Northern Ireland Assembly

Research and Library Service
Research Paper

Caroline Perry, Research Officer

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

This Research Paper considers four key areas that are often linked to educational outcomes in schools: qualities for effective school leadership; school engagement with parents and the wider community; addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy.

It finds that addressing disadvantage at post-primary level is particularly challenging, and schools must work towards improvement across a range of areas, with high quality teaching and learning and effective school leadership central to any approach.

Key Points

- There is widespread recognition of the link between lower family income and poorer educational outcomes for children;

- This paper explores four key areas that are linked to educational outcomes: school leadership; engagement with parents and the wider community; addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy;

- It is important to note that a broad range of factors contribute to educational attainment, and local contexts and circumstances must be taken into account when considering measures that have helped to improve attainment elsewhere;

- School leadership is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on outcomes for students: it is therefore essential that school principals have the appropriate skills and qualities to carry out their role effectively;

- Important personal qualities for effective leaders include a system of core values; high expectations of and respect for others; emotional intelligence and resilience; and personal conviction;

- Engagement with parents and the wider community can play an important part in supporting children's education, although schools are limited in the extent to which they can make large-scale changes through such approaches;

- Department of Education school improvement policies aim to improve standards in schools and to address underachievement;

- Schools seeking to address underachievement must recognise the need to drive improvements across a range of areas;

- High quality teaching and learning and effective school leadership should be central to attempts to address underachievement; and

- These factors should also be supported by a culture of high expectations, engagement with parents and community and the effective use of data; these are the key characteristics shared among successful schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Executive Summary

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that disadvantage and deprivation are linked to educational outcomes for children, with children from families with lower incomes less likely to perform well at school than those from better-off families.

This briefing paper considers four key areas that are often linked to the performance of schools: qualities for effective school leadership; school engagement with parents and the wider community; addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy.

It is important to note, however, that a wide and complex range of factors contribute to educational outcomes for children, and as such, there is no "one size fits all" approach to addressing underachievement. Local contexts and circumstances must be taken into account when considering measures that have helped to improve attainment in other schools, areas or countries.

Qualities for effective school leadership

School leadership is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on outcomes for pupils. Its impact is greatest in schools where pupils' learning needs are the most significant.

However, the roles and responsibilities of school leaders are becoming increasingly complex and demanding; requiring principals to have a broad range of skills and attributes in order to effectively carry out their duties. This is likely to be particularly important in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

The evidence suggests that there is a strong link between leaders' personal qualities and their success as a leader. Key qualities of effective leaders include a system of core values; high expectations of and respect for others; emotional resilience; commitment; and optimism. The distribution of leadership throughout the school is also a key practice of effective school leaders.

Effective leaders of schools in deprived contexts possess many of the same attributes as their counterparts in more advantaged areas. Characteristics that are thought to play a particularly important role in their success include:

- Risk-taking;

- Personal humility;

- Emotional intelligence; and

- Personal conviction.

School engagement with parents and the wider community

Engagement with parents and the wider community is an important strategy for many schools in deprived contexts in seeking to address underachievement. Engagement is carried out in a range of ways, such as providing training and guidance for parents to enable them to support their children's learning, offering counselling and support to parents, and developing partnerships with other schools.

Another form of engagement is extended schools, which aim to offer a broad range of services to children, families and communities beyond their main business of teaching and learning. Examples of services provided include breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use.

Assessments of engagement have identified some positive outcomes for pupils, families and communities; although it is likely that other factors have also contributed to these outcomes. It is important to note that schools face challenges particularly with regard to resourcing initiatives, and as such, impacts from engagement are likely to be generally small-scale in nature.

Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities

Gaps in attainment between children from different socio-economic backgrounds can already be wide at the beginning of post-primary school. While intervention in early childhood is likely to have the greatest effect on educational outcomes, actions taken in post-primary schools can play a key role in preventing further widening of the attainment gap.

It is important to note that schools cannot address underachievement through individual actions. Rather, approaches must recognise the need to work towards improvements across a range of areas, using a carefully planned, reflective approach. The following figure illustrates the key features of schools who achieve strong educational outcomes for children, despite serving areas of great disadvantage.
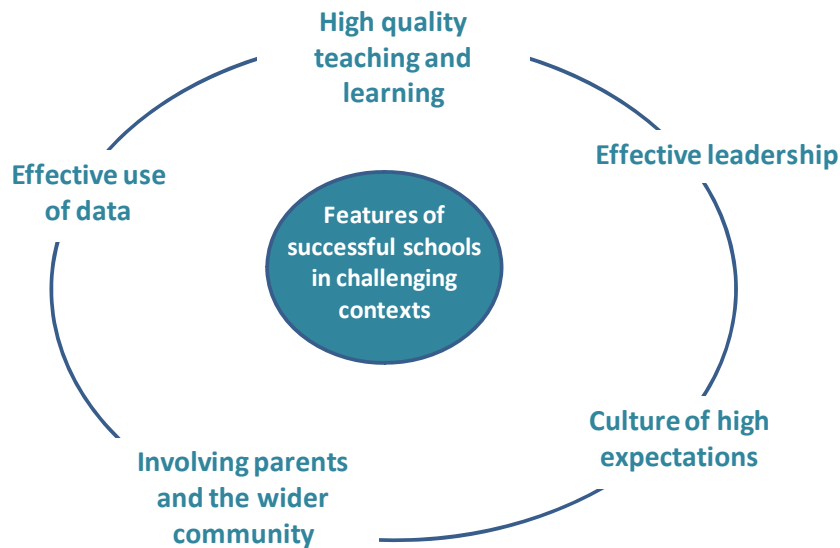
It is clear from the evidence that high quality teaching and learning and effective school leadership are critical to addressing underachievement. These key factors also need to be supported by a culture of high expectations, engagement with parents and the community and the effective use of data. These are the characteristics shared by successful schools serving disadvantaged areas.

Department of Education school improvement policy

The Department of Education has put into place, and is developing, a number of policies that seek to promote school improvement and help to address underachievement in schools. The key school improvement policy is *Every School a Good School*, which sets out a vision of schools as "*self-improving, well governed and effectively led communities of practice... meeting the needs and aspirations of all pupils.*"

Other important policies include Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy; the draft strategy on Special Educational Needs; Extended Schools; and the Entitlement Framework, which aims to provide all pupils aged 14 and over with a greater choice and flexibility in the curriculum offer.

All of these policies have a key objective of raising standards in schools, particularly those in disadvantaged areas that are not performing as well as might be expected. The policies recognise that a successful school is built on strong leadership and high quality teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Post-primary schools serving disadvantaged communities face great challenges in addressing underachievement. However, there are many examples in the evidence of schools that achieve strong educational outcomes for their pupils despite working in challenging contexts.

It is clear that schools seeking to address underachievement must recognise the need to work across a number of areas; acknowledging that single actions or initiatives are unlikely to lead to significant improvement in outcomes for children. High quality teaching and learning and effective leadership must be central to any approach, and these should be supported by a culture of high expectations, the involvement of parents and the wider community, and the effective use of data.

Contents

1 Introduction

Deprivation and disadvantage among families and communities are known to be linked to educational attainment for children, with pupils from less well-off families less likely to perform well at school than their counterparts from families with higher incomes.

The factors driving this discrepancy are many and varied, with great differences evident across areas, schools and individual families. However, broadly, they are thought to include lower support for learning and expectations of achievement; issues around school attendance; societal pressures; behavioural issues; and emotional tensions.[1]

Linked to this, the Education Committee is undertaking an Inquiry into Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities. The Inquiry aims to identify schools that are performing better than might be expected, given the high levels of deprivation experienced by their pupils. The stated aim of this Inquiry is:

"To consider examples of successful Post-Primary schools serving economically and socially disadvantaged communities, identify the key characteristics/ factors that contribute to their success and consider how they can be reproduced in schools where they are lacking."

This briefing paper is set out in four parts and it considers four key areas that are often linked to the performance of schools:

- Qualities for effective school leadership;

- School engagement with parents and the wider community;

- Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and

- Department of Education school improvement policy.

It should, however, be noted that the factors that impact on attainment for pupils are varied and complex, and therefore care should be taken in drawing conclusions from the areas discussed in this paper. In addition, local contexts and circumstances must be taken into account when considering measures that have helped to improve attainment in other schools, areas or countries.

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[1] Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools; Excelling against the odds* London: Ofsted

2 Qualities for effective school leadership

Key points

- The leadership of schools is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on student learning, with the greatest impact found in schools where the learning needs are most significant;

- The role of school leaders is becoming increasingly complex and demanding, and principals require a broad range of skills and attributes in order to carry out their duties effectively;

- It is important to note that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to school leadership; leaders need to adapt their practice to the context of the school in which they work;

- There is a strong link between leaders' personal qualities and leadership success;

- The evidence indicates that the most effective school leaders share a number of key characteristics, including that they are open-minded; ready to learn from others; have strong values; and are emotionally resilient;

- Leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts share many of the same traits as principals of other schools; being driven by core values that are people-centred, with a moral focus and an emphasis on equality and respect;

- Research suggests that effective principals of schools in challenging circumstances in particular share the following attributes:

  - o   Passion and risk-taking;

  - o   Personal humility;

  - o   Emotional intelligence;

  - o   Tenacity and resilience in advocacy;

  - o   Respect for others; and

  - o   Personal conviction.

- Effective distribution of leadership throughout the school is another key characteristic of effective school leaders and is linked to the improvement of educational outcomes for pupils.

Introduction: Qualities for effective school leadership

The leadership of schools is widely recognised as having crucial importance for pupil outcomes. Indeed, it is acknowledged as being second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on student learning, with the greatest impact found in schools where pupils' learning needs are the most acute.[2]

There is a wide range of issues relating to supporting and promoting the provision of effective leadership in schools, including those around recruitment, roles and responsibilities, retention, succession planning, governance, continuing professional development and reward. However, this section of the briefing paper deals primarily with the skills required by school leaders and the practices and qualities that lead to effective leadership. It also considers effective leaders in schools serving disadvantaged communities and the particular qualities shared among them.

Roles and responsibilities of school leaders

The role of school leaders has changed in recent years, becoming increasingly complex and demanding.[3] Schools are becoming more autonomous and are facing higher levels of accountability, while serving more diverse pupil populations and being confronted with a broad range of social issues.

Research into school leadership conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC)[4] identified a number of key roles and responsibilities of school leaders. These encompass a range of both strategic and operational areas, as follows:

- Strategic direction and ethos;

- Teaching and learning;

- Developing and managing people;

- Networking and collaboration;

- Operations; and

- Accountability.

It is evident therefore that school leaders will require a broad range of skills and qualities in order to effectively discharge these roles and responsibilities in leading the school. This is likely to be particularly important in the case of schools serving disadvantaged communities.

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[2] Leithwood et al. (2004) *How leadership influences student learning* New York: The Wallace Foundation

[3] OECD (2008) *Improving School Leadership Volume 1: Policy and Practice* Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

[4] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

Practices of successful school leaders

In a three year national research project conducted on behalf of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, Day et al.[5] found that almost all successful leaders draw on the same basic repertoire of leadership practices. These are linked to the roles and responsibilities outlined above and are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 1: Key practices of successful school leaders
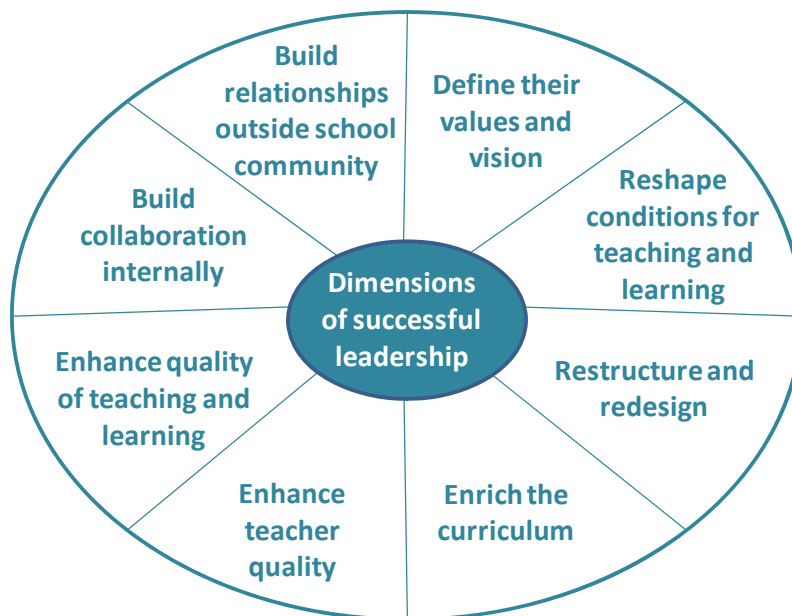
Source: Adapted from: Day et al (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership*
Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

It is important to note, however, that there is single model for achieving success, with successful leadership being sensitive to the local context. Indeed, Leithwood et al.[6] emphasise that the way in which leaders apply these core practices demonstrates their capacity to respond to the context of the school in which they work.

The evidence suggests that the school's context influences the selection and combination of practices used, with disadvantaged schools requiring a greater number of leadership practices in order to effect change. It has been found that successful heads working in schools facing disadvantage make greater efforts to drive improvement across a range of areas. [7]

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[5] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[6] Leithwood, K. et al. (2006) *Seven strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

[7] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

The way in which successful leaders apply these practices will be influenced by a number of factors, including their judgements about the conditions for teaching and learning in the school; the confidence and experience of their staff; and the behaviour, aspirations and attainment levels of the pupils.[8]

Qualities of successful school leaders

Research suggests that there is a strong association between leaders' personal qualities and leadership success.[9] For example, a study by Day et al.[10] finds that headteachers' values are key components in their success.

"Successful heads improve pupil outcomes through who they are - their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – as well as what they do in terms of the strategies they select and the ways in which they adapt their leadership practices to their unique context."

This study suggests that the most successful school leaders are open-minded; ready to learn from others; flexible; have a system of core values and high expectations of others; and are emotionally resilient and optimistic. It asserts that it is these traits that enable successful leaders to make progress in schools facing challenging circumstances. The study in particular finds that successful school leaders share certain attributes, as follows:

- **A strong sense of moral responsibility** and a belief in equal opportunities;

- **A belief that every pupil deserves the same opportunities** to succeed;

- **Respect and value for all people** in and connected with the school;

- **A passion for learning** and achievement; and

- **A commitment** to pupils and staff.

These key attributes are common to almost all effective school leaders. In addition, further qualities and characteristics have been highlighted pertaining to leaders of schools serving disadvantaged areas.

Qualities of leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts

Research with leaders of schools in disadvantaged areas[11] indicates that they share many of the same traits as successful leaders of other schools. In addition, it finds that they are particularly energised by challenge of leading a school in challenging

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[8] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[9] Day, C. & Leithwood, K. (2007) *Successful school principal leadership in times of change: International Perspectives* Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer

[10] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[11] National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

circumstances and by the drive to make a difference to both their schools and their communities.

In line with the findings previously discussed, leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts were similarly found to be driven by core values that are people-centred and combine moral purpose with the promotion of collaboration. A focus on equality and respect and concern for other individuals were other important characteristics. The key characteristics identified among effective leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts are illustrated in the following figure.[12]

Figure 2: Key characteristics of headteachers of schools in challenging circumstances

Source: Adapted from: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

Distributed leadership

A report by OECD states that the increased responsibilities and accountability facing school leaders create a need for the distribution of leadership throughout the school.[13] With regard to true distributed leadership, the importance of engaging and empowering others in the organisation, rather than simply distributing leadership tasks to them, has been highlighted.

"Distributed leadership is about much more than just sharing out tasks. Rather, it also encompasses a shared approach to strategic leadership, in which professionals throughout the organisation are genuinely engaged and can influence its culture, ethos and strategic direction."[14]

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[12] National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

[13] OECD (2008) *Improving School Leadership Volume 1: Policy and Practice* Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

[14] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

Some authors[15] assert that there is a link between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and the improvement of outcomes for pupils. Indeed, the distribution of leadership is found to be a key characteristic of effective school leaders.[16]

Linked to this, effective leaders will recognise the importance of developing staff and supporting and encouraging talent across the organisation. The traditional idea of a 'hero-head,' or an indispensable individual leader, is therefore not thought to be a sustainable approach for schools.[17]

Conclusion

The importance of effective school leadership for schools serving disadvantaged communities should not be underestimated. The increasingly demanding and complex role of school leaders requires a broad range of skills and attributes among principals to enable them to lead the school effectively and improve educational outcomes for children in deprived contexts.

Effective school principals in schools serving disadvantaged communities have core values that are people-centred, with a moral focus and an emphasis on equality and respect. They combine the key attributes of emotional intelligence, resilience and conviction with passion and personal humility, and are not averse to taking risks with the constant goal of driving school improvement.

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[15] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services; and Louis, K. (2010) *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* University of Minnesota

[16] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

[17] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

3 School engagement with parents and the wider community

Key points

- There is recognition internationally of the importance of engaging parents and the community with the school, particularly in deprived areas;

- Schools carry out this engagement in a variety of ways, generally with the aim of improving educational and social outcomes for children;

- Examples of engagement include providing training to parents to enable them to support their children's learning; offering pastoral care to families; and developing partnerships with other schools;

- Engaging with parents is thought to be particularly beneficial where they have had negative experiences of education;

- In general, much of the engagement in place relies on a personal approach, depending on personal knowledge and contact;

- Extended schools aim to offer a range of services to children, their families and to the wider community, with provision including breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use;

- Feedback on extended schools from principals has been positive with regard to its impact on school life;

- Evaluations of extended schools have found positive impacts of their work; however, it is important to bear in mind that engagement is likely to be one of a number of factors contributing to school improvement;

- Schools face a number of challenges in effectively engaging parents and the community; these include defining the school's community, resourcing initiatives and reaching the most disadvantaged; and

- Therefore it is likely that schools will have the capacity to drive primarily smaller-scale changes through parental and community engagement.

Introduction: School engagement with parents and the wider community

There is increasing recognition that schools cannot work in isolation from the community, particularly where they serve deprived areas.[18] A community-orientated approach to schooling is viewed as important internationally, particularly with respect to helping and supporting disadvantaged communities.[19]

Schools engage with parents and the wider community in different ways, with the general aim of supporting and improving educational and social outcomes for children. It is important to bear in mind; however, the limited resources schools possess to carry out such engagement, which mean that their capacity to affect significant change through such measures may be limited.

Engagement with parents

Many educationalists and schools believe that it is important to engage children's parents and their families in order to support children effectively in their education. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[20] found that schools who took this view provided services such as:

- Courses to help parents understand how to improve their children's reading;

- Provision of lap-top computers for the whole family to use; and

- Events to encourage fathers to become involved in their son's schooling.

Research conducted on behalf of the Department of Education in Northern Ireland[21] found that schools serving disadvantaged communities and performing better than might be expected recognised that encouraging parental involvement is a key factor in raising attainment. This was supported in a number of ways in the schools involved in the research, including training parents as reading partners and involving them in workshops in literacy and numeracy.

Involving parents in the school was thought to be particularly important where parents had negative experiences of schooling and may be intimidated by the school setting. In such cases, some schools took an approach involving pastoral care and an element of counselling for families, in order to help them develop a more positive view towards schooling and education.[22]

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[18] Harris, A. (2004) "Leading on the Edge: Successful Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances" *Education Today* Vol. 60. No.1 pp 3-5

[19] Dyson, A., Raffo, C. (2007) Education and disadvantage: the role of community-oriented schools *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.33, No 3, pp 297-314

[20] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[21] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[22] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

Engagement with the wider community

A research project conducted by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services[23] found that building and improving the reputation of the school and engaging with the wider community were considered to be essential in schools where improvements in learning outcomes where brought about. The study found that the leaders of such schools had developed positive relationships with community leaders and had built a network of links to other organisations and individuals.

The usefulness of wider engagement is also highlighted by Harris,[24] who notes that school leaders in disadvantaged areas are 'acutely aware' of the importance of engaging with the community. Regular communication with parents and promoting trust by showing genuine care for young people are suggested as possible ways of engaging with parents and, in turn, the wider community.

Collaboration with other schools is a further method of engaging with the wider community. In Northern Ireland, many schools have partnerships in place with other schools, aimed at easing transition between school phases, and also at stimulating interest in literacy among children. These partnerships were reported by school principals participating in them to be very effective.[25]

One report[26] notes that much of the engagement carried out by schools relies on a heavily personal approach, dependent on proactive individuals, personal knowledge and contact. It suggests that this approach is appropriate given the diverse populations served by schools; and that drawing on local knowledge is an important aspect of effective engagement. However, it notes that a degree of formalisation may be useful in engagement.

Extended schools

Extended schools aim to offer a broad range of services to children, families and wider communities in addition to their core business of teaching and learning for pupils. Extended schools can offer services such as breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use.

Research in Northern Ireland[27] found that school principals were positive about the effects of the extended schools programme on school life. The study also found that some schools had engaged in wider community partnerships that sought to address

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[23] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[24] Harris, A. (2004) "Leading on the Edge: Successful Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances" *Education Today* Vol. 60. No.1 pp 3-5

[25] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[26] Cummings et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

[27] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

issues such as anti-social behaviour or attitudes to the police, or to promote positive male role models (for example, in providing football training).

A review of extended services in England found three key factors for supporting the effective delivery of extended school services and engagement with parents. These factors were:

- Human resources: staff who can engage with the community;

- Strength of relationships with other agencies; and

- Sustainable funding.

It is therefore evident that effective and sustainable engagement with parents and the community through extended schools requires consistent resourcing, and that schools themselves must seek to build effective working relationships with other partners.

Evaluating the effectiveness of engagement

A thematic review of extended services[28] found that the effectiveness of such programmes tended to be evaluated by schools by assessing take up levels and user feedback. Schools in the study often reported individual success stories resulting from interventions, support or guidance to families, and some indicated that greater understanding of children and families arising from engagement had enabled them to target those whom traditional measures of deprivation may not have identified.

The Full Service Extended Schools Initiative in England provides a comprehensive range of services to children and families, including access to health services, adult learning and community activities as well as wrap-around childcare.

An evaluation of this initiative found a positive impact on pupils' attainment in a number of schools, and positive outcomes for families and local people who were facing particular difficulties. Impacts were found to be less strong for communities as a whole. However, the report states that other factors were likely to play a part where positive outcomes were identified, and that such outcomes did not always translate directly into school performance data.[29]

Challenges for engagement

There are a number of challenges and difficulties for schools in seeking to engage with parents and the wider community which should be taken into account. These include:

- Defining the school's community;

- Resourcing initiatives; and

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[28] Cummings, C. et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

[29] Cummings, C. et al (2007) *Evaluation of the Full Service Extended Schools Initiative: Final Report* Department for Education and Skills

- Reaching the most disadvantaged.

Firstly, defining the school's wider community may be problematic, particularly for schools serving pupils from a variety of communities. One research study found that some schools are surrounded by several distinct communities, and that in a number of cases, only a small proportion of the schools' intake came from the disadvantaged area. The consequence of this was that schools found it more difficult to view the disadvantaged area as a priority.[30] This therefore has implications for how schools' resources are targeted in seeking to engage more widely.

Resourcing initiatives is a further challenge for schools, and this is likely to become increasingly pertinent with the financial constraints facing schools. Research with schools engaging parents and communities has found that they were able to implement initiatives that were relatively small in scale. This has implications regarding the extent to which individual schools are able to affect large-scale cultural change among disadvantaged communities.[31]

A further challenge relates to the take up of services aiming to improve engagement by the most disadvantaged. One study[32] notes that engaging those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds remains a challenge, even where schools work hard at targeted recruitment strategies. By way of example, it states that an evaluation of Sure Start found that the most disadvantaged families were the least likely to seek to access services, and services were more likely to be used by families already doing relatively well. This has implications for schools in terms of how they seek to ensure that the most disadvantaged in the local community benefit from the engagement carried out.

Conclusion

Engaging parents and the wider community is an important area for many schools in seeking to improve educational outcomes for children. In particular, involving parents from disadvantaged families in the life of the school can have a positive impact on children's educational outcomes.

Some positive outcomes have been identified among schools engaging parents and the community and providing extended services; however, it is likely that engagement is one of a number of other factors driving improvements. It is important to bear in mind the challenges facing schools who seek to engage more widely, for example with regard to resourcing initiatives and reaching the most disadvantaged. In particular, it is likely that schools will have the capacity to affect mainly small-scale changes through parental and community engagement.

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[30] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
[31] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
[32] Cummings et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

4 Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities

Key points

- Attainment gaps between children from different socio-economic backgrounds can already be large at the beginning of post-primary school;

- As such, intervention in earlier childhood is likely to be most effective in addressing educational disadvantage; however, post-primary schools can have a positive impact on preventing further widening of the attainment gap;

- Research has highlighted a number of characteristics that are common to schools performing better than might be expected, given the levels of disadvantage their pupils face;

- The quality of teaching learning within schools is the main factor in variations in educational outcomes at school;

- This is followed by school leadership, which is reported to be second only to classroom teaching in its influence on attainment: effective leaders working in disadvantaged contexts recognise the need to work towards improvement across a number of areas;

- A culture of high expectations in schools can also have an important impact on raising educational attainment;

- The effective use of data also has the potential to support and promote school improvement, being used to develop strategies to address underachievement and to target support to those pupils most in need;

- With regard to the underachievement of boys, implementing a range of different strategies is thought to have the potential to have the most impact: these could include individual target setting, strategies for parental involvement and using varied activities; and

- Overall, it is important to note that schools cannot systematically address underachievement through isolated actions or individual strategies: they must work towards improvement across a range of areas, using a carefully-planned, reflective approach.

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Introduction: Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities

The evidence indicates that differences in cognitive ability between children from families with higher incomes and those from less well-off families become apparent early in children's lives, even before they begin school.

These gaps continue to widen as children progress through school, particularly throughout the primary school years.[33] By the time pupils reach post-primary school, attainment gaps can already be large; and it can be more difficult to address underachievement in this phase of education.

Factors affecting underachievement

Poor performance at school and disadvantage at post-primary level are linked by a broad range of factors, for example: expectations for higher education; material resources (such as access to the internet at home); and young people's belief in their own ability at school.[34]

With regard to for the generally higher levels of underachievement among boys, the evidence indicates that there is no single explanation for this. Rather, it is thought to relate to a range of factors, including the following:[35]

- Perceptions of literacy activities as 'female';

- Gender stereotyping on the part of teachers;

- Greater vulnerability of boys to poor teaching;

- Peer group cultures;

- Greater incidence of behavioural problems amongst boys; and

- A lack of male role models including fathers and male teachers.

Intervention earlier in childhood is thought to be most effective in addressing disadvantage. Nonetheless, actions aiming to address the underachievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds can have positive effects with regard to preventing further widening of the gap between children from families with differing income levels. The literature highlights a range of areas that can be considered with a view to improving educational outcomes for children.

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[33] Goodman, A., Gregg, P. (2010) *The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[34] Goodman, A., Gregg, P. (2010) *The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[35] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education


How schools address underachievement

The evidence suggests that where schools are performing to a high standard and better than might be expected given the levels of disadvantage their pupils face; a large part of their success is linked to the quality of leadership, staff and teaching and learning within them. Importantly, they take a highly reflective, carefully planned approach; have strong values and high expectations; and operate with a high degree of internal consistency.[36]

"They excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time... They fulfil individual potential through providing outstanding teaching, rich opportunities for learning, and encouragement and support for each student."[37]

Research by PricewaterhouseCoopers in Northern Ireland[38] and Ofsted in England[39] considered schools that are performing better than might be expected given the levels of deprivation faced by their pupils. These reports found that the high-performing schools had a number of particular characteristics or themes in common. These are illustrated in the following figure and considered in the subsequent paragraphs.

Figure 3: Features of high performing schools in challenging contexts
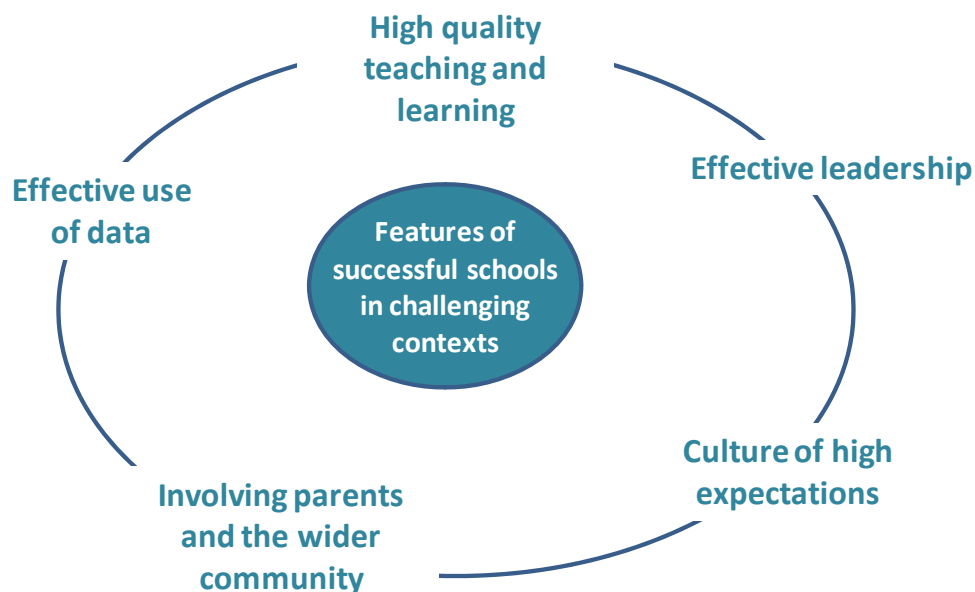
Source: Adapted from: PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education ; and Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools; Excelling against the odds* London: Ofsted

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[36] Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools; Excelling against the odds* London: Ofsted

[37] Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools; Excelling against the odds* London: Ofsted

[38] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[39] Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools; Excelling against the odds* London: Ofsted

High quality teaching and learning

In a review of the world's top performing education systems, McKinsey&Company[40] found that the main driver of the variation in student learning at school is the quality of the teachers. It cites studies indicating that students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times more quickly than those placed with low-performing teachers.

"Above all, the top performing systems demonstrate that the quality of an education system depends ultimately on the quality of its teachers."[41]

McKinsey&Company found that high performing school systems, despite their significant differences in construct and context, all maintained a strong focus on improving instruction for pupils. The study reports that these school systems consistently achieve the following:

- They get the **right people** to become teachers;

- They **develop these people** into effective instructors; and

- They **put in place systems and targeted support** to ensure that every child is able to benefit from excellent instruction.

The report asserts that focusing on these three factors is key to improving educational outcomes; and that any efforts of reform that do not address these drivers are unlikely to result in significant improvements. In order to achieve these three factors, the school systems ensure that appropriate conditions are in place, including rigorous standards and assessments, clear expectations, differentiated support for teachers and students; and sufficient resources.[42]

A study of good practice in British and Irish cities[43] found that effective and improving schools have a clear system for regularly reviewing the quality of teaching and learning, through the observation of lessons, provision of feedback and support to teachers by school leaders.

Effective Leadership

The first section of this report considered the qualities required by school leaders in their role, particularly with regard to those working in disadvantaged contexts. However, the following paragraphs build on this to provide further information on the actions effective school leaders take to improve educational outcomes.

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[40] McKinsey&Company (2007) *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top* McKinsey

[41] McKinsey&Company (2007) *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top* McKinsey

[42] McKinsey&Company (2007) *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top* McKinsey

[43] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities where the level of Social Deprivation is comparable to, or worse than, Belfast* Bangor: Department of Education

Research by the National College[44] found that successful heads in any school take a number of key actions to help improve pupil attainment. In particular, it notes that they view pupil achievement as having behavioural, academic, personal, social and emotional dimensions. The key tenets of their approach to pupil achievement include:

- **Setting high expectations** for staff and students is central to developing teaching and learning programmes;

- **Care and trust feature highly** in achievement-focused cultures that aim to improve student outcomes; and

- **Introducing a whole-school approach** to pupil behaviour management is considered a positive step towards improving student outcomes.

The evidence indicates that effective school leaders working in disadvantaged communities recognise the need to work towards improvement across a range of areas, in particular pupil behaviour, motivation, and engagement, and school culture. They also endeavour to make particular improvements in teaching and assessment and draw on performance data to assess the effects of changes made.[45]

Culture of high expectations

Research indicates that the aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of parents and children are an important aspect of why children from families with lower incomes tend to perform less well at school. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation identifies two major areas where actions could be taken to help reduce educational equalities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These are highlighted in the following table.

Table 1: Potential areas to address expectations and aspirations

Parents and the family home	Child's own attitudes and behaviours
• Improving the home learning environment in poorer families; • Helping parents from poorer families believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education; and • Raising families' aspirations and desire for advanced education, from primary school onwards.	• Reducing children's behavioural problems and engagement in risky behaviours; • Helping children from poorer families believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education; and • Raising children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education.

Source: Adapted from Goodman, A., Gregg, P. (2010) *The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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[44] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services
[45] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

A study in Northern Ireland[46] also states that the culture of the school is a key factor in raising educational attainment. The research found that effective schools placed an emphasis on building the self-esteem of children and young people and had high expectations of all pupils. Most of the schools also stressed the importance of high expectations for staff, and some also tried to address parental self-esteem.

Involving parents and the wider community

As discussed in the previous section of this paper, engagement with parents and the wider community can play an important role in addressing underachievement in post-primary schools.

Effective use of data

There is general agreement in the literature that the effective use of data plays a key role in raising standards in schools,[47] for example, by mapping and tracking pupil progress. However, there are concerns that many school principals and teachers may not understand the full potential of the data available to them and how to use it effectively.[48]

When used effectively, data can act as a key driver for developing strategies to address underachievement and in targeting support at individual pupils or groups of pupils most in need.[49] It can also be used to monitor the effectiveness of initiatives and strategies, to effectively allocate staff and resources and to ease transitions and transfers between and within schools.

Boys' attainment

A broad range of factors are thought to affect the underachievement of boys, including teaching and curriculum factors, a lack of male role models, peer pressure, discipline, attitudes to learning and learning styles.

In light of this, the evidence[50] indicates that the implementation of a range of strategies is beneficial when addressing the underachievement of boys. A range of strategies have been put forward in a study by PwC; these are broadly in line with those outlined above, with some more specific actions outlined. Examples of potential strategies are illustrated in the following table.

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[46] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[47] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *School and pupil performance data* Bangor: Department of Education

[48] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[49] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities where the level of Social Deprivation is comparable to, or worse than, Belfast* Bangor: Department of Education

[50] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

Table 2: Examples of strategies for improving educational outcomes for boys

Type of approach	Strategies
Individual	• Individual target setting; and • Mentoring.
Pedagogical	• Flexing style to meet individual's needs; • Setting aims, objectives and targets; • Use of texts that appeal to boys; and • Using varied activities, including practical work and ICT.
Whole-school	• Roles and responsibilities of school leadership; • Ethos of high expectations; • Effective use of data; and • Strategies for parental involvement.
System-wide	• Professional development; and • The dissemination of best practice.

Source: Adapted from: PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

Conclusion

Addressing underachievement at post-primary level is particularly challenging, due to the already wide gap in cognitive ability between children from families with differing incomes. However, there are clear areas that schools and policy makers can focus on to promote positive educational outcomes for children from deprived contexts.

It is important to note that schools cannot systematically address underachievement through isolated actions or individual strategies. Rather, they must recognise the need to work towards improvement across a range of areas, using a carefully planned, reflective approach.

High quality teaching and learning and effective leadership are crucial tenets of any approach to addressing underachievement. These are linked to and complimented by a culture of high expectations, engagement with parents and the community and the effective use of data. Successful schools in disadvantaged contexts share these characteristics in common.

5 Department of Education school improvement policy

Key points

- The Department of Education has put into place, and is developing, a range of strategies that aim to improve standards in schools;

- Its overall school improvement strategy is *Every School a Good School,* which sets out a vision of schools as *"self-improving, well governed and effectively led communities of good practice... meeting the needs and aspirations of all pupils;"*

- Key policy areas within this strategy include effective leadership and teaching and learning; addressing the barriers to learning; supporting school improvement and increasing engagement between and beyond schools;

- The strategy for *Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy* aims to work in conjunction with *Every School a Good School*, and sets out to improve standards in literacy and numeracy and narrow gaps in attainment between pupils;

- The Department's draft strategy on Special Educational Needs and Inclusion aims to result in a more open, positive, flexible and inclusive model that identifies children who require support for learning and delivers it to them in a timely manner;

- The Extended Schools programme provides funding for schools in more disadvantaged areas, and seeks to reduce differences in educational outcomes for children;

- The Entitlement Framework aims to provide all pupils aged 14 and over with greater choice and flexibility, and with a curriculum offer that meets their needs and expectations; and

- The National Standards for Headteachers provide a framework for professional development with the aim of informing, challenging and enthusing serving and aspiring school principals.

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Introduction: Department of Education school improvement policy

A number of policies have been put into place by the Department of Education (the Department) in Northern Ireland with the aim of driving up attainment in schools. Other policies are currently undergoing consultation and development. The policies relevant to addressing underachievement considered in the following paragraphs are:

- Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement;

- Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy;

- The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion;

- Extended Schools: schools, families, communities- working together;

- Together Towards Entitlement: Delivering the Entitlement Framework through Area-based Planning; and

- National Standards for Headteachers.

Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement

The Department's overall policy for school improvement is *Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement* (ESAGS)[51] which is based on a consultation exercise that took place between January and March 2008.

This policy is based on a number of principles, including equity of provision; acceptance of the importance of school leadership and high quality teaching and learning; and a recognition that every school is capable of improvement.

"Our vision is of schools as vibrant, self-improving, well governed and effectively led communities of good practice, focusing not on institutions but on meeting the needs and aspirations of all pupils through high quality learning, recognising the centrality of the teacher."

The policy starts on the basis that there are many outstanding schools that can provide a model for other schools. It is centred on six key areas, which each have particular goals; these are explored in the following table.

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[51] Department of Education (2009) *Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement.* Bangor: Department of Education

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Table 3: Key policy areas and goals of *Every School a Good School*

Policy area	Policy goals
Effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement	• To make **school governance an attractive and rewarding** experience • To make **school principalship an attractive career** option • To **support** aspiring and existing leaders
High Quality Teaching and Learning	• To work with teachers, those who support teachers and those who represent their interests to **ensure that the teaching profession is equipped and empowered** to deliver the highest quality teaching
Maintaining a focus on tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face	• To make sure that **strategies, policies and programmes** support children and young people who have special needs or who face particular barriers to learning **are developed in a way that maintains focus on raising standards** and on allowing every young person to reach his or her full potential
Embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment and of using performance/ other data to affect improvement	• To **provide support systems needed** to help all schools engage positively in robust self-evaluation and **to use the findings** from self-assessment and performance and other data to determine priorities and to plan for continuing improvement
Focusing on support to help schools improve with clarity about the place of more formal interventions where there is a risk that the quality of education in a school is not as high as it should be	• To **target support on helping schools to improve** and to ensure that self-improving schools will be the norm • To **explain the more-formal intervention processes** and how these will be applied when inspection evidence indicates that the quality of teaching and learning and the educational outcomes in a school are poor
Increasing engagement between schools, parents and families, recognising the influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes	• To work with schools to **ensure that their pupils are given a voice** in the running of the school and that there are **strong and effective links between every school and the parents, families and local communities** it serves

Source: Adapted from: Department of Education (2009) *Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement.* Bangor: Department of Education

Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

The Department's strategy for raising achievement in numeracy and literacy[52] was launched for consultation between June and November 2008. It is designed to work in conjunction with other strategies, and in particular with *Every School a Good School.*

The strategy points to the need for targeted and supportive action to support those most at risk of underachievement as well as for action designed to maintain and improve achievement in literacy and numeracy. Its aim is to raise standards in literacy and numeracy through learning and teaching strategies designed to help young people acquire and develop core skills in these areas. It also seeks to narrow the gaps in attainment between boys and girls and between the highest and lowest performing pupils and skills.

The strategy recognises the crucial importance of classroom teaching in driving educational outcomes. The core elements of the revised strategy are as follows:

- Quality whole class teaching;

- Quality teaching plus additional support for identified pupils;

- Quality teaching plus personalised support to meet the needs of individual pupils; and

- Facilitating professional learning.

The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

This policy document,[53] launched for consultation in August 2009, aims to help children to make the most of the learning opportunities offered by their school, and to lead to a more open, positive, flexible and inclusive model that recognises and delivers support for learning to children who require it.

The key principles underpinning the policy proposals include the continued promotion of an inclusive ethos; an approach encompassing all children who face barriers to learning; quality intervention and provision; and the promotion of greater collaborative working and sharing of information between schools.

Extended Schools: schools, families, communities- working together

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[52] Department of Education (2008) *Every School A Good School: A Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy.* Bangor: Department of Education

[53] Department of Education (2009) *The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion* Bangor: Department of Education

The Extended Schools programme, launched in May 2006,[54] is targeted at reducing differences in educational outcomes for children, particularly for those from deprived areas.

The programme aims to support learning and healthy lifestyles, raising school standards while engaging schools with their local community and connecting people with local services. £40 million of funding has been provided through the programme over the past four years, and activities provided include breakfast and homework clubs, sport, art and programmes aimed at encouraging parental, family and community engagement.[55]

Together Towards Entitlement: Delivering the Entitlement Framework through Area-based Planning

The main policy objective of the Entitlement Framework (EF) [56] is to provide all students in schools aged 14 and over with a curriculum offer that meets all of their needs and aspirations.

The Department states that the EF will guarantee all post primary pupils aged 14 and above greater choice and flexibility by providing them with access to a wide range of learning opportunities suited to their needs, aptitudes and interests irrespective of where they live or the school they attend.

The target date for the full implementation of the Framework is September 2013. From that date, schools will be required to provide pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (current target 24) and minimum number of courses at post-16 (current target 27). Of equal importance to the range of courses is the coherence of the offer which should enable young people to choose from a package of courses that leads to progression to further education, higher education, training and employment.[57]

National Standards for Headteachers

The National Standards for Headteachers[58] aim to provide a framework for professional development to inform, challenge and enthuse serving and aspiring school principals. The Standards state that the core purpose of the headteacher is to provide professional leadership and management for a school.

The Standards embody three principles that the work of headteachers should be: learning-centred, focused on leadership and reflect the highest possible professional

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[54] Department of Education (2006) *Extended Schools: schools, families, communities- working together* Bangor: Department of Education

[55] *Extended Schools Programme 2010/11* [online] Available at http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/extended-schools-programme-2009-2010.htm

[56] Department of Education (2009) *Together Towards Entitlement: Delivering the Entitlement Framework through Area-based Planning* Bangor: Department of Education

[57] DE Entitlement Framework http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/80-curriculum-and-assessment/108-entitlement-framework.htm

[58] Regional Training Unit (2005) *National Standards for Headteachers Northern Ireland Edition* Belfast: RTU

standards. In addition, they set out six key areas that represent the role of the headteacher, as follows:

- Shaping the future;

- Leading learning and teaching;

- Developing self and working with others;

- Managing the organisation;

- Securing accountability; and

- Strengthening community.

Conclusion

Every School a Good School is the Department's key overall policy strategy for improving education. It works alongside and is supported by other policies and initiatives in addressing underachievement, including the Entitlement Framework and Extended schools.

Central to all of these policies is the objective of raising standards within schools, particularly those in disadvantaged areas that are producing poor results. The policies acknowledge the difficulties faced by schools in disadvantaged areas and suggest that a successful school is built on strong leadership and high quality teaching and learning. They also assert the importance of strong parental and community links, partnerships with neighbouring schools and a positive ethos that has the needs of the pupils at the centre.