

The Essex Toolkit – an approach to maximising the use of the pupil premium funding.

Starting points/Background

Like many Local Authorities, Essex LA had identified through its data intelligence systems that the gap in performance at all key stages between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils was significant. Significant monies had come into schools through the pupil premium funding mechanism and it was not clear how this funding was being used to improve outcomes and raise achievement for disadvantaged pupils. After consultation with headteachers requests were made to develop a toolkit to help understand how funding could be best used to support outcomes. A tender process was held and the National Education Trust was commissioned to develop a toolkit for Essex schools.

The work was led by Marc Rowland, who worked for the Trust and was also a leading expert for the use of pupil premium funding through his involvement with school and authorities around the country.

The Toolkit

The initial steps taken by NET were to carry out a survey amongst schools, meet with school groups and visit a range of schools particularly identified by the LA. Investigations were also carried out into school websites and published information.

The result was the publication of the Essex Toolkit. The toolkit represents a whole school systemic approach to good practice, identifying key components which are regarded as the active ingredients. The design of the toolkit lends itself to school leaders challenging their practice against a number of key questions so that the culture, identification of barriers, monitoring and understanding of accountability are targeted at ensuring the funding has maximum impact. It also provides some advice and examples of good practice to help support schools. One key message that we try to get across is the pupil premium funding should be used primarily to ensure disadvantaged pupils have access to the highest quality teaching. Money alone does not transform outcomes it is about well embedded approaches and whole school understanding and ambition.

Leadership, culture and values

Excellent leadership is at the heart of effective practice. Where leadership is vulnerable then it is the most vulnerable in our schools who suffer the most. Often disadvantaged do not have a backup plan. Leaders need to be relentless in their pursuit of ambition and highest outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. In the effective schools, leaders ensure that the needs of disadvantaged pupils are a thread through all their planning and tracking. Leaders will not be afraid to tackle under performance but ensure that the highest expectations are systemic in their schools. This means establishing a culture of possibilities not barriers; have a collective sense of mission which pervades through the school and reflected in all staff;

builds capacity amongst all its leaders in monitoring and evaluating impact; expects only the best from all; engages all the stakeholders and partners, including parents; understands the range of approaches which not only support academic achievement but also metacognition so that learners develop strategies when things don't work.

'It takes an 'every second counts culture' in which each person knows and 'feels' their role and the absolute importance of it; where everyone is striving to be a little better than they were the day before; where they are gladly held to account and where everyone can succeed.'

Primary School Headteacher

Understanding barriers and targeted activities

Most effective schools understand how socio-economic disadvantaged impacts upon outcomes. Therefore they constantly probe and do not limit actions to just 'first-face' interventions. In my experience there are several areas where schools need to question to check that are tackling the barriers to outcomes.

Firstly, having systems for checking that help and support is provided at the earliest opportunity. Effective schools recognise that early language acquisition is key to academic success. Many of our vulnerable pupils experience limited access to language which impacts upon both communication and processing skills. Targeted early screening and use of strategies known to work can accelerate children's oracy.

Secondly, a deep understanding of children and their families which helps to identify wider needs and support. Schools sometimes use the language of 'hard to reach parents' but are they unwittingly a 'hard to reach school' because of the processes and procedures that make them inaccessible to some parents.

Thirdly, access to the highest quality teaching the school can offer and not delegated to less well trained personnel. The premium should be used to provide opportunities for developing teachers' knowledge and skills so that first quality teaching is of the highest quality. Interventions may be used but they are integrated into a provision of good teaching.

Fourthly, barriers may be multiple and schools need to get beyond the pupil premium label and consider the characteristics of learners that are underachieving. This will help in the targeting of activities to promote progress. A high quality and well thought out curriculum looks to promote the wide range of skills that will help pupils succeed in life.

Engaging the voice of pupils and contributions of others is important to help understand and clarify the barriers. Testing school's published strategy statements provides an insight into their understanding of their rationale for the use of funding because it should link to the barriers it has identified. Barriers should not be just limited to a close the gap mentality but also the barriers that result from being disadvantaged. This may also include the

opportunity to develop cultural capital. The skills and knowledge required to participate successfully in our communities. Pupils may continue to have barriers but can enjoy success through high quality teaching and provision. It is always important to remember that disadvantaged pupils themselves do have high aspirations but low expectations of achieving them. It is the role of school leaders to recognise and where possible remove the barriers through use of the funding.

Monitoring, evaluation and accountability

Effective monitoring is finding out whether what you did works and not trying to prove it works. Important lessons can be learnt when things don't work. The monitoring should be frequent so that where required changes can be made in practice and approaches and it should engage a wide range of sources and contributors. This helps to focus the responsibility for pupil premium pupils is everybody's. Sharp evaluation is supported through clear success criteria which avoids poor proxies for impact such as 'pupils enjoyed' or 'teacher confidence'. However, there are numerous success criteria that are wider than just relying on outcomes at the end of key stage data and are still useful in tackling educational disadvantaged such as better attendance or better behaviour for learning.

An effective pupil premium strategy starts at meeting pupils' needs and not overly concentrating on the end of key stage outcomes. This is because a strategy needs to be long term and sustainable this will ultimately deliver better outcomes. It is important that schools adopt an approach of using what works and has been tested in their own settings. Use of any strategies need to ensure that schools themselves are programme ready and that it fits its own rationale. Not only should internal checking be carried out but also external peer reviews contribute to ensuring best impact even where outcomes for disadvantaged learners are strong. Information should be clear and accessible to parents. Finally, accountability should be focused upon the outcomes and destinations of disadvantaged pupils.

Essex experience

The toolkit has been rolled out to schools in a number of ways. Two conferences were held which were free for schools to attend. The first focused upon the Toolkit as well as inviting speakers from the Educational Endowment Fund. This conference also included group seminars provided by Teaching School Alliances who had been commissioned to look at effective engagement with parents/carers. The second conference gave greater focus to developing metacognitive approaches to learning. As a result a number of schools have signed up for an action research project 'ReflectED' which will evaluate approaches within the classroom that make a difference in helping learning to learn skills of pupils. Some tailored work has been provided for schools to help them with a particular focus on their work with disadvantaged pupils.

School Improvement now focuses upon a school led system. As part of this tools are being developed to help partnerships and clusters carry out their own peer reviews of pupil premium strategies.

The latest unvalidated information for 2017 shows that the difference has been diminished at the end of primary key stages, including EYFS. There appears to be more work to be done at key stage 4.

Whilst I continue to carry the title of Pupil Premium Champion, it is important that all my colleagues are skilled in challenging schools around disadvantaged pupils. Achievement for disadvantaged pupils remains one of our key priorities as a LA. Through our teams support of the School Led Improvement System, helping schools become empowered working with disadvantaged pupils and accountable for their outcomes.