysis of the work of NSSs. The data analysis demonstrated that samples of primary and secondary NSSs had smaller gaps in attainment between their pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and their peers than nationally, and that the attainment of pupils eligible for FSM was also above national averages. The data analysis in the report also demonstrated that samples of both primary and secondary schools supported by an NSS for more than one year saw more rapid increases in attainment by FSM pupils than national averages between 2008 and 2010. By 2010, pupils eligible for FSM in the sample of supported schools were on average performing better than pupils eligible for FSM nationally. Indeed, in the sample of 164 primary schools, the rate of improvement of FSM pupils was 4 times the rate of improvement of pupils eligible for FSM nationally across the same period (Rea, Hill & Sandals, 2011:17–26).

Since the publication of the report, the College has analysed the context of all NSSs¹. National support schools across the country face similar socio-economic challenges as all schools judged by Ofsted to be 'outstanding': the proportion of FSM pupils is slightly higher in all NSSs compared with all 'outstanding' schools (by 2.5 per cent). In fact, the average percentage of FSM pupils in all NSSs (17.2 per cent) is only slightly below the average percentage of FSM pupils in all schools nationally (currently 18 per cent).

The report by Rea, Hill & Sandals (2011) reviewed the research evidence, analyses effective school-level interventions, and reported on discussions with staff and school leaders which demonstrated how strategies and interventions to close gaps in attainment in schools tended to work at three broad levels.

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

- high-quality teaching and learning, consistent across the school, supported by a strong culture of continuing professional development, observation, moderation and coaching
- an engaging and relevant curriculum, personalised to pupil needs
- pupil-level tracking, assessment and monitoring
- an inclusive and positive school culture, underpinned by values and moral purpose that all pupils will achieve

Secondly, there were more specific strategies that school leaders and schools used to support pupils who were underperforming. These strategies benefitted all underachieving pupils, including those eligible for FSM, and might include, for example:

- early intervention and targeted learning interventions
- one-to-one support and catch-up provision
- targeted parental engagement, including raising aspirations and developing parenting skills
- developing confidence and self-esteem through pupil voice
- empowering student mentors through sport, music, or other programmes

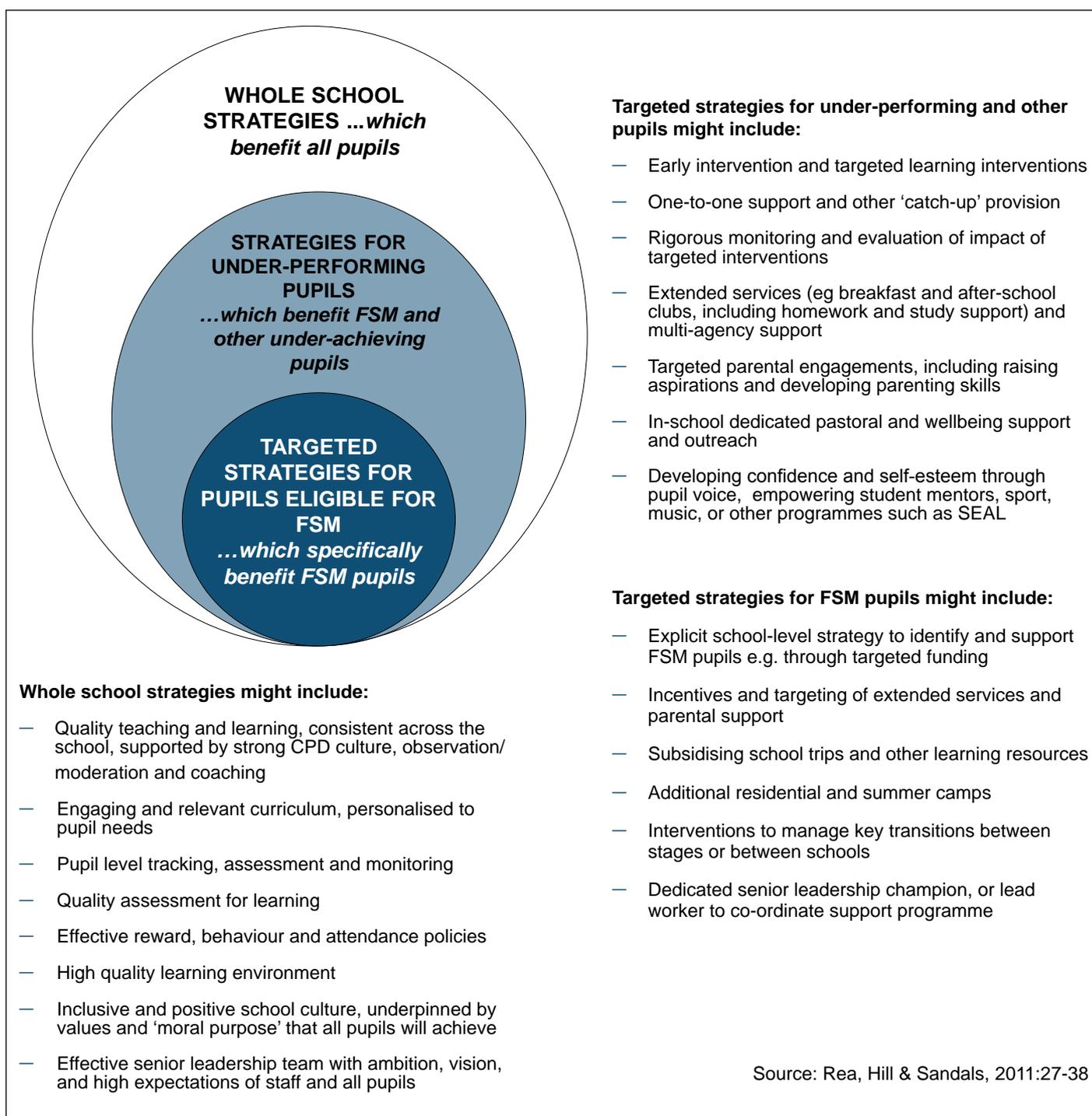
¹ unpublished National College data analysis, 2013

Thirdly, there were strategies that might be targeted specifically at pupils eligible for FSM, which would provide more specific additional levels of support. Examples included:

- explicit school-level strategy to identify and support FSM-eligible pupils through targeted funding
- incentives and targeting of extended services and parental support
- subsidising school trips and other learning resources
- dedicated senior leadership champion or lead worker to co-ordinate a support programme

Figure 1 is taken from the report and summarises this evidence.

Figure 1: Example strategies to close attainment gaps between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers



In April 2011, Pupil Premium funding was introduced to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) states:

[The Pupil Premium is] additional funding given to schools so that they can support their disadvantaged pupils and close the attainment gap between them and their peers. In most cases the Pupil Premium is paid direct to schools, allocated to them for every pupil who receives free school meals.

DfE, 2012a [online]

The Pupil Premium is allocated for the number of pupils from low-income families who are known to be eligible for free schools meals, and for children who have been looked after continuously for more than six months. The funding was initially set at £488 per pupil in 2011/12.

Since the end of 2011, there has been an increasing focus on how schools are tackling the achievement gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (using the proxy measure of FSM eligibility) and their peers. There have been a number of important system-wide publications and policy developments, including:

- The Department's performance tables now include a section on narrowing the gap, which includes data on the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals or who are looked-after children achieving against a range of indicators (threshold measures, average points score and levels of progress) in comparison with their peers. In February 2013, Ofsted published for all schools a data dashboard, which included a section on narrowing the gaps in the performance of disadvantaged pupils compared with their peers.
- The funding for the Pupil Premium increased to £600 per pupil in 2012/13 and will rise to £900 per pupil in 2013/14. Eligibility for the Pupil Premium for 2012/13 was extended to pupils who have been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years. Schools are now required to publish on their website information about how they have spent their Pupil Premium funding on targeted pupils and their planned approaches to evaluating the impact of this spending. In March 2013, the Department announced the Pupil Premium awards, which are valued at up to £10,000, for schools that can 'demonstrate objectively how they have used the Pupil Premium to achieve a measurable advance in the attainment of their disadvantaged pupils' (DfE, 2013a).
- In January 2013, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2013) revised and relaunched the teaching and learning toolkit which had been developed with the Sutton Trust and Durham University. This includes meta-analyses of research about commonly used strategies to close gaps in attainment, rating them by cost, potential impact on attainment and the strength of the evidence-base. The revised toolkit includes case study and video material, and a searchable element to help schools identify potential strategies to address barriers to learning.
- The Department has made available on its website (DfE, 2012b) case studies and evidence of how schools have improved the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and used their Pupil Premium funding, including material on one-to-one tuition, the use of teaching assistants, Year 7 nurture groups and parental engagement.
- The new Ofsted inspection framework (Ofsted, 2012a) now asks inspectors to make specific judgements about the performance of different pupil groups, the school's work to close gaps, and whether the school is making effective use of Pupil Premium funding.
- In September 2012 and February 2013, Ofsted published survey reports (Ofsted, 2012b; 2013) about schools' use of the Pupil Premium. The 2012 report surveyed schools to see how they were using Pupil Premium funding, including whether this was on existing or new initiatives, and how they were planning to evaluate impact. The 2013 report provided case study material on how schools had been working to close gaps in attainment, the strategies they had employed and their use of Pupil Premium funding.

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- The National College recently launched a wide-ranging two-year research study called ‘Closing the gap: test and learn’. This will look at strategies that will help schools to close gaps in attainment. The project will use a randomised controlled trial (RCT) approach with the additional intention of enabling individual teachers to be supported and enabled to improve their own practice and that of others within their school, with a direct impact on educational outcomes for their pupils.
 - The government announced in March 2013 (DfE, 2013b) that schools that are judged by Ofsted to ‘require improvement’ and that are not closing gaps between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers will be required to draw up plans about their use of Pupil Premium funding. NLEs and other system leaders will play an important role in supporting schools to draw up effective plans, which will need to demonstrate to Ofsted and others that Pupil Premium funding is being targeted on pupils eligible for FSM and aimed at improving their progress.

2: How the action research was designed

Research focus

The research focus of this report was to understand:

- the impact of different strategies and interventions to close gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and their peers when used by national leaders of education and teaching school alliances in supporting other schools
- how system leaders identify the most appropriate forms of support and target these to be effective, and the leadership skills and behaviours required of those system leaders in supporting other schools to close gaps in attainment

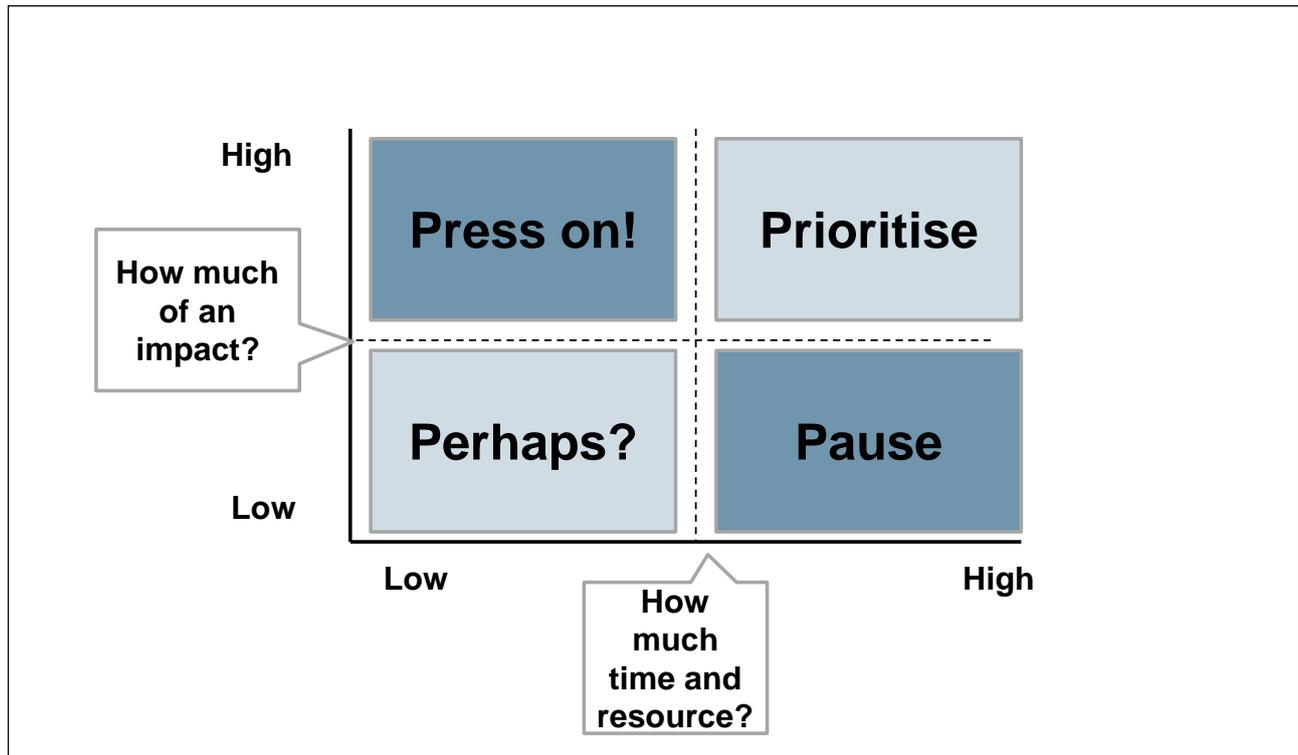
Methodology

The National College commissioned an action-research project to investigate how system leaders, in particular those who are national leaders of education (NLEs), close gaps in attainment between pupils from deprived backgrounds and their peers. The research project investigated how NLEs, when they were working to support another school, could help to close gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for FSM and other pupils. The project also gathered evidence about the leadership attributes and behaviours that were used when carrying out such work. The research project was undertaken between December 2011 and February 2013.

The main strand of activity involved working with 16 NLEs and their schools. NLEs applied to be part of the research project through a competitive process, and the 16 NLEs selected were provided with a small amount of funding by the National College to cover release time and associated costs of the action-research meetings. A range of primary and secondary schools was included in the project from different parts of England to help establish regional action-research clusters. The NLEs were invited to attend an initial kick-start meeting at the National College in December 2011. Workshop activities were undertaken, including reviewing the impact and cost of strategies and interventions they had used to close gaps in attainment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: NLE workshop activity (initial meeting for NLEs)

Please consider which strategies or interventions **you** have used to close gaps in attainment.



Source: author presentation at NLE workshop, December 2011

NLEs were subsequently grouped into five regional clusters:

- two clusters in the North West region (one primary and one secondary)
- one in the Midlands region (primary)
- two clusters in London and the South East region (one primary and one secondary)

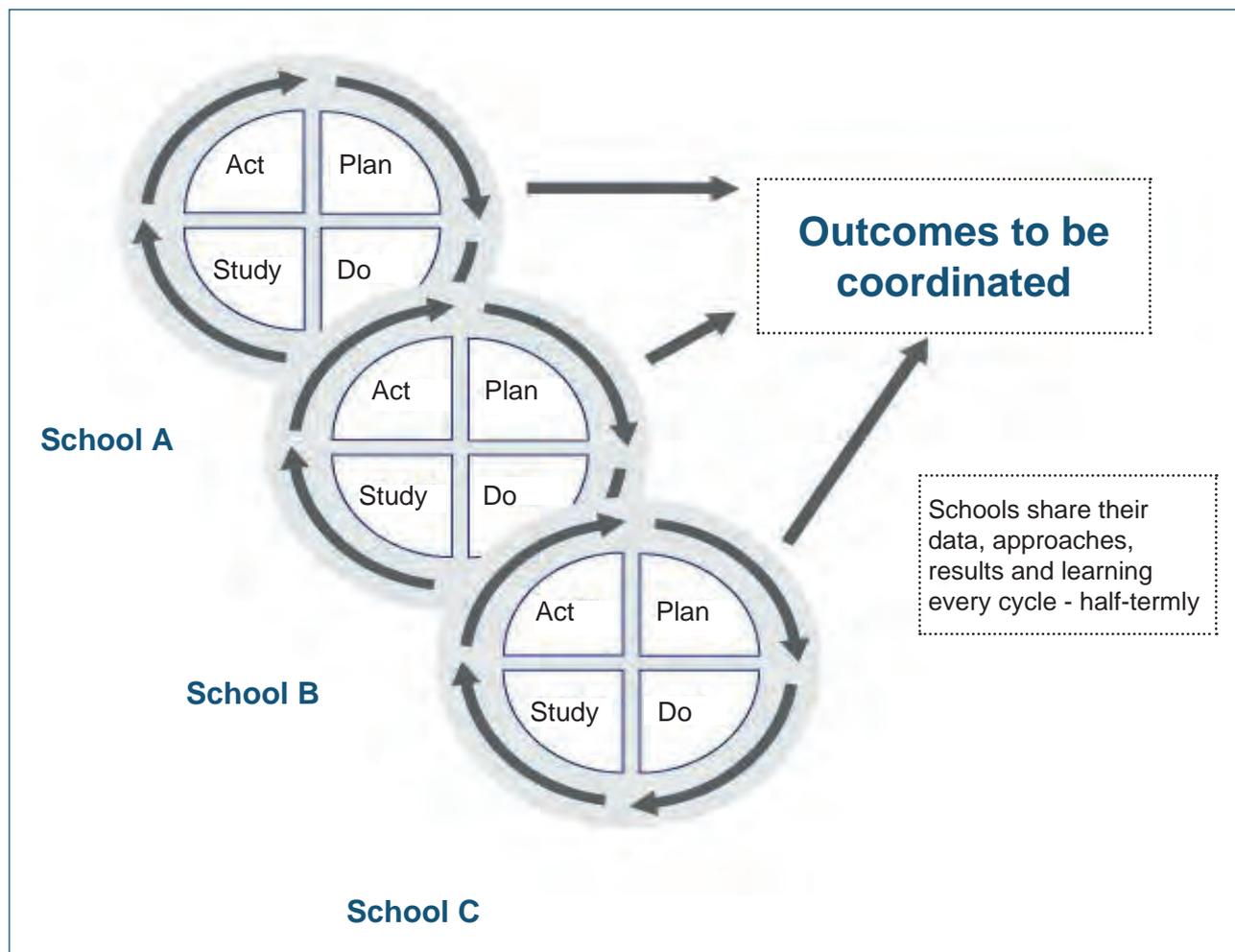
The action-research clusters met half-terminally, rotating between participants' schools. NLEs were asked to identify a school (or schools) to support and work with as part of the project. They used a range of strategies and interventions to:

- support these schools to raise achievement overall
- improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds
- close gaps in attainment between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers

NLEs collected data, evidence and learning about their approaches and leadership actions. Every half-term they met with a member of the research team to review their progress. The action-research approach ensured rapid learning, and gathering of effective practice through peer discussions using the plan-do-study-act, action-research methodology to:

- **plan** their activities and interventions, including identifying appropriate progress measures and tracking data to demonstrate impact
- **do**, ie put the interventions into effect
- **study** and review the operation and impact of the interventions through schools collating and analysing their own monitoring, and regional workshops bringing together participating schools
- **act** on the results of their review and plan the next cycle of work

Figure 3: NLE workshop - description of action research



Source: NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement

A parallel research strand was established with five teaching school alliances. The teaching schools all were led by NLEs. The purpose of this strand was to examine how support from these alliances could help other schools to close gaps in attainment between pupil groups, what interventions and strategies were effective, and what leadership skills and behaviours were needed.

Alliances worked in different ways to suit their contexts and deployments to support different schools:

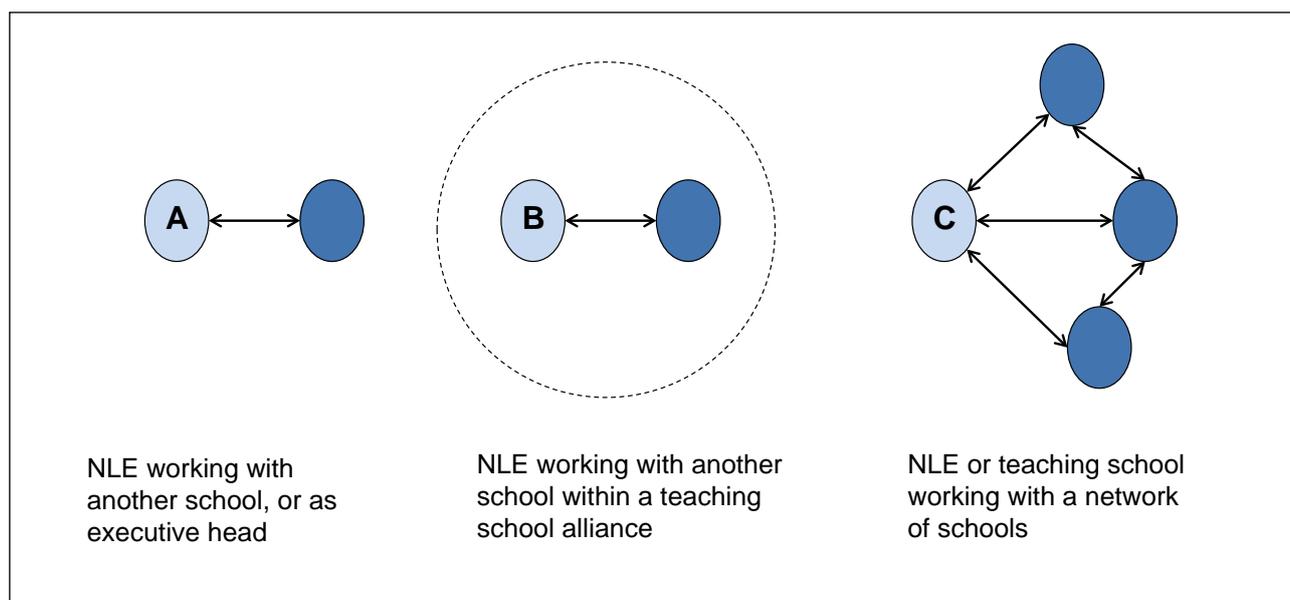
- Two teaching schools each worked with a cluster of local schools on a closing the gap project.
- One teaching school provided one-to-one support to a local primary school.
- One teaching school alliance brokered a local leader of education to work with a primary school in an Ofsted category.
- One teaching school alliance provided one-to-one support to a local primary school and worked on a closing the gap project across its alliance.

At two points during the overall research project (in June 2012 and January 2013), all participating school leaders were invited to attend workshops at the National College to review progress and capture learning.

3: How NLEs worked with other schools to close gaps

How was support from the NLEs and NSSs initiated?

Figure 4: Three models for supporting schools to close the gap



Source: author presentation at NLE workshop, June 2012

One-to-one support between an NLE/NSS and another school

The action-research project included a range of engagements between NLEs, their national support schools, and other schools. The most common engagement (all but four of the projects) was between a single NLE/NSS and a single school. The relationships were most often brokered through a local authority or teaching school alliance. In some instances the school seeking support identified and contacted the NSS direct. In all of these cases, the support being provided was arranged through negotiation, with the schools involved establishing a relationship of trust and developing a package of support, with closing the gap being an important part or the main focus of the work between the two schools.

In nine of the projects, the work on closing the gap was based on well-established relationships between schools that had been working together for several years. In half these projects, both schools had identified similar challenges to address, and were using the project to co-construct potential solutions. This had enabled a positive working relationship to be established with both partners having expertise to offer. Not all the projects were between schools with populations of the same socio-economic background: there were examples of NSSs with high levels of FSM-eligible pupils working with schools with lower levels of FSM pupils, and vice versa. Where schools were facing similar performance challenges or with similar gaps to close, these appeared to be particularly good examples of action research or joint practice development (Sebba, Kent & Tregenza, 2012): schools working together to test innovative practice to address similar challenges. These two extracts from the case studies illustrate this.

Michael Faraday School

There had been strong links between the heads of the two schools [Michael Faraday and St Peter's CoE Primary School] and the Early Years teams had been working closely together. A key challenge for both schools has been speaking and listening skills, particularly for those pupils who spoke English as an additional language (EAL).

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

[The NLE] held three initial meetings with the head and leadership team at [Irlam and Cadishead College] to discuss priorities. These were identified as improving progress in English and maths between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, and a focus on FSM-eligible boys in Year 10 who were attaining around the C/D grade borderline. Maths was a specific area of focus, and this had also become a priority at Blessed Thomas Holford. Both schools wanted an outcome of their shared work to be that the quality of teaching in their maths departments was at least good overall. Both schools recognised that they had gaps to close between the attainment of FSM pupils and their peers at the end of Key Stage 4, and this mutual recognition of priorities was important in developing the constructive relationship between the two schools.

The project included two examples of support from an NSS to a single school, where the schools were part of the same federation, or where an executive head had management responsibility for the schools involved. In these cases, the levers of action were more straightforward to deploy, and the project could be tightly focused on the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as the following extract illustrates.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

At the start of the project, children from across the three schools [in the federation] who were receiving FSM were identified. The classes with the highest number of FSM pupils were chosen to pilot the research. This involved three classes from Halterworth, two from Wellow and one from Awbridge.

There were differences as to whether the support from the NLE was at whole-school level, or specific interventions for targeted pupils. We will return to this point in Section 5, when we consider the leadership learning from NLEs. At this stage, it should be noted that some projects commenced with a whole-school focus on priorities that were broad and wide ranging (for example, availability of data, tracking and monitoring, quality of teaching), moving to a focus on closing specific gaps. Other projects started with a focus on the gaps that the data had uncovered, and then in some cases broadened out to address whole-school priorities.

Closing the gap projects between an NSS and a group of schools

There were two examples in which the NLE and NSS worked with a group of schools. These projects were established specifically to support schools to close gaps in attainment. The numbers of schools involved ranged from five to nine. The role the NLE played in these projects in the early stages was to establish the credibility of the work and win the trust of the other heads involved. As the projects developed, peer challenge and support between the schools were important in generating momentum and making progress.

Tollgate Primary School

Tollgate acted as the 'facilitation school' to lead the work with a cluster of schools. The focus was on pupils in Year 5. Tollgate identified and subsequently worked with nine local schools, some that had made recent progress in closing gaps and some with gaps to close. Tollgate recognised that it was important for the success of the project that the schools were able to trust each other and feel there was no hidden agenda. NLE Tom Canning led the initial meeting with the heads to build trust and credibility. An important part of the message was that Tollgate was in a similar context and faced similar challenges to all the schools: "If we can do it here, you can too" (Tom Canning). At the same time, the initial meeting emphasised that the schools involved needed to be open to taking on new ideas and sharing their data. They needed to identify a co-ordinator from the senior leadership team for the work, and agree that their Year 5 teachers would be released for training. An emphasis was placed on co-developing solutions within a supportive network. The project had to be based on trust, as the schools were sharing their weaknesses and "there were some surprises when they were looking at their own data" (Tom Canning).

What interventions and strategies were used to improve the progress of targeted pupils?

The individual action-research projects covered a range of areas. These varied from whole-school priorities to address issues for underperforming pupils, to specific areas of focus designed to improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the schools had reviewed the EEF learning toolkit, materials published by the National College, case studies from Ofsted and other research evidence to identify possible strategies (see the references to these materials in Section 1).

In terms of the work that was undertaken, projects have been grouped under the following five themes to assist the reader in following through to particular case studies that may be of interest:

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support.
2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice.
3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils.
4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning.
5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning.

Several of the projects included activity under multiple themes. For example, all the projects reviewed and analysed data to identify gaps; a number of the projects worked on an aspect of pedagogy with a targeted group; and some used pupil voice to support work on improving teaching and learning. However, projects have been allocated to a particular theme on a best-fit basis: what was the most significant aspect of their work, or what made the most difference to pupil outcomes? In addition, work to develop staff capacity through professional development applied to the work of most of the projects, without it being the most significant aspect of their work.

Within their projects, schools used a range of interventions or strategies to address the identified challenges. Examples of these interventions have been drawn out below.

Table 1 sets out:

- the five closing the gap themes, including the additional theme of staff development
- examples of the interventions and strategies used by the schools under each theme
- examples of the projects and case studies related to each theme

Table 1: Closing the gap themes and case studies

Closing the gap theme	Examples of interventions and strategies used	Examples of projects and case studies where this was a strong focus of the work
1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Analysing available data to review the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds – Workshops on data for senior leaders, demonstrating how to compare the progress of different pupil groups 	<p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Tollgate – Chestnut Grove – Gilmorton Chandler – Meadow
2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Tools for pupils to review their own learning, with assessment scales to judge progress – Lesson observations, learning walks and scrutinies of pupils' work – Improving speaking and listening skills for targeted pupils – Implementing a new phonics programme – Improving the percentage of lessons judged to be good or better in targeted year groups 	<p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Halterworth – St Eanswythe's – Broadoak – Michael Faraday – Little Ilford
3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Weekly intervention sessions with targeted pupils – Identification of FSM children in specific classes – Whole-day events or funded residential events for targeted pupils – Year 10 and Year 11 study skills and exam preparation – Sixth-form mentors supporting and working with targeted pupils – Establishing a homework club with funded places for targeted pupils – Summer school focusing on maths and sport 	<p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dunraven – Blessed Thomas Holford – The Heath School – Kibworth – Victoria Infants/Junior Schools – Yesoiday Hatorah

<p>4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pupil reward and incentive strategies – Pupil surveys and questionnaires to gauge enthusiasm, confidence and motivations – Reviewing student progress on scale for attitudes to learning, progress being made and homework 	<p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Forest Way Teaching School Alliance
<p>5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Parental surveys and workshops to engage families – Meetings with parents to reinforce commitment 	<p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Danehill
<p>Interventions that applied to all closing the gap themes and were about developing staff capacity through professional development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Joint CPD and training for staff between schools – Paired coaching and development between teachers in different schools, including shared lesson observations – Lesson study, team teaching, modelled teaching and collaborative planning – Training and development programmes for teaching assistants, including redefining their roles 	<p>Most case studies include elements of developing staff capacity in their work.</p>

The remainder of this section will take each of these five themes in turn and use examples from the case studies to illustrate some of the interventions and strategies used.

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support

All the projects used whole-school, year-group or pupil-level data to review progress and look for gaps in attainment. For four of the projects, a key focus of the support work was to enable schools to be able to review their own data and use pupil-level progress data to identify gaps and areas for action.

This example from the Tollgate case study shows how the project to work with a cluster of nine schools started with schools bringing and reviewing together their Year 5 pupil-level data.

Tollgate Primary School

The first engagement was through a whole-day in-service training (Inset) day to support Year 5 staff in the participating schools to review and compare their data. They were asked to bring their own pupil-level data with FSM pupils identified. This extract from the presentation explains the content of the Inset day:

Our first meeting with the teachers revolved around them finding patterns within their own class data, [and] once this was achieved, we focused our attention on key day-to-day pedagogical awareness of how to raise attainment of these children.

For this project, it also became apparent over time that supporting some of the schools to develop their own data, tracking and monitoring processes would be the most important aspect of the work of the cluster.

Tollgate Primary School

For some schools, there needed to be a greater focus on data and assessment. [The assistant headteacher commented:] “It became evident that some assessment procedures within the schools were needing support; this meant that the closing the gap project needed a new direction... data reports generated by me for the schools to use”. [The assistant head] analysed the schools’ Year 5 data, reviewing the average points scores of Year 5 pupils and looking for areas of underperformance and gaps. The data review was then discussed and reviewed with the schools.

In the following example, shared work to investigate the data further was part of the project.

Chestnut Grove School

The heads of English and maths [at Chestnut Grove and St Cecilia’s CoE Secondary Schools] met regularly to analyse data and identify strategies for the targeted Year 10 FSM students (who moved into Year 11 during the project). These students were also mentored and supported by their English and maths teachers. Staff visited each other’s schools and Chestnut Grove demonstrated how it used data to dig down and develop appropriate teaching and learning practices.

For most of the schools, reviewing and revisiting pupil-level data was a vital first step. In some cases, as in the example below, this exposed issues that had not always been recognised by the school being supported.

The Heath School

Initial discussions at the supported school had suggested the performance of pupils eligible for FSM was satisfactory; however when the data was reviewed in detail, it showed that only 7 per cent of FSM pupils across the school were expected to gain 5 or more grades A*–C including English and maths at GCSE.

2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice

For some of the projects, there was a tight focus on an aspect of teaching and learning. The example below illustrates how a primary school had revisited the research evidence to consider what strategies might be appropriate to support its pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The school linked together an innovation that enabled pupils to reflect on and make judgements about their own learning, with an opportunity to focus one-to-one teacher support on those pupils who had decided themselves that they required further support. The approach worked as follows.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

A working group of teachers focused on a method to try to narrow gaps in attainment. Using research from the Sutton Trust and the findings from John Hattie's work (2009; 2012) on visible learning in relation to the impact of effective feedback, it was decided to look at the use of one-to-one teacher time, as the evidence pointed to this having the maximum impact. The aim was to improve the practice of assessment for learning (AfL), focusing on the construction of success criteria and how children rate their success against these.

A learning scale was developed to enable children themselves to reflect on and identify how secure they were in their learning: how well did they understand what they were learning, and could they teach someone else?

1. I can teach someone else.
2. I understand.
3. I understand most.
4. I understand some.
5. I don't understand yet.

The scale was designed to be applicable to all year groups from 1–6 but how the children were taught to use it differed (for example, physical actions were used in Year 1). Children were given numerous opportunities to learn and internalise what each number on the scale meant and had copies around the classroom and in their toolkits.

The tool was used with all pupils but with a particular focus on FSM pupils. During the course of lessons, pupils who assessed themselves on the scale as 1 supported others who needed clarification. The targeted FSM pupils who assessed themselves on the scale at 2–5 were then prioritised to be given one-to-one teaching support for short periods during the lessons, assembly times and other short slots on areas they had identified. The scale was also used at a midpoint during the lesson.

The focus was very much on the language of learning and the acquisition of strategies to improve learning behaviour, which would enable pupils to build on success.

In the examples below, the support was to implement a phonics programme and also to support a phonics intervention group. In the first example, the NLE and NSS deployed a number of staff to work with the supported school, using a range of strategies. In the second example, the detail of the phonics intervention was based on the work at the NSS on a similar programme.

St Eanswythe's Church of England Primary School

During the autumn term 2012, support from St Eanswythe's [for Christ Church Primary School] focused on the implementation of the phonics support programme in Key Stage 1 and lower Key Stage 2, as follows:

- time and expertise from a manager and literacy co-ordinator trained in specialised phonics teaching (RWInc)
- baseline assessments in July of pupils in Reception to Year 2
- supported two-day training in September
- joint observations and feedback to staff and teaching assistants
- modelling of interventions
- direct support for staff leading on the phonics programme

Broadoak Primary School

The intervention strategy had been designed at Broadoak, and was then used at The Cathedral Primary School with the same key features:

- The strategy was based on a six-week cycle of daily phonics support.
- Intervention was at the start of every day between 9am and 9.30am when the rest of the class was carrying out some other directed activity.
- All pupils were screened to identify those who would benefit from the intervention, through analysis of available data and work scrutinies.
- The intervention focused on providing pupils with time to apply their learning. This was achieved through a 5-minute input and then 20 minutes of activity.
- A teaching assistant observed and monitored whether pupils had successfully learned phase 3 and phase 5 sounds, and reviewed this material with the headteacher. The shared review provided high-quality CPD for the teaching assistant.

The following extract from one of the case studies shows the work on supporting boys' writing, with a focus on developing feedback. Work was needed in advance to establish the data and progress of targeted pupils, benchmark against local and national data, and explain the importance of rates of progress.

Little Ilford School

Teachers [at the supported school] provided 26 boys with increased formative feedback and oral feedback throughout their English lessons. The school, at the NLE's suggestion, brought in an external coach to support teachers in developing their skills in assessment for learning (AfL) and providing feedback.

The identified boys had the quality of their writing audited and tracked every six weeks. The boys' books were also sampled to monitor the quality of feedback provided by teachers and the degree to which the boys were acting on it.

The head of department and other English teachers from the supported school visited Little Ilford to do joint lesson observations so that their understanding of what 'good' and 'outstanding' teaching and learning looked like was enhanced.

3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils

Several projects focused on the support pupils could provide to each other to address barriers to learning, or used pupil voice to establish a framework for the project. The example below illustrates one intervention using sixth-form mentors.

Dunraven School

Dunraven selected Year 12 students to act as mentors [to Year 6 pupils at Crown Lane Primary School] who were themselves FSM students or had encountered barriers to their own learning. An English specialist trained and supported the mentors, using principles informed by Dunraven's speech and language communication team, so that the mentors had an understanding of the concepts necessary to enable the [primary school] pupils to progress in their writing skills.

The Dunraven students spent each Wednesday afternoon with their Year 6 partner pupils. The work of the pupils and the mentors was monitored weekly and the mentors also received regular guidance from a literacy support teacher.

The following extract shows how one of the projects identified a target group and a set of interventions related to barriers to learning.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

During the summer term of 2012, the focus moved to closing the gaps in Year 10 between the performance of FSM boys in maths and their peers. Plans were established for a specific project involving 28 pupils from both schools [Blessed Thomas Holford and Irlam and Cadishead Colleges]. All were Year 10 boys eligible for FSM who were all working below their predicted grades in maths. The two schools agreed a set of activities designed to engage and motivate the students by relating maths to real-world situations especially sport, based on successful practice at Blessed Thomas Holford.

4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning

One project included an overarching strategy to support the development of personal resilience and positive psychology of pupils. The work was led by one of the schools in the teaching school alliance.

Forest Way Teaching School Alliance

The school [King Edward VII Science and Sports College, a key strategic partner in the alliance] had raised attainment for seven successive years, but realised it had reached a plateau in the core subjects: in 2010, there were a number of students who gained only four grades A*–C at GCSE and a grade D in either maths or English. Some were students eligible for FSM. The school realised these students tended to lack problem-solving resilience, were poorly organised, lacked aspiration and missed work deadlines. They needed to raise their expectations and also promote peer pressure and support. The programme aimed to change learners, and thereby, learning. It promoted happiness and wellbeing.

Work focused on a programme called the Art of Brilliance, supported by a research student from Loughborough University, to improve the positive psychology of students. The purpose was to improve emotional and personal resilience as a way of supporting learning.

In other projects, work to engage pupils and understand what they perceived as their barriers to learning was an important part of the work of the NLE.

Little Ilford School

The NLE used student voice, via a survey of the boys and discussions with them, to gauge their levels of motivation and understand barriers to learning. The survey was conducted at two points during the project. The boys' feedback was evaluated and shared with the English department and with the boys themselves.

5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning

For some of the projects, there was a clear series of inter-related interventions designed to address an overarching challenge. This example illustrates the series of steps taken to engage parents of targeted children to support their reading.

Danehill Church of England Primary School

The intervention was aimed at encouraging greater engagement with the parents of pupils eligible for free school meals [at the supported school]. The project targeted nine FSM pupils who at the start of the project were in Year 2 and activity included:

- a survey of about their own reading habits and how much they read with their children
- workshops for parents and carers to share strategies for helping their children to become confident readers
- time for teachers out of class to conduct structured conversations with parents
- a reward system for the number of books read and the number of times adults heard their child read, with the reward being a book to take home and keep
- teachers keeping a log of homework completed
- assessment of the degree of parental support with reading, homework and general support for their child using a scale to monitor reading diaries for evidence of parental engagement, analysis of attendance at parents' events, attendance records of pupils, and behaviour of pupils in school
- tracking of pupils' progress in reading through assessing pupil progress (APP) assessment records

In other projects, such as in the example below, there was an important aspect of the work to explain and engage parents in the project.

Kibworth Church of England Primary School

The project was launched [at the supported school] with parents first. They were invited to a meeting where the project was explained and the importance of attendance for their children emphasised. The project was free to parents but non-attendance in the summer would mean that they could be charged for the time absent. This was to ensure that parents realised how much money had been invested and how their child's non-attendance could mean that another child had missed out. A firm commitment from parents was sought and dates were shared early so they could organise holidays around the dates.

Building capacity and skills

Most projects included work to develop staff capacity, and thereby to support the sustainability of the work. The following extract from one of the case studies illustrates how this was part of a package of support.

Gilmorton Chandler Church of England Primary School

To further support the focus group of FSM pupils [at the supported school], the NLE demonstrated how to analyse and compare the progress of different groups across cohorts, how to develop the language of learning with pupils, involving pupils in assessment and target-setting processes, and how to improve parental involvement and support.

The package of support also included a workshop on data analysis for senior leaders, peer learning walks, lesson observations and work scrutinies with senior and middle leaders.

We will return in Section 5 to the leadership learning from NLEs about how the projects were advanced and the important lessons for other NLEs. In several of the projects, there was an important role played by a member of the senior leadership team to drive the work forward and engage other practitioners. For some schools, such as in the example below from Chestnut Grove, a conscious decision was taken to distribute leadership of the work to close gaps.

Chestnut Grove School

The headteachers and two deputies from the two schools [Chestnut Grove and St Cecilia's] met together regularly to review data, discuss progress and consider the broader implications for their schools. They placed the main responsibility for closing the gap work on their heads of department because they felt that too much improvement focus had previously been led by the senior leadership team and that action had not been getting down to the level where it could be really effective. The heads of English and maths met regularly to analyse data and identify strategies for the identified Year 10 FSM students (who moved into Year 11 during the project).

Finally in this section, it is important to note the benefits apparent for the NSS in working with another school to close gaps in attainment. For some NSSs, this was about developing and testing solutions to shared challenges. Where the two schools were working on a joint project, knowing that gaps were present in both schools, the impact was felt in both schools. For other NSSs, there were other tangible benefits from being involved in work with other schools to close gaps, and including the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and plans. The example below illustrates how one secondary school used participation in the action-research project to develop a detailed plan for its own use of Pupil Premium funding that has since become an example of effective practice. In doing so, it provides a potential template for a supported school.

The Heath School

At the same time [as working on the project], The Heath School was developing its own plan for the use of its Pupil Premium funding for the next three years. In 2012/13, the funding available for the plan amounted to £65,000. To develop the plan, the school audited all existing interventions and reviewed their effectiveness. The plan then set out the interventions that would be used in addition to the existing strategies. There were three key objectives:

1. Improve transition outcomes for FSM students to bring attainment in line with expected levels of progress.
2. Establish a reading scheme to improve the reading age of students whose reading was below the national average.
3. Improve curriculum engagement and academic achievement for FSM pupils and children in care.

The plan set out detailed intended interventions, for example: appointing a Key Stage 2/3 progress champion to support transition of targeted students; using reading champions who were Year 11 students to work with underperforming students; and implementing an academic subsidy to enable FSM students to access the curriculum (the funding could purchase revision guides, resources for technology, staffing for FSM workshops, theatre trips etc). The work to develop the plan fitted well with the involvement in the closing the gap action-research project, which was described as 'an invaluable starting point', providing access to research and opportunities to discuss tools such as the Sutton Trust toolkit and closing the gap material from the National College.

This section has described how the work between the schools was initiated, and the strategies and interventions that were used. It has grouped the work under five themes:

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support.
2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice.
3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils.
4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning.
5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning.

Section 4 gives examples of the impact of the projects in relation to these five themes.

4: The impact of the projects

This section uses examples from the case studies to explain the impact of the projects, and then describes some of the main barriers and challenges faced by NLEs and their schools.

The action-research projects had a variety of ways to measure the impact of their work. Most projects had a target group of pupils, eligible for free school meals or from disadvantaged backgrounds, and reviewed the progress that these pupils made or how the gap between their progress and that of their peers changed over the course of the project. Several projects looked at other outcome measures, such as pupil attendance, engagement in learning or changes in motivation and behaviours. A number of projects worked with pupils who had data available from end-of-key-stage tests or GCSE exams during the projects. Several projects sought feedback directly from the pupils involved, either through pupil interviews or surveys.

Most of the case studies were also able to provide examples of whole-school impact in the schools being supported. These whole-school impacts were of two sorts as follows:

- The work on closing the gap provided a model that could be undertaken in other areas of the school. There were examples where the process of working in this targeted way as part of an action-research project could be seen to have potential benefits if it was replicated for other projects in other parts of the school; or the work was so successful that it was agreed there would be benefit in its wider implementation.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

The work had been presented to both senior leadership teams, and both schools [Blessed Thomas Holford and Irlam and Cadishead Colleges] were considering how other departments might use a similar approach in supporting their specific student groups. It was felt there had therefore been a whole-school impact in terms of the approaches to action research at the schools.

- The work on closing the gap had identified and helped to address a whole-school priority: for example, data, tracking and monitoring; teaching and learning; rates of pupil progress and expectations; or staffing capacity and development.

With schools now receiving substantial pupil premium funding, rising to over £2 billion in the year 2014-15, it is incumbent on all schools to demonstrate the impact that this money is having on closing the gap. Not only is there a figure in the school performance tables for closing the gap, but Ofsted is inspecting schools specifically on the work that they are doing in this field. From the outset, this National College project had a clear focus on impact and NLEs emphasised to the schools they were supporting that the school's data must enable them to assess the impact of the project work on the performance of disadvantaged pupils. The following discussion and examples will therefore be of considerable interest to all schools that are seeking to show that their work on closing the gap is bearing fruit.

As described in Section 2, the methodology of the project was action research. The purpose of the project, with a small number of NLEs, was to test interventions and strategies deployed by system leaders to support other schools. There were no randomised controlled trials and therefore other factors will certainly have contributed to the impact on pupils. Nonetheless, schools were using data to identify progress and impact compared with either what had been projected for pupils, or assessing progress relative to the performance of non-FSM pupils. Not all interventions were universally effective for all pupils: not all targeted pupils showed an increase in progress or attainment; not all classes closed gaps in attainment between pupil groups. However out of the 17 case study schools, all except one were able to demonstrate a positive impact on either closing gaps in attainment in supported schools, or increasing progress or attainment for targeted pupils.

The following illustrations from the case studies demonstrate the different methods that the projects used to measure and assess progress and impact. Full details are included in the case studies themselves, and in a number of cases there are example tools and materials used by the schools during the course of their work. The examples are grouped under the five themes described in Section 3:

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support.
2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice.
3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils.
4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning.
5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning.

1. Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support

Where the NLE and NSS were working with a cluster of schools, they were able to analyse the impact at pupil level school-by-school and whether gaps had closed in the core subjects. This example from Tollgate Primary School shows the data review and also scale of the impact from this project with nine other schools working to close gaps in Year 5.

Tollgate Primary School

In the nine schools involved, gaps in attainment between FSM pupils and their peers closed in two-thirds of the schools:

- Four schools closed gaps between FSM pupils and their peers in reading, writing and numeracy.
- One school closed gaps in reading and writing.
- One school closed the gaps in one of its Year 5 classes in reading, writing and numeracy.

Table 2: Example of anonymised school-level APS report

Year 5 class: Autumn term	FSM	Whole class
Reading	19.9 (-2.2 compared with rest of class)	22.1
Writing	17.5 (-2.9 compared with rest of class)	20.4
Numeracy	17.0 (-2.0 compared with rest of class)	19.0
Same Year 5 class: Spring term	FSM	Whole class
Reading	22.3 (-1.1 compared with rest of class) Gap closing: Yes	23.4
Writing	19.9 (-1.3 compared with rest of class) Gap closing: Yes	21.2

Numeracy	18.9 (-2.7 compared with rest of class) Gap closing: No	21.6
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For another project, there was a whole-school impact on the school's capacity to analyse data and use it to review pupil progress across the school, and in doing so, to focus more strongly on the progress of FSM pupils.

Chestnut Grove School

St Cecilia's [the school working with Chestnut Grove on the project] has produced a graph showing expected rates of progress. This is used across the school to raise expectations of all students.

The deputy head of St Cecilia's reported in December 2012 that the closing the gap project had:

- made the school focus on FSM students as individuals, not numbers on a spreadsheet
- exposed previously unidentified underperformance
- raised the profile of progress rather than attainment
- made the school realise that although some students appear to be doing well, they should be doing better
- led to in-depth conversations between senior staff and heads of department in English and maths, as well as the conversations with [Chestnut Grove School] staff

2. Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice

The following example from the Halterworth case study demonstrates the impact on targeted pupils by closing the gap in performance between FSM and non-FSM pupils. In this case study, the impact achieved was believed by the school to have resulted from the increase in pupils' abilities to reflect on and assess their own learning, resulting in some pupils receiving more one-to-one support. In this example, staffing turbulence was identified as a factor affecting the impact for all pupils. The impact of the work was also noted by Ofsted during an inspection of one of the schools in the primary federation.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

In summary, from all of the classes involved across the three assessed areas, 10 out of 15 assessed areas showed a decrease in the gap between FSM pupils and non-FSM pupils. In one case it remained the same and in four cases it increased. It is important to note that the supported schools of Awbridge and Wellow experienced turbulence in the appointment of teaching staff from the end of the summer term to the autumn term. Inevitably, this has had an initial negative impact as new staff needed to become familiar with the concept and purpose of the project. Where stability was evident, greater progress was achieved.

In July 2012, Wellow Primary School was inspected by Ofsted, which reported:

Pupils known to be eligible for free school meals are now working at levels very close to those of all other pupils... A programme of peer observation and coaching has been effective, contributing to improvement in teaching and the achievement of pupils.

The same case study demonstrated how a successful teaching and learning innovation (the use of a learning scale for pupils to self-assess their own learning) was seen to be worth implementing across both supported schools and the NSS. The impact of the intervention shows why the programme was rolled out more broadly.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

The use of the learning scale was evaluated by staff as being so successful (in terms of giving the children a language to talk about their learning and set their own targets) that it has now become part of the mainstream teaching and learning scale across the three schools.

Staff have noted that pupils have become much more confident in realising what they can do, and this has had a very positive impact on pupils with low confidence (often the FSM pupils). Teachers also found it useful to have identified pupils to work with in one-to-one time for a set period which, although difficult at first, made teachers more focused on:

- who they were supporting
- the exact nature of the support that was needed (identified from success criteria, as displayed in books or on the board during the lesson)

Another positive impact has been the use of much more effective AfL in relation to more fluid groupings within the classroom. Teachers are noting that they feel they are making much more effective use of support staff within the room. For example, at a mid-point in a lesson, one teacher described how she could say to a pupil: “If you have given yourself a 4 or 5 for [this piece of work], please go and sit on the carpet with [the teaching assistant], who is going to go over this with you for 10 minutes”.

Pupils who grade themselves at 1 on the scale are given the opportunity to teach others for a short period during some lessons. This has led to increased self-confidence and articulation as learners. Pupils have become very aware of the worth of teaching others. This has been commented on by parents, who have been impressed by their children wanting to come home and teach their parents something they can do well. A good example of this was a Year 1 pupil who told her mum she was so good at using ‘Fred fingers’ (a method for learning phonics) she would teach her mum how to do it!

3. Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils

In several projects, the schools used pupil-level assessment data to show the impact for the target group of FSM-eligible pupils. The following illustration from Dunraven School shows the impact on 10 Year 6 students who had been supported by Year 12 mentors from the NSS. The impact is shown both in terms of their attainment data at the end of the project, and oral feedback from the pupils about the support they had received.

Dunraven School

Nine of the students [from Crown Lane Primary School] made at least two levels of progress from Key Stage 1 when it appeared unlikely that as many would make this progress at the start of the project. Eight met or exceeded their target level.

Response from the Year 6 students was very positive. The NLE visited the school to meet with students and their mentors. All saw the support as positive and all knew what it was aiming to do. Year 6 students commented:

I like the idea of a mentor. She helps me to revise what I think and to make it better.

We agree a key issue and I practise. Then he tests me the following week to look at progress.

My attendance is better as I know she'll check up on me.

Student identifier	Pre-intervention level	Target level	Outcome level at Key Stage 2
10 students involved	Levels ranged from 2c to 4b	Target levels ranged from 3b to 5c	Six met their target levels. Two exceeded their targets. Two did not meet their targets. From their pre-interventions levels, six made two sub-levels of progress and four made three or more sub-levels of progress.

In several of the case studies, the projects used measures including pupil engagement, attendance and motivation to review the impact of the work undertaken. The following two examples from secondary schools illustrate this.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

Students completed two questionnaires, one at the beginning of the project and one at the end of the autumn term to gauge the impact on motivation and engagement, confidence, and self-esteem. This showed a positive change in terms of their engagement and attitude to learning. There was 100 per cent attendance from all students at all of the sessions.

The Heath School

The self-assessment completed at the start of the intervention averaged at 68 per cent confidence in skills needed for the exam - this had then moved to 80 per cent by the end of the intervention. All pupils had been on the grade C/D borderline, with 86 per cent expected to achieve a grade C in English. However, the movement of the grade boundary in that year meant that the actual achievement was 68 per cent. In comparison, English results overall at C and above were 36 per cent.

For one project, there was a connection for the target group of pupils between their increased attainment, enthusiasm for maths, and parental support and homework completion.

Kibworth Church of England Primary School

Work on closing the gap can be used to demonstrate to the supported school what is possible in terms of raising achievement. One school held a holiday club, linking maths with sport and using 'mathletics', an online maths activity site. From being far behind, 84 per cent of the pupils attending the club achieved age-related expectations. Not unconnected with this success, all pupils ended the project 'liking' or 'loving' maths, compared with 92 per cent who had disliked the subject at the outset. Parents became more engaged with their children's maths and began to seek support to help their children. In the autumn term, the homework return rate among the holiday club group increased from 14 to 96 per cent and all showed a more positive attitude to maths.

Another project saw the close working relationship between the two schools develop both schools' practice, and support both groups of teaching assistants.

Victoria Infant and Nursery School

The collaborative partnership way of working that developed during this project between the Executive Headteacher [of Victoria Infant and Junior Schools] and the Acting Headteacher [of Victoria Infant School] resulted in a parallel focus on action research in the NSS with two leaders driving learning. This resulted in a significant raising of standards in the NSS as well as the supported school making the impact of the research project significant for the pupils of both schools. Current Year 3 pupils are outperforming pupils in Year 4 due to this focused intervention and improved use of TAs to directly impact upon intervention. As a result of the NLE and AHT leading the deployment and monitoring of TAs in the intervention programme, communication, expectations, standards of teaching, behaviour and outcomes for all targeted children were clear from the onset and throughout. Impact was rapid and support teachers felt valued and supported.

One case study demonstrated that using data to look in detail at the impact of the same intervention delivered by different staff could pay dividends in demonstrating the need for professional development. In the example below, it was the difference in progress that pupils made in weekly mentoring sessions that identified the need for further support for the teaching assistants at the supported school.

Yesoiday Hatorah Primary School

In the spring term 2012, the supported school analysed the data for each of the pupils who had made one sub-level progress. The analysis reviewed whether the weekly mentoring session had been taken by a TA or a teacher. There was a significant difference: of the 107 pupils who had made one sub-level of progress or more during the autumn term, 27 had been taught in a TA-led group and 80 had been taught in a teacher-led group. Over the spring term, 42 pupils had made one sub-level progress or more, of whom 4 had been taught in TA-led groups and 38 had been taught in teacher-led groups. The TAs had led sessions with just over half the pupils. As a consequence, the school considered its overall use of TA support and requested training and development for their TAs [from Yesoiday Hatorah staff] in delivering the sessions. This had been strongly supported by the TAs themselves.

4. Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning

For one of the case studies, the key area of focus was on improving levels of emotional and personal resilience as a way of supporting learning. There has been a range of positive outcomes from their work, and the school used a pupil survey and the outcomes of peer mentoring support to review the impact.

Forest Way Teaching School Alliance

Four Year 12 students [at King Edward VII Science and Sports College] used their mentoring support for Year 11 students, which had been organised as part of the programme, as the subject matter for their extended project qualification (EPQ). As part of this work, students evaluated the support that had been provided. One Year 12 student wrote about the Year 11 students she was mentoring:

Since speaking with me on a regular basis, both students began attending extra revision classes and both have gone up at least one grade in either maths or English... they are at the age where peer pressure is more influential to them than adults.

The impact of the programme across Year 11 was gauged in May 2012 by repeating a survey originally conducted in October 2011. A total of 287 students had completed the survey. Of the 58 questions, 48 were answered in ways that showed an improvement since October 2011, and 19 of these were significantly positive. Some of the most significant improvements since October 2011 were in response to the statements 'I feel confident', 'I am aware of how I impact on others', 'I feel proud of myself', 'I am doing my very best at school', and 'I know how to set goals'.

5. Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning

The following excerpt from the case study for Danehill Primary School illustrates how two schools used the impact on pupil progress, together with support for pupils' reading at home, to measure the outcome of the project. The focus of the project had been to improve the engagement of parents in their child's reading at home. The case study shows the variable impact of this intervention. As with other projects, however, the work at the supported school was also noted during an Ofsted inspection during the autumn term.

Danehill Church of England Primary School

Between February and October 2012, seven of the nine pupils [at the supported school] made one sub-level of progress in reading and two had stayed at the same level (including the pupil with a statement [of special educational needs]). Teachers made the following assessment of the strength of parental engagement with reading, their children's work and teacher consultations (5 = strong engagement and 1 = weak engagement):

- Three of the nine parents/carers had strong engagement (scoring 5 on the assessment scale). All these pupils made one sub-level of progress and were at their age-related level for reading.
- Four of the nine parents/carers had moderate engagement (scoring 3 on the assessment scale). Three of these pupils made one sub-level of progress and one (the pupil with a statement) did not. Only one of these pupils was reading at the age-related level.
- Two of the nine parents/carers had weak engagement (scoring 1 or 2 on the assessment scale). One of these pupils made one sub-level of progress and one made no progress (including one who was taken into care during the project because of neglect at home). Neither of these pupils was reading at their age-related level.

In its latest monitoring report on the supported school in September 2012, Ofsted commented that the school was making good progress and that 'teaching was better matched to pupils' needs.' In particular Ofsted identified how parents and carers had been:

Enthusiastic in supporting a project to increase opportunities for pupils to read aloud. The school has run workshops for parents and carers to share strategies for helping pupils to become confident readers.

For other schools, the work to close attainment gaps had exposed whole-school issues that required attention from the NSS. The partnership with the NLE had in some cases resulted in significant improvements, for example a stronger understanding of rates of pupil progress, how to better support targeted pupils, and a raising of the profile of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Little Ilford School

The project has resulted in the supported school:

- having a whole-school focus on writing from September 2012 with the outcomes from the project feeding into this initiative
- untangling the issues and needs of the school's middle leadership team, including the headteacher deciding to reorganise the leadership of the English department
- raising the expectations and skills of the English teachers who continued to be supported by the external consultant
- stimulating further support from Little Ilford and deepening the partnership between the schools

What were the barriers and challenges faced?

For several of the projects, the barriers to the work on closing the gap were identical to those NLEs have encountered on other support projects since the establishment of their role in 2006 (see for comparison, Hill & Matthews, 2008, 2010; Rea, Hill & Sandals, 2011). These included:

- staff at the supported school not having the capacity to work with the NSS
- leadership capacity at the supported school being unable to engage the NLE
- the context within which the support was being provided changing rapidly and significantly, for example due to forced academy conversion or changes in staff and leadership
- the time-limited nature of the support package resulting in progress being made but not necessarily being sustained

In one of the case studies, an NLE used a member of her senior leadership team to overcome some of the issues from the supported school at a key meeting, after which there was effective engagement between the two schools.

St Eanswythe's Church of England Primary School

A commercial phonics package was used at St Eanswythe's (Read Write Inc), and there was initially some caution in relation to the adoption of a single specific package at the supported school, as opposed to a range of strategies. The NLE met with the senior team at the beginning of the summer term 2012, and for this meeting was accompanied by her reading leader from St Eanswythe's. This proved a significant step in convincing senior staff: it allowed them to question the reading leader and understand the details of implementation, enabled preconceptions about the benefits of the package to be challenged, and determined what would be needed to put it in place. This took many of the excuses off the table about implementing the programme.

Alongside these general challenges to the NLEs and their schools, there were also specific barriers to supporting other schools to close gaps in attainment, particularly where those schools were in serious weaknesses or subject to other interventions. NLEs most often cited the following issues:

-
- The range of support and interventions being focused on schools in Ofsted categories or below floor standards could make it difficult for NLEs to find a way in, in particular to sustain a focus on the performance of specific pupil groups when this work was seen as a separate intervention.
 - Similarly, if there were fundamental whole-school priorities that needed addressing (for example, quality of teaching, behaviour, leadership and management, inadequate attainment and progress for all learners), these would need to be tackled immediately and probably before any specific work to support targeted groups of learners. For schools with performance below floor standards, the overriding concern can be “chasing the threshold indicators” as one SLT member described it (referring to progress to Level 4 or grade C at GCSE). This was sometimes reflected in the priority given to closing gaps.
 - Work on closing the gap exposed fundamental whole-school priorities that needed addressing, and therefore the support became considerably more wide-ranging than had been expected. For example, data and tracking evidence didn’t exist or wasn’t robust enough to use to plan action to close gaps until those processes were established, or the data that was available was not sufficiently well understood by staff throughout the school to take action.
 - Some schools didn’t believe that focusing on closing gaps was right for them at that time: in some cases there were too many other whole-school issues to resolve and these needed to be tackled first; others that it was not seen as a priority, until in some cases the data review exposed that it was.
 - Communication within the school being supported was poor and so the value and impact of the work was dissipated or lost, or the NLE could not access other staff. This communication problem could be made worse when the head who wouldn’t allow others access to the NLE did not themselves know what to do with data. This issue became particularly acute when the closing the gap project was in the hands of a single teacher and she left the school, taking her expertise with her.
 - Interventions were not always successful. This should be a basis for further analysis, learning, and revised and new interventions, rather than despondency that the actions had failed.

One of our case studies summarised the challenges in supporting a school in an Ofsted category to close gaps in attainment as follows:

Yesoiday Hatorah Primary School

The LLE reflected that basic foundations need to be in place in a school to allow it to take advantage of support to close gaps. For example, secure leadership and management, good proportion of quality first teaching, secure tracking and assessment processes. The school required the leadership capacity to take advantage of the support, and engage positively in the collaboration. A focus on closing gaps could appear to some schools in challenging circumstances to be about just the short-term progress of pupils rather than helping to build capacity over time. It “...can be challenging to establish a collaborative and supportive relationship over a short period with a strong focus on data and pupil progress for a school in special measures” (LLE).

Finally in this section, we looked at the interventions or strategies that NLEs considered appropriate for scaling up and for use more widely by system leaders. In many cases, these related to the strategic steps NLEs believed should be taken by system leaders when they supported schools to close gaps in attainment: these steps will be explained in Section 5. For example, the forensic focus on pupil-level data for all year groups to expose the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds was regarded as a crucial part of the strategic work.

For system leaders, in particular those involved in teaching school alliances, scaling up could be about how schools might be engaged to work together. Most of the projects involved a single NSS working with a single school, although there were examples of NSSs working with multiple schools as part of a cluster on closing the gap. This approach has the obvious advantages of involving schools in peer challenge and support, and enabling effective practice to be communicated to a wider number of schools. We make recommendations about this approach in Section 5.

5: How system leaders can apply the leadership lessons, the strategic steps needed, different models of support and recommendations

The final section of this report covers four areas.

Firstly, it sets out some **strategic steps** that NLEs believed it was important for system leaders to take in working with other schools to close gaps in attainment. This is the learning from the project for other NLEs about ‘what to do’. These steps apply equally to NLEs engaged in supporting a school one-to-one, or NLEs working with a cluster of schools on a specific closing the gap project.

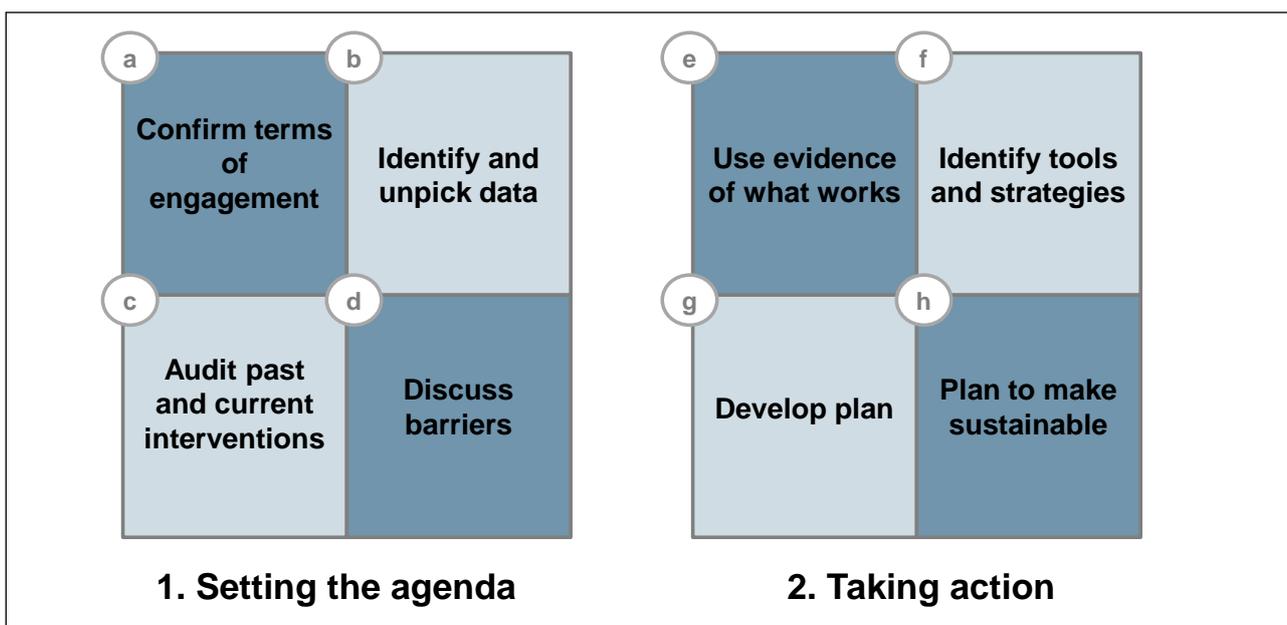
Secondly, it summarises the **leadership learning** about how the NLEs went about their work to support other schools, and sets out a number of leadership skills and behaviours that NLEs believed were important for system leaders to adopt in undertaking closing the gap work with other schools. This captures the learning for other NLEs about ‘how to go about it’.

Thirdly, it comments on how work to close attainment gaps might be distinct from other NLE support work.

Fourthly, it makes recommendations about the roles of system leaders in supporting schools to close gaps in attainment.

Many of the school leaders who had been working together on the closing the gap action research met for a workshop at the National College in January 2013 towards the end of the project. They reflected on the interventions and strategies they had used to work with other schools. They also summarised the steps that they thought were important in working with another school to close gaps in attainment. These strategic steps are summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Suggested strategic steps for system leaders



Source: author summary of NLE workshop, January 2013

Although not necessarily sequential, the suggested strategic steps in Figure 5 fall into two broad categories.

The first four steps were seen as establishing the terms of the support, gathering evidence and ensuring that the focus of the support would be appropriate.

a. Ensure work on closing gaps is part of the initial terms of engagement

This strategic step would confirm from the start that the NSS expected to be working on this agenda. It would challenge any culture of low aspirations that might be an issue. A number of NLEs reflected that, if the focus on closing gaps is clearly agreed and set up as part of the contract, this would help establish the high priority given to the work and the speed with which action could be taken. This confirmation of the focus on closing gaps might arise from the brokering organisation emphasising the importance of this work, the supported school recognising that this was a priority, or the NSS identifying this as fundamental to the support.

An additional benefit of this step is that it forces both schools to clarify the scope and scale of the project in terms of time and personnel involved, and range across the school. Some initial diagnostic work might be required to clarify this, which links to the following three strategic steps.

b. Identify and unpick the data to analyse the progress of pupil groups

Identifying and unpicking the data and sharing it throughout the school were regarded as vital to getting the support work off to a successful start. This was clearly predicated on the supported school having access to and being willing to share pupil-level data. The result of this step would enable a clear analysis of where the gaps existed and where action needed to be focused.

For some projects, ownership of the data at middle leader levels had proved a significant challenge. RAISEonline data and evidence that demonstrated the attainment gaps that needed to be closed got stuck with the head or deputy. This resulted in the performance of FSM pupils and the gaps in attainment coming as a surprise to middle leaders. Actually, the reverse needed to be true: middle leaders should be spotting gaps, raising problems and taking the initiative in proposing solutions to senior leaders. Part of the work of the NLE and staff from the NSS might be to ensure that staff and leaders in the supported school knew how to use assessment data to focus on the progress of different pupil groups. This work might then also need to address questions around “the particular gaps the school should focus on”, and ensure an understanding that closing gaps needed to be in the context of raising attainment overall.

c. Audit the effectiveness of past and current interventions

NLEs observed that it was vital to shine a light on current and past practice by undertaking work (which did not need to be extensive) to review the impact of the school’s strategies to improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. If this could be undertaken as a supportive and collaborative activity using a simple framework, it would help to build capacity and processes at the supported school to review the impact of its work in the future. For some schools, this activity could provide a vital building block in developing a plan for the use of Pupil Premium funding.

Observations, learning walks², talking to students, and looking at books would all be important ways in which evidence of practice could be built.

d. Discuss barriers with staff and pupils: what do they think are the priorities?

NLEs advised that it was important to hear what ideas staff – both teaching and support staff – had for change, to help them reflect on their own practice, and to consider with staff what the barriers to making further progress were. This is vital to ensuring that the staff of the supported school take ownership of the process. There could be opportunities through this work to challenge misconceptions about closing gaps, or use benchmark data to raise aspirations or challenge complacency. Governors should also be involved from the start. NLEs advised that pupil voice is a crucial component of closing the gap work. It was important to hear from pupils what they perceive as the barriers to learning, why they might not be enjoying aspects of their education and why they were not succeeding.

By this stage, it should have become clearer for the NLE whether the strategies and interventions to close gaps needed to be at whole-school level to address wide-ranging school improvement issues; needed to focus on a group of underperforming pupils, including pupils eligible for FSM; or whether specific strategies were required to support the school’s FSM pupils.

² The Learning Walks model was created by the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for Learning (IFL) based on research by Professor Resnick (http://ifl.lrdc.pitt.edu/ifl/index.php/professional_development).

Once the first four steps had been undertaken, the second group of four strategic steps (Figure 5) was designed to make progress in supporting the school to close gaps and improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

e. Raise the profile of research and potential solutions: use the evidence on what works

NLEs said it was important to help staff see what success looked like for individual pupils, and what staff would see differently if the changes were successful. An important aspect of this was grounding the activity, especially if it was to be undertaken as an action-research project, in the evidence of what works. The Education Endowment Foundation toolkit (EEF, 2013) was seen as a key resource which could be used to explain to staff what the evidence said about strategies that were effective, and those that were less so.

NLEs said that using the research evidence would be a powerful way to address questions from teachers about how it was possible to close gaps in the context of raising attainment overall, and that 'closing gaps' was often shorthand for improving the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

f. Identify the tools and strategies needed

In this part of the process, tools and resources were identified to address the specific issues in the supported school. NLEs said it was important not to adopt a 'scattergun' use of a range of strategies. The EEF (2013) toolkit, as well as other resources from the National College or other research, could be used to help match interventions to need.

g. Develop a plan and demonstrate the links to the school's core aims

NLEs said that wherever possible, it was important to develop a concrete plan with timelines, roles and milestones. In doing so, it was helpful to identify the staff that could make change happen – the 'change agents' at different levels – who could be brought on-side to help challenge assumptions and change habits in the supported school. In developing the plan, this needed to be closely linked to the school's core aims and priorities to ensure buy-in and alignment with other activity so that the supported school could take long-term ownership of the improvement process. Governors might also need to be engaged. The establishment of a specific plan for work on closing gaps might then be used as a basis to develop a more strategic plan for the use of Pupil Premium funding at the school.

h. Build leadership capacity to make sustainable improvements and strengthen the school's own performance capability

NLEs advised that they should always be thinking about the exit strategy, thinking about making changes sustainable and improving the performance capability of the school to reflect on and analyse its own outcomes. (This point is covered in further detail later in this section.)

What is the leadership learning for NLEs? What skills and behaviours are needed to help schools to close gaps?

Throughout the action research, the research team asked NLEs to keep a log of their leadership reflections. This was designed to capture their thoughts on the skills and behaviours needed to work with other schools to close gaps in attainment: How were they working with the supported school? What behaviours did they need to adopt? What skills were they using to work collaboratively with the other schools? The reflections were then discussed by NLEs at their half-termly action-research cluster meetings. The following were some of the most commonly discussed areas:

- establishing credibility and positive relationships between schools
- engaging staff and pupils
- helping schools to work together
- driving the work forward through commitment from heads

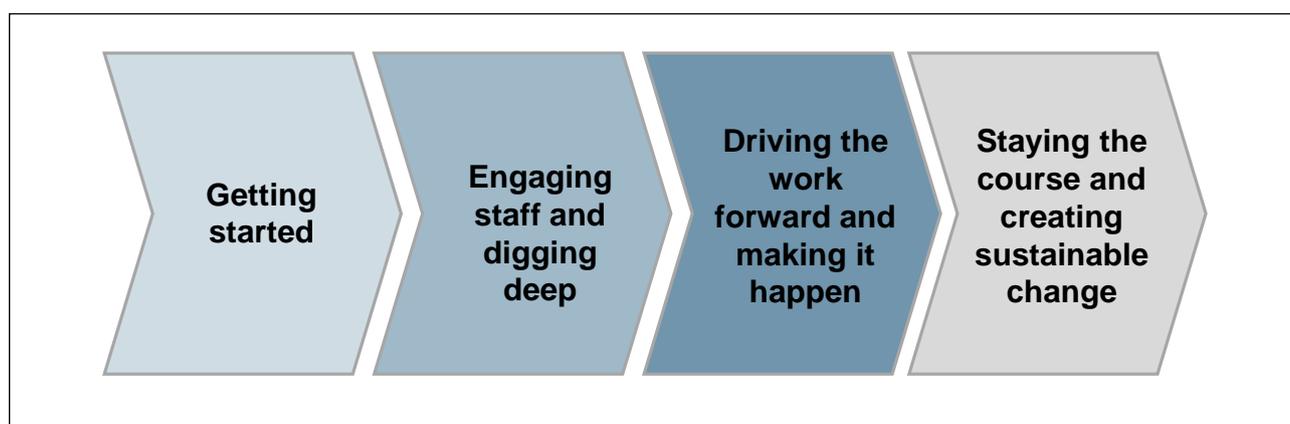
- identifying staff to lead
- balancing coaching and implementation

Towards the end of the project, NLEs gathered for a workshop at the National College. One of the activities undertaken was a facilitated group discussion: NLEs were asked, in reflecting on their projects and in the light of their experiences of other work, what advice they had for other NLEs about the key leadership skills and behaviours needed to support other schools to close gaps in attainment.

The following part of this section brings together this evidence. It is organised into four stages of support for another school (see Figure 6) and for each stage describes:

- NLEs' reflections from their leadership logs about how they supported other schools, including illustrative material from the case studies
- advice to other NLEs about how they might need to act in supporting other schools to close gaps

Figure 6: Four stages of NLE support



Source: author summary of NLE workshop, January 2013

Getting started

What were the NLEs' leadership reflections about supporting other schools to close gaps?

As with other NLE and NSS engagements to support other schools, setting up the relationship on a strong and trusting basis was an important prerequisite to achieving successful outcomes for all the projects.

For some schools, building on existing relationships and partnerships provided a strong basis for school-to-school working.

Michael Faraday School

In this case, the two schools [Michael Faraday and St Peter's CoE Primary Schools] were in close proximity to each other, the NLE had identified the head of the partner school as a potential school leader, and had supported her development and encouraged her to go for headship. In addition the NLE understood the challenges facing the new head as she took on the leadership of a one-form-entry church school that had been in special measures before her appointment.

In other cases, having similar pupil intakes, having implemented similar interventions or having common problems provided the right starting point for school-to-school collaboration. For a number of the projects, the need to raise the attainment and progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds was a common challenge for the NSS and the supported school. This was helpful in developing a collaborative culture: no one school was seen as having a monopoly of insight and best practice, and nor was it seen as threatening for the supported school. In the Chestnut Grove School case study, this was described as 'avoiding a done-to attitude and fostering a do-with approach'. In time, both schools were likely to co-develop solutions that would be relevant for each.

Dunraven School

The common desire to improve outcomes for students, address gaps in attainment and enable both schools [Dunraven and Crown Lane Primary School] to benefit from the project provided the platform for joint working.

Michael Faraday School

Both schools shared the same demographic profile and both the NLE and the partner head had identified the problem of an increasing number of children joining their respective schools with limited language, very poor ability to express themselves, and in need of speech and language support. Although both schools were aiming to provide a rich and creative curriculum, they were aware that certain children needed targeted provision to help develop their confidence and language.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

The focus of the project fitted what both schools needed. There was a shared focus on improving the quality of teaching in maths and closing gaps, and this had not been threatening for Irlam and Cadishead College; instead it felt like a project that the two schools were engaged on jointly (it was described as 'how can both schools close their gaps by working together?').

Tollgate Primary School

Building up trust and credibility for the project was crucial. The NLE's role was to bring people on board and develop trust in the initial stages. It was important that the dedicated time for the project came from an assistant head who was based in the classroom and therefore could model practice. Throughout, it was important that Tollgate could demonstrate that it faced similar challenges in a similar context.

In several projects, listening and understanding the personalities and characters of all involved were important parts of the process to design the project and ensure positive engagement. One NLE said that "all the actions needed to come from [staff at the supported school], not imposing solutions".

Little Ilford School

The NLE combined an upbeat and positive tone ('it can be done' attitude) with the boys and the leadership of the department, regularly demonstrating the impact the project could have on short-term outcomes.

What is the advice to other NLEs about leadership skills and behaviours?

Building trust could be helped by clear and transparent communication and ensuring a joint approach to the project: both schools had things to learn, and there was a shared purpose in supporting targeted pupils; it was important that the schools were seen to learn together. Honesty at this stage was often important, and ensuring key non-negotiables were clear, for example access to the school's own data (not just for published year groups) at pupil level.

NLEs and system leaders needed to ensure they did not make assumptions about the capacity of the school with which they were working, for example by presuming that the school had the ability to interpret and the use the data generated. NLEs needed to be sensitive to the school's situation and demonstrate empathy with its challenges and context. They needed to provide clear messages about the focus of their work, and about the changes that could be achieved for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

NLEs might also need to adopt a different leadership style from their own preferred style, and in many cases this was likely to be a coaching and empowering approach. At the start of the engagement, they said it is important to identify where effective practice exists that can then be built on.

Engaging staff and digging deep

What were the NLEs' leadership reflections about supporting other schools to close gaps?

For some NLEs it was necessary to win over some sceptical staff. The focus on data was an important aspect on several projects in providing a compelling answer to anyone who asked why the project was necessary. One other way of addressing the scepticism was to draw on the research and engage staff to prompt enquiry – beginning the steps to support a learning community. For other schools, it was important to see the interventions modelled and have the opportunity to engage with experienced practitioners at the NSS so that fears and concerns could be discussed and addressed.

St Eanswythe's Church of England Primary School

It helped for Christ Church Primary School to see phonics sessions in action, which helped to demystify them; the training from the national support school also answered key questions. Staff at the supported school could see that the children enjoyed the sessions and it was well structured, and that it had raised reading levels.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

Teachers may initially need support to frame their work with pupils and with each other in terms of a language of learning, but over the course of the project they should become more confident. The role of the NLE is likely, therefore, to move to providing challenge to help to focus and sharpen their analysis.

The importance of explaining the work to all staff to raise its profile and make everyone aware (even if they were not involved at a particular point) was not to be underestimated. Several projects used professional development day sessions to communicate the purpose of and background to the work. This had the additional advantage of raising the profile of specific pupils eligible for free school meals across the schools.

Halterworth, Wellow and Awbridge federation of primary schools

In September 2012, an Inset day was held for all three schools involved in the collaboration. During the morning a range of enquiry projects was shared between staff at Halterworth and across the collaboration using a coaching approach. A short presentation demonstrated the assessment scale. Information on the initial impact (statistics) was shared and staff who would be the next teachers for these pupils were informed about the project.

At the same time, engaging the pupils who were involved in the work was important. For several projects, this became a vital aspect of the leadership work to establish the baseline and understand what had been happening in the supported school, as well as determine the motivations and interests of the pupils involved. For these projects, this aspect was noted as being a more important element than had been the case in work supporting other schools.

Little Ilford School

Student voice proved a powerful way of engaging students, understanding their aspirations and motivations, and identifying the blockages to progress. Outcomes of student voice need to be shared with staff and students and put alongside hard data. Students' perceptions are likely to be catalytic to the success of any such project. If they see themselves as improving, even though they don't necessarily like writing, they will be more motivated.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

The project engaged the students successfully by understanding their perceptions and views via the survey. This had helped the project focus on real-world applications of maths relating to sporting themes.

What is the advice to other NLEs about leadership skills and behaviours?

At this second stage, NLEs' advice was that the important skills were in getting underneath the obvious, and really developing a good understanding of the supported school's strengths and weaknesses as this would have a strong bearing on its capacity to close gaps.

An important skill was to be able to articulate clearly the need for the work to all staff, the impact on pupils' life chances, and to set the aspirations for the achievement of pupil groups using comparative data. NLEs used these skills to help staff articulate (perhaps for the first time), the non-negotiables for the school and how they wanted to help pupils achieve. This would help to engage the staff in the work and the changes needed.

NLEs would begin to model the behaviours of collaborative enquiry, talking to staff about their successes and barriers, and enabling opportunities for staff from the schools involved to enjoy genuine peer engagement about learning and the barriers faced by specific pupils. Through this enquiry, NLEs would be able to identify staff in the supported school who would support change and who had the capacity to develop the project for the supported school.

Driving the work forward and making it happen

What were the NLEs' leadership reflections about supporting other schools to close gaps?

Ensuring that each phase of the project was undertaken jointly helped to build links between the schools. Some projects were particularly well suited to partnership working; for example a non-hierarchical coaching programme usefully built links and learning between two schools.

Michael Faraday School

The NLE and the head [at St Peter's Primary School] agreed to hold joint training sessions at Michael Faraday (which has a purpose-built training space) and involved EYFS and Year 1 staff from both schools.

For some projects in which the NLE was working to support a vulnerable school, there was a constant need to join up and align the interventions and support being provided. Work on closing gaps could often expose whole-school issues that needed addressing. Where weaknesses in a newly supported school were widespread, it was sometimes challenging to ensure there was a strong focus on specific closing the gap policies. Effective working between the school leaders was vital in enabling everything else (including all the practical arrangements) to follow and to sustain the work.

For some projects, the NLE needed to be prepared to see the NLE role evolve over the course of a project. It might be necessary to change focus from whole-school issues to specific interventions or vice versa, depending on the needs of the school, as in the following example:

Little Ilford School

In this project, the NLE started at a macro level (understanding the school's data and challenges), and moved to a micro level (being engaged with a cohort of boys and a head of department), before standing back and becoming more distant as the senior leadership team recognised and took ownership of the whole-school nature of the challenges relating to FSM boys and the quality of formative feedback.

The personal involvement and commitment by school leaders often helped to consolidate support for the project among staff.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

[Blessed Thomas Holford] recognised that it was vital to ensure both schools were fully aware of both the project and their FSM pupils, and that both maths departments were fully engaged in the project. This had been achieved by explaining the project at in-service training (Inset) days at the start of September, and ensuring that the ideas for the interventions came from the heads of maths departments who were leading the projects in both schools. At the same time, it was important that both schools knew that their heads and senior leadership teams (SLTs) were involved and supporting the work.

For many of the projects, a key step towards a successful project was identifying a lead member of staff who would drive, co-ordinate, and monitor the project. In some cases, distributing the leadership of the project was a specific outcome that was sought for the project.

Michael Faraday School

The NLE and the head of the partner school each identified key staff that they thought had the ability to motivate and enthuse children, their parents and colleagues. Staff from both schools have been working successfully together alongside the Speech Bubbles leader and from next year will take on the leadership of the project themselves.

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

[The lead member of staff was] co-ordinator for the project and provided the support and challenge to ideas, ensured the timetable was maintained, and provided the communication between the SLTs and maths departments in the two schools. She was also able to secure the necessary funding from the school. She organised the planning sessions, which were important in ensuring the two departments were able to generate ideas and ensure the work aligned with their other priorities.

Chestnut Grove School

Empowering the heads of English and maths in both schools [Chestnut Grove and St Cecilia's] to change practice was significant because it helped to spread and embed the responsibility for ensuring all students achieved the three levels of progress. Using the deputies to oversee the detailed work and the data analysis ensured that strategic and operational leadership were aligned.

Yesoiday Hatorah Primary School

For projects such as these it was important to have a link person in the supported school. They could move the project forward and be the link for communications. It was important that the LLE or NLE was able to ensure this person would provide the appropriate level of support to the project.

In other cases, the lead member of staff could coach and mentor other members of staff or model particular approaches to teaching and learning. For one NLE, she reflected that it was necessary to have strong communication and modelling skills in supporting a school in challenging circumstances, especially where staff morale might be low.

Gilmorton Chandler Church of England Primary School

In the supported school, it is beneficial to have at least two leaders involved to increase capacity and ensure sustainability.

What is the advice to other NLEs about leadership skills and behaviours?

As the project and support got properly under way, NLEs needed to use their skills to maintain momentum and address challenges as they emerged. Modelling practice (for example, specific interventions) could be important in demonstrating what the project would look like and what could be achieved. This could also be necessary to clear away any questions or misconceptions. It might be necessary to deploy knowledgeable practitioners from the NSS (for example a specialist leader of education or literacy co-ordinator) to overcome challenges, thereby increasing individuals' motivation by helping them to see what might be possible for different pupil groups.

There were likely to be occasions when the NLE needed to stand back and look strategically at the support and the project. Was it proceeding according to plan? Had other priorities emerged which meant a change of tack was necessary? Had the focus on gaps exposed other whole-school priorities? This ability to keep the big picture in mind and adjust course if necessary was recognised as a key skill.

Focusing on the details at this stage was important, and NLEs said it was important to keep asking the 'what else?' questions about what could be achieved in supporting specific pupils. Maintaining the regular cycle of meetings, checking against plans, recording outcomes and tracking regularly the outcomes in relation to specific pupils would all be important. All of this was likely to require strong reserves of patience and tenacity.

Wherever it was possible, demonstrating progress, looking for positive changes in practice and therefore securing some quick wins to maintain support would be important. Celebrating those wins and pushing out the credit to others was another important set of behaviours.

Staying the course and creating sustainable change

What were the NLEs' leadership reflections about supporting other schools to close gaps?

In some projects, there was sometimes a challenging balance to be struck between coaching staff to develop their capacity, and the NSS providing the capacity to do the work. In one project, a specialist leader of education reflected on the benefits that had been gained from her help to deliver an intervention group, but also a realisation that this had detracted from developing the capacity of SLT members in the supported school.

The need for the NLE to adopt a coaching approach, which might run counter to their more usual style of leadership and management, was apparent to a number of leaders. It was a different skill-set from those, for example, where the NLE was an executive head, and it occasionally "had been hard and time-consuming," said one NLE.

Little Ilford School

NLEs need to address early on the tension between the need to deliver rapid impact and coaching to enable and empower the head and leaders of the supported school to own and sustain a project or intervention. For example, the NLE started by coaching and supporting the development of the head of the English department. But after a first round of monitoring, it became clear that there was a need to address leadership issues due to inconsistent impact by each teacher that stemmed from a lack of direction and rigour by middle leaders. A subtle but important change of tack in the NLE's approach was necessary.

In most of the projects undertaken, some elements of the support did not work as planned. These aspects needed to be investigated and the schools needed to be prepared to learn from the mistakes and their experiences.

School leaders needed to be prepared to follow where the data and evidence took them in projects such as this.

Chestnut Grove School

In the case of Chestnut Grove School and St Cecilia's, it has led to starting interventions as soon as the pupils enter the school, re-examining the Key Stage 3 curriculum, the quality of special educational needs (SEN) support, the rigour and accuracy of Key Stage 3 assessments, and investigating the level of support pupils had been receiving in primary school.

Staffing turbulence had an adverse impact on projects where they were too firmly rooted in individuals rather than distributed across both schools. If the closing the gap project was being delivered through only one or two members of staff in the supported school, the project became unsustainable when they left the school.

Where the projects were likely to have a significant and long-lasting impact, they often engaged the SLT at the supported school in focusing on both a specific aspect of practice that could close gaps, which then also revealed a whole-school priority. The example below was concerned with feedback to pupils.

Little Ilford School

[As] it started to develop strategies for addressing the [closing the gap] issue, the SLT began to realise the challenge of embedding and sustaining formative feedback across the school. So the processes of ensuring corporate responsibility for closing the gap are essential but keeping it a priority has to be realised within the context of the school's overall development. This model of working created a template for the SLT to be diagnostic, strategic and conceptual in its planning and leadership: the focus moved from being a specific closing the gap initiative to making real impact, achieving consistency and sustaining improvements while maintaining closing the gap as a priority.

Tollgate Primary School

"It's not the children who create the gaps, it's the teaching" (Tom Canning). It was fundamental to the success of the project to get to the level of developing pedagogy and improving teaching and learning through support and challenge.

What is the advice to other NLEs about leadership skills and behaviours?

The key role for all NLEs was to make the changes sustainable by building the capacity of other schools to continue their own improvements. This was equally applicable to work to close gaps in attainment. Raising the profile of work to improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, coaching senior leaders, identifying leadership capacity in staff, and co-constructing tools and processes that would help the school continue the work; these were all important aspects of building sustainable change.

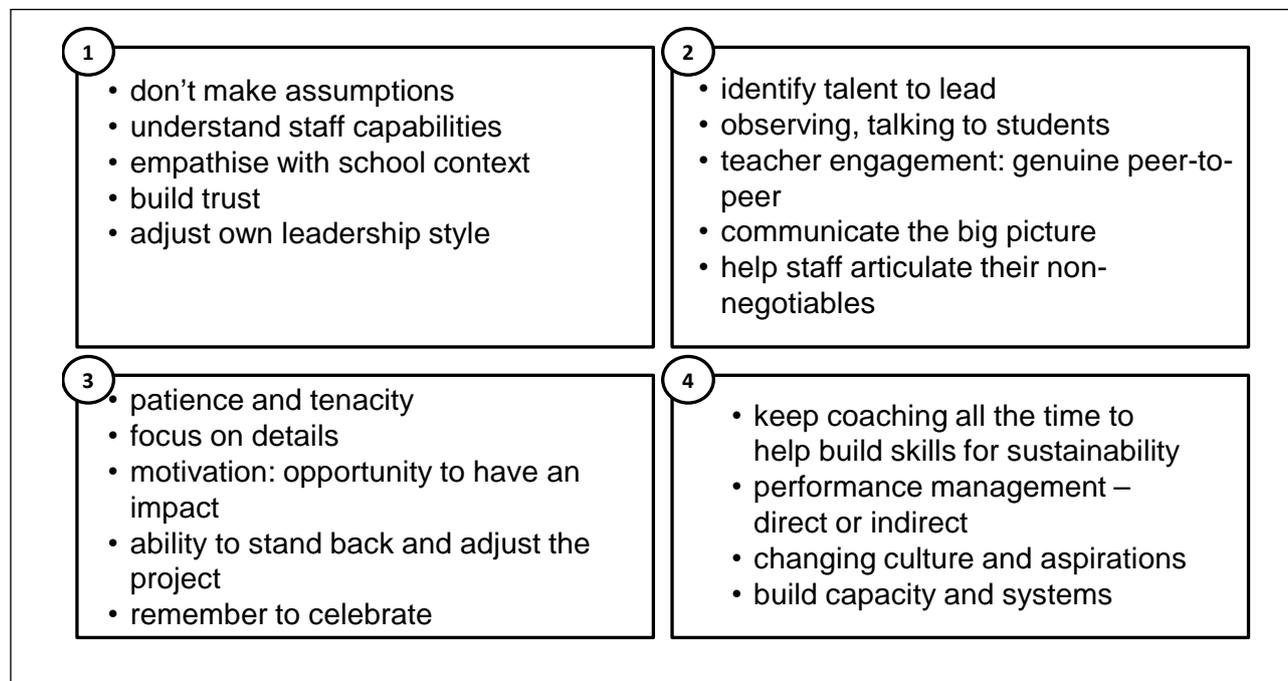
Equally important was to set the work into whole-school policies and practice, or establish ways of working that could be used in other ways across the school. Using the performance management framework would also be a way to create sustainable change.

Throughout the engagement, the NLE and staff needed to model a culture of high ambition and expectations for all pupils. Affecting the culture of a school was a long-term change process. However, the seeds could be sown by the work in supporting another school. The NLE might achieve this by setting clear expectations and non-negotiables, or it might be by overtly sharing their own philosophies

about school improvement. The NLE would be identifying the key levers to make this change happen, and very often would be focused on the use of data, leadership, and teaching and learning.

Figure 7 summarises the preceding advice to NLEs about the leadership skills and behaviours in relation to the different stages of support.

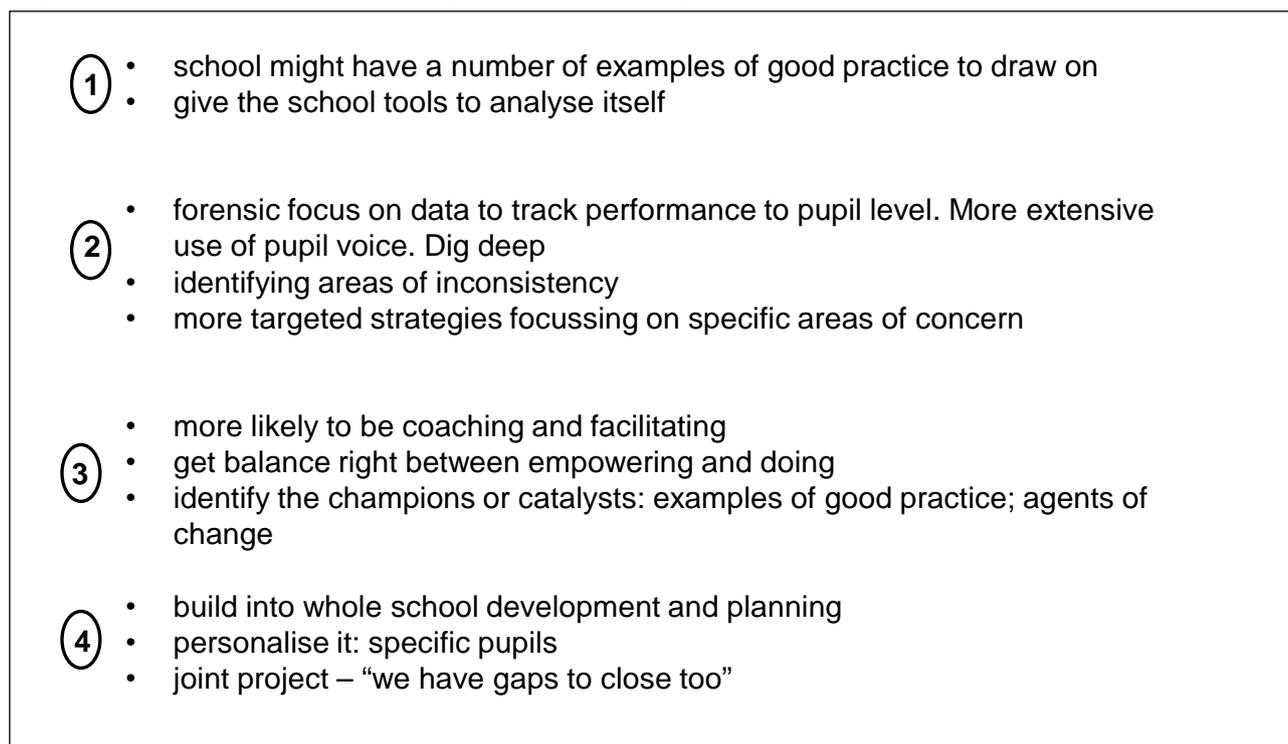
Figure 7: Leadership skills and behaviours identified by NLEs



Source: author summary of NLE workshop, January 2013

How work to close gaps in attainment might be distinct from other NLE support work

Figure 8: Differences identified by NLEs in working with schools to close gaps



Source: author summary of NLE workshop, January 2013

In reflecting on the leadership skills required of NLEs and system leaders to support schools to close gaps, NLEs involved in the research project recognised that there was overlap between how they needed to act generally in supporting other schools and specifically in closing the gap work. In one sense, this is no surprise. As observed throughout the research, many of the interventions and strategies are about effective school improvement. Much activity to close gaps in attainment is about effective leadership and management, using data to identify areas for improvement, improving the consistency of teaching and learning, and using resources to support specific interventions. So what were the differences in working with schools to close gaps in attainment, compared with supporting schools more broadly? NLEs identified four issues:

1. Schools being supported might have a stronger capacity to improve than others that the NLEs had worked with. With appropriate tools and coaching, they would be more likely to be able analyse their own gaps and put appropriate strategies in place. Schools might be more likely to have examples of effective practice on which to draw, and the problems might be more around internal consistency. Schools might have access to good pupil-level data, but need support to raise awareness of the progress of specific pupils. NLEs recognised that collaborative projects, in which both schools were engaged as joint partners, were more likely to be possible.
2. There was likely to be a stronger focus on pupil-level data than with some other types of support. Access to pupil data for all year groups was more likely to be a non-negotiable to commence the work. Drilling down and using the data to justify the work and expose issues were more likely to be key parts of the set-up phase. As has been explained earlier in this section, using pupil voice to provide evidence was also more likely to be a component of work to close gaps. Once the data had identified areas of concern, it was then likely to be the case that specific year groups or aspects of teaching and learning would be the focus of the work.
3. It was more likely that the NSS would be in entirely coaching and facilitative mode, although as explained earlier, there would be the ongoing challenge of balancing empowerment of the supported school against carrying out the intervention. This approach would be assisted by identifying the champions, catalysts or change agents to work within the supported school.
4. Finally, it was more likely that the work would focus on specific pupils and pupil groups. This had the advantage of personalising the support: it was about improving the progress of identifiable pupils who might have provided evidence of the barriers to their learning. Equally, the moral force of being able to identify specific pupils whose progress would be improved through the work could have a strong impact. It was also much more likely to be the case that there would be joint work between two or more schools working together to close gaps in attainment present in all the schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the research project.

NLEs and other system leaders have a significant role to play across the system in supporting schools to close gaps, improve the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and use Pupil Premium funding effectively. NLEs should be encouraged and incentivised to play this role. Their expertise and experience in supporting schools in challenging contexts should be recognised. There is a strong case for NLEs supporting in particular those schools in which there are significant gaps to close or where Pupil Premium funding is not being used effectively.

For NLEs and NSSs

- NLEs should be encouraged and enabled to see work to close gaps in attainment as central to their role.
- NLEs should be encouraged to share effective practice across their region, or across other alliances or networks of schools, on how they have worked with other schools to close gaps.

-
- NLEs within teaching school alliances should be encouraged and incentivised to adopt cluster support to schools to close gaps, and consequently become hubs of outstanding practice to support other schools to close gaps.
 - NLEs should be encouraged to use their own plans for spending the Pupil Premium to support other schools to strengthen their funding plans. In doing so, NLEs will need to demonstrate that their own plans are of the highest quality.

For the National College and the Department for Education

- Continue to develop case studies and materials for NLEs and system leaders about how they can work with other schools to close gaps. There is potential in the use of the forthcoming Closing the gap: test and learn research project to demonstrate how NLEs can work with other schools effectively.
- The proposals for NLEs to undertake reviews of schools whose use of the Pupil Premium funding has not been effective is a powerful opportunity to demonstrate to the system the impact that NLEs can have in helping schools to close gaps in attainment. This opportunity needs to be seized by both NLEs and the College, to demonstrate that NLEs are credible partners in work to close gaps and can have a significant impact. The identification of NLEs with a track record of supporting schools to close gaps and with the credibility to undertake this work will be an important step in achieving this.
- Ensure NLEs have appropriate tools and materials to enable them to support other schools. The Ofsted toolkit is a good start, and needs expanding to focus on teaching and learning, the impact of interventions and internal consistency.
- The National College should work closely with the Education Endowment Foundation to communicate the effectiveness of the learning toolkit.
- Continue to remind NLEs, system leaders and schools that most of the strategies and interventions to close gaps are about effective school improvement.

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Recommended additional reading

Cabinet Office, 2011, *Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility*, Norwich, The Stationery Office

DCSF, 2009, *Deprivation and education: the evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to KS4*, Nottingham, Department for Children, Schools and Families

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Appendix: Schools involved in the action-research

We are very grateful to all the school leaders and staff who gave up time to make this project and the report possible. We worked with many national leaders of education and staff at their schools through meetings and workshops, and we valued their insights, reflections and learning. We are particularly grateful to those who welcomed us to their schools, attended regional cluster discussions, or attended our workshops at the National College. It was a privilege to work alongside these school leaders as they worked with other schools. For the case studies included in this report, we are grateful for the further time which NLEs and school leaders took to review draft material.

Case study schools involved in the action research project

Name of NSS / school leading the project	Phase or alliance	School context	Work with other schools	Key area of focus for the case study (see main report section 3)
Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College	Secondary	Mixed, VA, 11-18 in Trafford 10% FSM	Irlam and Cadishead College, Salford	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils
Broadoak Primary School	Primary	Mixed, 3-11, academy in Salford 3% FSM	The Cathedral Primary School, Salford	Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice
Chestnut Grove School	Secondary	Mixed, 11-18 academy in Wandsworth 50% FSM	St Cecilia's CoE Secondary School Wandsworth	Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support
Danehill CoE Primary School	Primary	Mixed, VC, 4-11 in East Sussex	Work with a primary school in East Sussex	Work to engage parents or support them in having greater engagement in their children's learning
Dunraven School	Secondary	Mixed, 11-18 academy in Lambeth 25% FSM	Crown Lane Primary School, Lambeth	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils
Forest Way School	Teaching School Alliance	Mixed, community 3-19 special school in Leicestershire 20% FSM	King Edward VII Science and Sports College, Leics Shelthorpe Primary School, Leics	Pupil engagement and voice, and improving the personal resilience of pupils and attitudes to learning
Gilmorton Chandler CoE Primary School	Primary	Mixed, VA, 4-11 in Leicestershire 4% FSM	Work with a junior school in Leicestershire	Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support
Halterworth Community Primary School	Primary	Mixed, community, 4-11 in Hampshire 4% FSM	Federation of Awbridge and Wellow Primary Schools, Hampshire	Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice

Kibworth CoE Primary School	Primary	Mixed, VC, 4-11 in Leicestershire 10% FSM	Work with a primary school in Leicestershire	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils
Little Ilford School	Secondary	Mixed, community, 11-16 in Newham 50% FSM	Work with a secondary school in Newham	Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice
Meadow Community Primary School	Primary	Mixed, 4-10 academy in Leicestershire 25% FSM	Work with other schools in Leicestershire and Leicester City	Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support
Michael Faraday School	Primary	Mixed, community, 3-11 in Southwark 30% FSM	St Peter's CoE Primary School, Southwark	Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice
St Eanswythe's CoE Primary School	Teaching School Alliance	Mixed, VA, 4-11 in Kent 20% FSM	Christ Church CoE Primary School, Kent	Improving and developing an aspect of pedagogy or teaching and learning practice
Tollgate Primary School	Teaching School Alliance	Mixed, community, 3-11 in Newham 40% FSM	Work with nine other primary schools across the authority	Using pupil progress data to identify gaps and focus support
The Heath School	Secondary	Mixed, 11-16 academy in Halton 23% FSM	Work with a secondary school in a neighbouring local authority	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils
Victoria Infant and Nursery School	Infants	Mixed community, 3-7 in Cumbria 30% FSM	Victoria Junior School, Cumbria	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils
Yesoday Hatorah Primary School / Altrincham Grammar School for Girls Teaching School Alliance	Teaching School Alliance	Mixed, VA, 3-11 in Bury	Work with a primary school in a neighbouring local authority	Mentoring support, one-to-one support or small-group intervention work for targeted pupils

Schools involved in the action research project

Name of NSS / school leading the project	Phase
Mills Hill Primary School, Oldham	Primary and Teaching School Alliance
St Pauls CoE Primary School, Bolton	Primary
Woodlands Community Primary School, Lancashire	Primary
Gaddesby Primary School, Leicestershire	Primary

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