

**Annual Enquiry 2005
Case study**

Kingsbridge Networked Learning Community

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Impact on children: attendance, levels of disaffection and standards

This report aims to examine how the initiatives and actions instigated by the Kingsbridge Networked Learning Community (NLC) brought about changes at school level that have led to improvements in pupils' attendance and levels of disaffection, and raised standards. The macro- and micro-level successes of Kingsbridge NLC's schools have to be seen in the context of their wider community. It matters that the schools and the children that attend them are in areas of high economic and social deprivation, for this has a strong influence on the schools' ability to impact on pupil engagement, achievement and attainment. The schools have to work much harder to sustain performance levels than schools in less challenging circumstances.

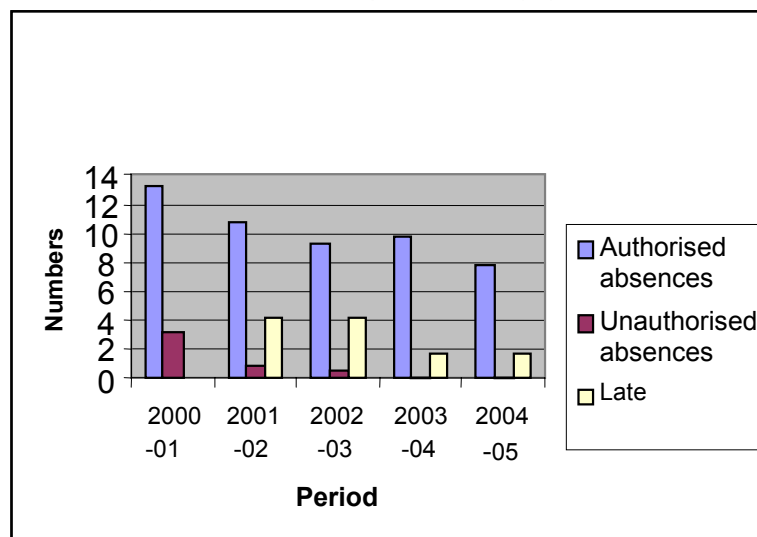
Kingsdown High School

Kingsdown High School's attendance has risen from 84 per cent in 2000 to 92 per cent in 2005, with the percentage of pupils arriving late to school dropping significantly in recent years (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1: Kingsdown High School: percentage of pupils attending and late, 2000-2005

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Authorised absences	13.2	10.7	9.4	9.7	7.8
Unauthorised absences	3.1	1.0	0.6	0.2	0.2
Percentage late before register closes	unavailable	4.1	4.1	1.6	1.6

Figure 1: Kingsdown High School: percentage of pupils absent or late, 2000-05



While further improvement is needed in 'attendance and punctuality to lessons', the school's most recent Ofsted report in 2004 states that, although still below the national average 'attendance is much better' and has 'improved very considerably'.

During this same period, the percentage of Year 11 students achieving five A-C grades has risen from 7% in 2000 to 35% in 2004. Ofsted noted that the school's GCSE and GNVQ results are generally higher than those for similar schools, although still below the national average. In 2004 they were graded B ('above average') in comparison with results of similar schools. In 2004, comparison of GCSE results with similar schools was graded A*, well above average.

Highlighting the school's main strengths, Ofsted stated that: 'standards are improving rapidly'; 'teaching and learning are good' and 'students' behaviour is good in response to the school's high expectations'; as well as 'very good pupil-teacher relationships'. Since the previous inspection, improvements were judged to have been made in the areas of students' attitudes, leadership and teaching. Standards are also improving lower down the school. This year, 66 per cent of Year 7 pupils entering at Level 3 or below in English literature had achieved Level 4 by the end of the autumn term.

At an individual level, interviews held with two learning mentors reveal what improvement in attendance and disaffection potentially means for pupils living in challenging circumstances. This is illustrated in the cases below.

Case 1: Year 10 pupil

Situation:

A "huge file of report cards ... exclusions from Year 7 [onwards] ... silly behaviour ... class clown ... late to lessons ... late mornings ... cheeky. Lived with dad; mum left ... dad worked shifts and was not there to get him up. Comes in late ... gets told off ... so he's in a bad mood to start off with. He's not done his homework because he's been on detention the night before so he gets in trouble, then he gets fed up and then messes about ... would actually be certain teachers he'd go for ... I used to walk around corridors and if he was larking about I used to tell him off ... then we found out he'd got very little coursework done ... he didn't work in lessons."

Action taken:

The mentor explains how she helped:

"Got him a clock and he still came in late ... I used to go and pick him up in the morning ... he would then sit in here [learning mentor room] and do the homework that he got ... so he would be here on time ... punctual ... and his homework got done and his behaviour in class improved because he wasn't having confrontations ... detentions."

She also got his father to the school "loads of times", to tell him how bright his son was and "what little work he was doing". The father gave her permission to keep him in after school to work: "I had him sitting here for a week. Once he slipped out ... he'd lost it ... running off ... I ran after him down the field ... all his mates got him back for me ... he was laughing ...". Her success reveals determination and dedication.

Outcomes:

His attendance improved, his coursework got done, and he got five A-Cs: "He was on target for this but he was underachieving," in the words of the learning mentor.

Case 2: Year 10 pupil

Situation:

"A loner ... didn't mix ... others picked on her ... attractive, others jealous ... [she was] attacked by another girl." Her poor attendance and punctuality were not discouraged at home: "Mum supported her ... no firm boundaries ... [she] just needed organising - very bright. Moved in with a Year 11 boy, another difficult pupil [who] needed anger management ... [also] not attending ... [he] lived with dad who worked. Neither got up ... [it] went from bad to worse."

Action taken:

The learning mentor managed to get the boy into school although "Dad came up and complained" and the girl "went home". The girl was given emotional and academic support.

They helped her to get organised: *"She wanted to be a fashion designer."* The learning mentor got information for her about college and *"got her focused"*. She went on to Wigan College.

Outcomes:

Her attendance improved, she completed her exams and *"she got six or seven A-Cs"*. The boy got four A-Cs.

What these case studies highlight is that good adult-pupil work relationships, wider community involvement and commitment, and a culture of high expectations (in school and outside it) are raising pupils' achievement and attainment. When interviewed, five Year 8 pupils said that they understood the system for monitoring attendance and informing parents, although one commented: "Why pupils stay at home when it is so much more interesting here, I don't know." They enjoyed the visits out of school into other educational establishments and the responsibilities they were given, such as managing the shop, booking holidays and ordering drinks, as they could see the relevance of this to their future. The pastoral team leaders were identified as adults whose responsibility it was to be there for them if they were experiencing crises in their lives. Fully aware of the reward and sanction systems, pupils saw the school as strict but very fair.

Britannia Bridge Primary School

Britannia Bridge Primary School's most recent Ofsted report (2003) states that the school has improved considerably since its previous inspection in 2001, when it was placed in special measures as an underachieving school. At that time, pupils were underachieving in English, mathematics and science – results were well below average in the school's Key Stage 2 standard assessment tests (SATs) in 2002 - and behaviour was considered poor, mainly among boys. Behaviour is no longer considered a problem. Attendance has risen from 92 per cent to 94 per cent in 2004-05. Records of contact with parents show significant improvement, as is illustrated by the dramatic drop in the number of phone calls the school made to parents (Table 3).

Table 3: Britannia Bridge Primary School: number of phone calls made by to parents, 2002-04

	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3
2002-03	39	29	21
2003-04	4	5	6

For all children with special educational needs, phone calls are made at step 4 of the behaviour policy after sanctions, loss of play, etc.

As the data in Table 4 and Figures 2, 3 and 4 indicates, Key Stage 2 SATs results have improved since 2002, and the school is striving to achieve a degree of stability year on year. To raise attainment, huge amounts of time and resources have been targeted to support the development of children at Foundation Stage and to reduce the number of children entering the upper school with learning difficulties. In 2004, around 40 per cent of pupils eligible for the Key Stage 2 tests in Year 6 were identified as having special needs.

Table 4: Britannia Bridge Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs at Levels 4+ and 5+, 2002-2005

	English				Maths				Science			
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
Level 4+	32	62	61	54	41	51	64	50	50	79	68	54
Level 5+	-	18	14	17	-	18	14	8	-	21	7	33

Figure 2: Britannia Bridge Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in English at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005

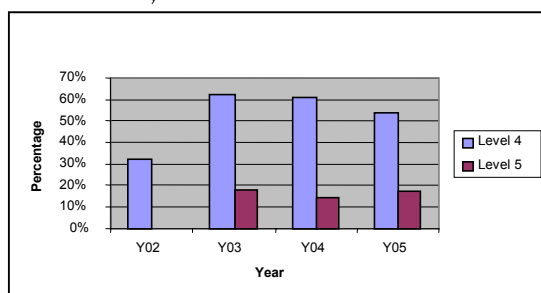


Figure 3: Britannia Bridge Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in maths at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005

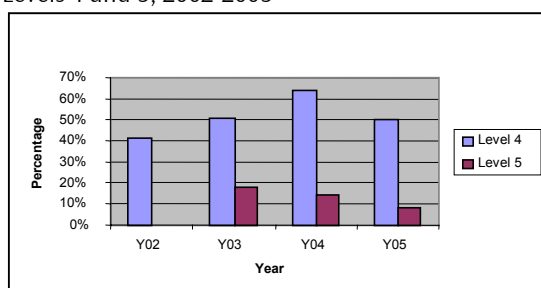
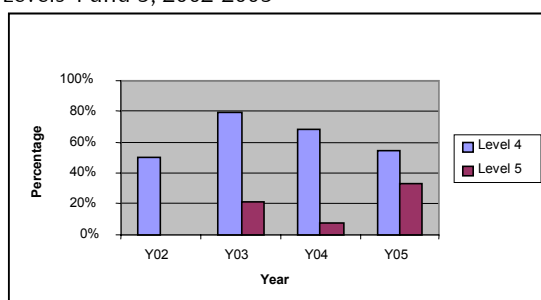


Figure 4: Britannia Bridge Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in science at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005



The school's pupil-tracking records for this year offer evidence of added-value, particularly in literacy. For example, Year 6 pupils' records for writing indicate that a third have made noticeable progress. Only 1 out of 25 children (4 per cent) got SATs results at a level lower than their target level.

The school's thorough tracking systems for younger children show signs of small steps in progress. The school wants to support its children early on. The Boxhall portfolio, which consists of three assessments over the year, is used by the school to monitor progress and inform personalised teaching inputs (Table 5).

Table 5: Britannia Bridge Primary School: examples of pupil assessments for Year 1 pupils

	English	Maths	Progress
Child 1	p5 to p8	1c to 1b	Steady progress – ‘teach how to interact with peers’
Child 2	p5 to p7	1c to 1a	Craves attachment; insecure sense of self
Child 3	p4 to p7	1c to 1a	Slight improvement in attendance; often very late

Interviews with learning mentors reveal what ‘improvement’ might mean for the social, emotional and learning development of children living in difficult socio-economic circumstances.

Case 3: Pupil in infants

Situation:

"Severe speech problem ... low self-esteem ... spent long periods of time silent ... no eye contact ... nervous."

Actions taken:

He spent his mornings in the Sunflower nurture room with a small group of children, his learning mentor and another adult. In this informal environment, which is set up like a living room with a sofa, free role-play is followed by structured play around day-to-day situations, eg *"You are having visitors today and they are having a meal. What do you need to do first?"* or *"How can we cheer Mrs S up?"* Adults participate by modelling behaviours. For this child, using the telephone was a breakthrough: *"He loved to talk on the telephone."* Gentle encouragement and a planned speech programme using the language in the room, eg talking over breakfast (which is provided in the nurture room), resulted in him speaking far more frequently. His confidence and speech improved as a result.

Outcomes:

Now fully integrated in a mainstream classroom.

The school's learning mentors promote the steps the children need to make in developing their emotional intelligence. For example, if children want to be alone or are angry, they are prompted with *"Can you sort yourself out?"* and then they *"will go into the butterfly garden and sort themselves out"*.

St Catherine's Primary School

In 2004, St Catherine's Primary School was judged by Ofsted as showing a 'good level of improvement' since its previous inspection in 1998. At that time, attendance was held to be satisfactory in terms of authorised absences, having previously been judged unsatisfactory. It has since risen from 93 per cent in 2002 to just over 94 per cent in 2004-05. High pupil mobility is part of the problem.

Once pupils are in school, they make very good progress. Attainment on entry to the school is well below average, but by the end of Key Stage 1, SATs results are above those for similar schools. By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils' SATs results are above average and well above average for similar schools. The trend in the school's average national curriculum (NC) points for all core subjects is above the national trend for Key Stage 2.

Table 6: St Catherine's Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs at Levels 4+ and 5+, 2002-05

		2002	2003	2004	2005
English	Level 4+	83	82	81	89
	Level 5+	18	31	22	21
Maths	Level 4+	90	82	88	67
	Level 5+	41	31	28	31
Science	Level 4+	93	92	100	94
	Level 5+	14	40	47	60

Figure 5: St Catherine's Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in English at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005

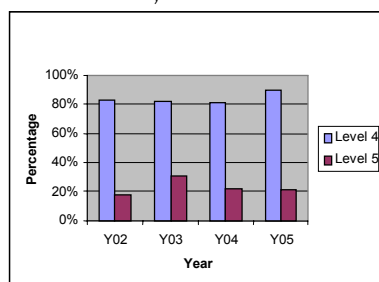


Figure 6: St Catherine's Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in maths at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005

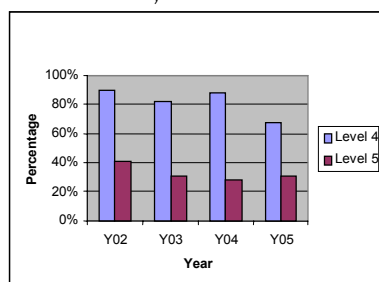
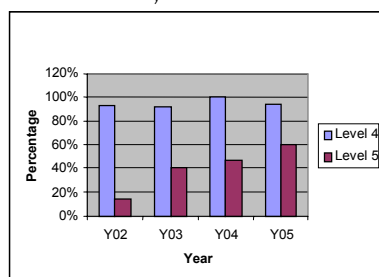


Figure 7: St Catherine's Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Key Stage 2 SATs in science at Levels 4 and 5, 2002-2005



In the world class arena papers, pupils got five merits and four distinctions in mathematics papers 8 to 11.

Ofsted described pupils' attitudes as good and their behaviour as very good. Conversations with four formerly disaffected pupils with poor attendance records are revealing. They are now in school - for example, B's absences went from 18.7 per cent in 2004 to 6.4 per cent in 2005 - and are able to illustrate the impact that this has had on their attitudes and behaviour.

“I like school because somebody [staff] took the time to bring me in every morning.”

“If you have a problem there is always someone to help you. They will calm you down, they will give you ideas and they will help you to understand how what you have done affects others.”

“Mrs A [the head] keeps me safe. If I feel sad I would go to Mrs A.”

“There is a lonely bench at dinner-time and someone will come to talk to you.”

School processes: what contribution has the network made?

Interviews with the three headteachers in their roles as associates reveal that they are very aware of the effects of the economic and social problems in their communities, such as binge drinking, drug abuse, violence, a high rate of teenage pregnancy and a racially motivated murder by teenagers. It is also clear that their understanding enables them to look beyond the blame culture of disaffected and dysfunctional pupils and families. This is important when engaging with young people for whom these economic and social problems are a lived experience. Recognising that many of their children live hard lives, as the cases above illustrate, they convey a very strong sense of caring. Offering a haven of safety in which children can learn is seen as an important role of the school.

Given the challenges with which they work, there is no evidence of defeatism, only of a desire constantly to seek ways to enable their pupils to have a wider range of learning opportunities. They are passionate about giving their pupils better life chances, and passionate belief is their driving force and their source of energy. By channelling this energy into network-generated initiatives they are experiencing varying degrees of success, as outlined above.

Kingsdown High School and Britannia Bridge Primary School, in particular, have faced a myriad of problems affecting their capacity for improvement, such as high staff turnover, high absence rates and poor examination results. The challenge for these schools is significantly greater than for schools not experiencing these problems. Despite this, there is evidence that the schools are having a positive impact on pupils. What has enabled this?

It is difficult to disaggregate the causal effects upon school performance and pupil improvement, but tackling inequalities in educational outcomes requires focused interventions and targeted support. In all three schools visited, three network-related interventions are described by the leadership of the schools, staff and pupils as being central to improving attendance, reducing disaffection and raising achievement:

- establishing learning mentors, initiated by and financed through the network since 2002
- creating nurture rooms in the primary sector and the rotunda base in the secondary sector
- adapting the curriculum to meet the children’s needs more effectively

These interventions have involved providing emotional and social support and development for pupils, developing teaching and learning, and in the secondary school the provision of vocational training opportunities.

Learning mentors play a central role in the success of the network in both the primary and secondary phases. Evidence suggests that their appointment has had a significant impact on underachieving and disaffected pupils. Common across phases is the importance attached to their role, their shared learning and professional development in areas such as behaviour

support and ICT. This has been achieved by the network, and learning mentors now constitute a network within the network, meeting monthly.

Kingsdown High School (a full-service extended school)

Learning mentors

The two (of four) learning mentors interviewed in Kingsdown High School explain their role in the wider context of the aims of their school and the network as "to beat down the barriers to learning" and "to raise aspirations". They see their responsibilities as vital in two areas: allowing the teaching staff to concentrate on learning and teaching, and reducing the barriers that prevent pupils from learning. There is also a belief that once they get children into school, they will "become aware that the curriculum is more relevant to their getting a job than they thought". Raising attendance, raising achievement and reducing exclusions are key aspects of the school's ethos. Learning mentors support these objectives through instant response to non-attendance, behaviour management of identified children - staff call them if there is a problem in class - and working with other agencies to support pupils. Where there are problems relating to attendance, punctuality or behaviour, learning mentors are the point of contact. Both teachers and parents refer pupils to them: "anybody who's got any concerns ... highlights a child". Initially, pupils are put on report to be monitored during early morning and break-times for up to a week. If they do not respond, the system is that they go "upwards and onwards" to report to the senior management team.

Attendance is improving, reflecting the effective strategies that are now in place. Electronic registers produce absence sheets, and mentors make quick contact. Ringing parents of poor attendees the same day or the next is a particularly effective strategy. If there is no reply, learning mentors will go to the home. Parents know the systems in place and this makes them effective: "Parents don't want the hassle so they send them in." Through phoning and visiting homes, mentors come to know a lot about the pupils' home lives and rapidly build up a relationship with parents. It is this level of awareness that is making support effective.

With the support of network training and growing experience, the mentors learn to handle difficult situations. For example, D has been to anger management. When he is angry in class they know how to "bring him down" by reminding him "he can do it". Their role is to reinforce good behaviour and encourage pupils to be responsible for their own behaviour. There is an awareness that most of the children need more attention and their self-esteem building up: "It's just giving them attention, some of the kids ... they're not really bad ... they just need some contact, and then when you've built a relationship you can go up to them on the yard and say 'How is it going?' ... It's not really about putting them down, it's about building them up again" says one learning mentor.

The target groups for learning mentor support are those identified as needing support in "turning [GCSE grades] Ds to Cs" and those pupils who are targeted for a C in a subject but are seen to be underachieving. Mentors then find out what the individual's problem is, but they do not get involved with the curriculum and students are not withdrawn from lessons. Their role is to work on positive attitudes and enable the students to organise their work: "Some of the kids just get overwhelmed by just how much work they've got to do." There is a noticeable emphasis on getting them to organise themselves, perhaps in recognition of their disorganised lives.

Curriculum

Interviews with the leadership team highlighted the opportunities that are given to pupils on entry into Key Stage 4 within a curriculum entitlement system that has three possible routes: the traditional academic route, a mixture of academic and vocational, and a more vocational route. Pupils are assessed at the end of Key Stage 3 by individual interviews with members of the senior leadership team to ascertain the recommended route. This is followed by a parents'

evening after which a final decision is taken. The vocational route is pursued by some pupils as a route into professions such as architecture.

Conversations with the staff leading the vocational route indicate that this has played a crucial part in increasing attendance. The pupils see the relevance of the curriculum in terms of future employment and in links made with the local further education college. The school's 2004 Ofsted report praised the fact that the 'curriculum offers a wider range of opportunities, in particular work-related learning'. It had 'broadened the curriculum by including subjects with greater practical, technical and business components which students perceive as more useful to them in the future'.

Links

The network influence in this process can be seen in the link that the school has with Standish Community High School, the original catalyst for adapting and developing teaching and learning and the school curriculum. This original model has now been extended, with the school linking with Rose Bridge High School to model their practice of curriculum change. The network is enabling the schools to link up with a variety of other schools in the network and with community initiatives. For instance, Kingsdown High School links with St John Rigby College where Year 11 pupils work on AS Level thinking skills. Wigan Sports Development is working with pupils at risk of disaffection, displaying poor behaviour and attendance, and the learning mentors feel this is improving the behaviour and attitudes of "a difficult group of Year 9 boys". There is also the Fix-it Programme Working Community and Safety Partnership, which is giving students who are at risk of not attending school an alternative ASDAN qualification. In addition to this, there is a lot of support from other network schools, for example in curriculum areas where some staff have worked in a department in another school through Pathways to Excellence. School activities are set up and open to all schools: a number of schools have been involved in Kingsdown High School's business enterprise. The business enterprise is a strength of the school and ensures that the work-related learning is relevant. Links with network primary feeder schools are very strong. The King's Express primary feeder schools initiative enables gifted and talented Year 6 pupils to spend a week at Kingsdown High School on an accelerated learning programme as a way of trying to tackle disaffection, and the high school's behaviour support team has supported network feeder primaries.

Britannia Bridge Primary School

Developments in Britannia Bridge Primary School resemble those at Kingsdown High School. Like Kingsdown High School, Britannia Bridge Primary School came out of special measures relatively recently under the leadership of a new headteacher and deputy headteachers.

Curriculum

At Britannia Bridge Primary School, the head has found the network an invaluable means of support in starting to turn the school around and she found an effective deputy head from within the network. The 2003 Ofsted report states that: 'Significant weaknesses have been overcome by knowledgeable and purposeful leadership and management that utilises advice from beyond the school very well', reflecting the impact of the network. It also praised the school for its 'enriched curriculum that appeals to all pupils, which encourages them to think analytically' and added that the new nursery and reception unit provided 'imaginative experiences that help [children] to achieve well'.

Improvements in attendance are linked to the focus on learning, thinking skills, speaking and listening, and ICT skills: "During that week of the ICT literacy focus there was 100 per cent attendance in my class," says one teacher. All these have come from collaboration with the network, from professional development opportunities and sharing good practice, according to the headteacher.

The headteacher explains that there has been a change of ethos that has been encouraged by the network and focuses on behaviour and how children learn: "Children now want to come to school." In the view of two Year 6 pupils, school is enjoyable because "I know what to do and I feel the lessons are far more varied and interesting" and "we learn about a lot of different areas and in different ways". They talked about feeling safe: "the teachers are there to help you", "there is always someone to go to when you feel sad or angry" and "you can sit down and talk to adults".

Attendance is an ongoing issue, but there is a first-day response system both to attendance and lateness. Highly structured systems were put in place to tackle the behaviour problems noted by Ofsted in 2001. Children now know what is expected and behaviour is no longer a problem. Over a two-year period, the deputy head tracking the same children has recorded a significant reduction in calls to parents relating to behavioural issues. Lunchtime welfare staff are particularly aware of improvement in behaviour at lunchtimes. The head and deputy commented about the need to be in the school hall every lunchtime two years ago, while now most issues are dealt with by the welfare staff. A clear structure of communication is used if there is a major incident.

Learning mentors also support identified children in the primary schools. The establishment of two nurture rooms, the Poppy room dedicated to Foundation Stage and the Sunflower room for Years 1 and 2 pupils in the main school, is proving to be very beneficial. The school is investing significantly in supporting children in their early years. The principle of getting these children early is well established and has had a major impact on inclusion. The fact that the Foundation Stage mentor knows the children, parents and grandparents, having been at the school for many years, is proving very helpful.

Nurture rooms

In the primary sector, nurture rooms follow a similar pattern in their function and role. Children who need support have the opportunity to spend time in the nurture room on a small group basis and to join in with activities that encourage them to learn social skills, to express their emotions and most importantly to build self-esteem and relationships. Developing communication and social skills is seen as central. Mentors work closely with social services, speech and language experts and other health service officials.

Children in the main school identified as needing social or emotional support spend time in the Sunflower room in the mornings until they are ready to be reintegrated (after two to four terms). On a bad day they can return, visit at playtime or come to show work. Staff model aspects of home life, such as ways of behaving and dealing with everyday situations. They pretend to have arguments, be sad, sulk and then ask the children how to solve the problem. A quiet area where children can go if they want to be alone, the butterfly garden, has been created, with huge cushions, blankets and mosquito nets. A number of schools from the network have visited the school to learn more about the nurture rooms, and the learning mentor has spoken of their success at learning mentor meetings. She is very committed and her enthusiasm is infectious. She and the welfare staff feel they can make a difference.

St Catherine's Church of England Primary School

St Catherine's Church of England (CE) Primary School has built on its successes over time. Ofsted in 2004 talked about the school's improvement since its previous inspection in 1998. It referred to good teaching, a caring ethos, high levels of inclusion, very good links with parents and very productive contact with other schools and the community; the headteacher has been at the school for 30 years. The headteacher feels the network has offered them a great deal through

sharing strategies for increasing learning opportunities. These strategies are all part of the school's highly structured and successful approach to raising attainment.

The school is raising pupils' attainment from well below average on entry to above average on exit at Key Stage 2 (Ofsted, 2004). How has it achieved this? The head and deputy talk about a change of attitude among the staff in relation to a broad range of strategies introduced to widen teaching and learning opportunities and about the crucial role of teaching and learning as important factors in the school's success: "[We] take every opportunity to introduce initiatives". For example, children with special educational needs are identified in Reception and receive additional input such as springboard, early literacy and mothers and grandmothers coming in for reading. There is whole-school learning support, curriculum enrichment in language skills, booster classes for Year 6 pupils and specialist science teaching that includes a school club for Year 6 pupils. A recent local authority visit report in spring 2005 confirms the school's high evaluation of its impact in improving pupils' engagement, achievement and attainment. It refers to the impact of the learning mentor: 'the appointment of a learning mentor has impacted on learning and improved attendance' and notes that 'several strategies [are] in place to improve attendance'.

Behaviour policy

The school has been proactive in its initiatives to raise attendance from unsatisfactory to satisfactory. Electronic registers are checked by the learning mentor, who contacts parents immediately if children's absences are causing concern. Close liaison between the class teacher, the headteacher and the education welfare officer also prompts quick action. The behaviour policy was also designed as a step-by-step process so that children know what the next course of action will be: "Now you know where you're at," says one child (Focus Group and Armstrong, 2003). Staff talk about their relief that strategies for attendance and behaviour are there to allow them to concentrate on teaching and learning, whilst recognising the obvious connection between attendance, lateness and behaviour and the quality of learning in their classrooms. All staff have accessed the network behaviour improvement training, which has been a major influence on their understanding of emotional literacy and boys' achievement. The headteacher talks about the growing ability of all staff to question the effects of certain behaviours and consequently explore strategies to deal with them.

The role of the network-funded learning mentor in this school covers support in three areas: attendance, gifted and talented, and disaffected pupils. She is working with five disaffected pupils with poor attendance records, four gifted and talented pupils, and other small groups of pupils, as well as supporting literacy pupils. At 8.30am she is in the playground to link with parents as the children arrive and to build trust and relationships. At lunchtime she runs a nurture group where children sit and eat together and she encourages the development of social skills. She uses a variety of strategies from the network support group to engage and connect with pupils. The emphasis is on prevention, and her work is having a positive impact, as her notes show (Table 7).

Table 7: Learning mentor's notes, St Catherine's School

Activity	Impact
Pre-school supervision - build relationships, talk to solitary, quiet pupils, children who arrive with problems or concerns	Improved security and safety of pupils who arrive early Reducing problems at the start of the day
Monitoring attendance	Following up absence is increasing parental awareness Attendance rewarded
Supporting pupils at risk	
Supporting disaffected pupils	Develop social skills, co-operation, turn-taking - positive impact
Group and lunchtime club	Identified groups of children come together, chat and develop social skills; encouraged to play games together, share Improved playground behaviour; welfare staff feel supported; fewer problems at end of lunch, smoother start to afternoon Potential problem situations identified early and dealt with immediately, before problem escalates

Network characteristics

Context

Kingsbridge Networked Learning Community and Excellence Cluster, an extension of Excellence in Cities, came together in 2002. It consists of 5 secondary schools - 1 Beacon school, 3 with leadership incentive grants (LIG) and 1 in an Education Action Zone (EAZ) - and 10 primary schools within the Metropolitan Borough of Wigan in Greater Manchester. They cater for 8,000 pupils, 31.9 per cent of whom are entitled to free school meals and 3.3 per cent of whom have special educational needs statements.

Although located in one of the top 10 per cent of areas for deprivation in the country (parts of Wigan, a former coal-mining and manufacturing area, have second- and third-generation unemployment) Britannia Bridge Primary School, Kingsdown High School (formerly Pembec Secondary School) and St Catherine's Primary School were selected as showing noticeable improvements in attendance, disaffection and associated behaviours, which are helping to raise standards. The most recent Ofsted reports for Britannia Primary School and Kingsdown High School (2003 and 2004) show that they have made significant improvements since the Excellence Cluster network was formed in 2002, and these improvements have helped bring them out of special measures.

Focus and purpose

The aim of the three schools looked at within the network is to raise pupil aspirations, remove barriers to learning and ensure the curriculum meets pupils' personalised learning needs more effectively. In doing this, the schools hope to meet the network's overall focus of raising standards. The network is seen to have played a very important role in this. The heads of Kingsdown High School and Britannia Bridge Primary School talk about the invaluable support it has provided as they have brought their schools out of special measures. The headteacher of St Catherine's CE Primary School is clear that it "facilitated our ability to put all this in place". She is referring to the range of innovations and activities, led by the network, that have made the school so successful. These have included developing gifted and talented children, involving primary, secondary and higher education, and appointing learning mentors to support

disaffected pupils. It also "provides a wide range of staff benefits" through its school improvement training and development agenda.

Relationships

Relationships are seen as very important. Wigan LEA is a small authority and historically schools have worked well together. In addition: "The group of headteachers and schools worked hard to build up relationships [...] People have been there to support and 'say if they have a need'," explains the head of St Catherine's CE Primary School. Openness and sharing seem important. The cluster meetings for headteachers are also a key driving force behind network initiatives.

Leadership

The headteacher of St Catherine's CE Primary School also felt that the leadership of the network had been crucial in raising the aspirations of staff and pupils. More people are able to link with the vision of leadership, according to the head of Kingsdown High School, adding that they now had a lot of new staff with high aspirations. These schools feel they are getting value for money.

Building capacity and support

There is significant shared expertise in the network; learning mentors are a good example. Monthly meetings of learning mentors, which take place at the Excellence Centre, have built capacity and provided support. They meet to share good practice, training, eg on behaviour support and ICT, lead on initiatives and visit each other's schools. A number of learning mentors have visited Britannia Bridge Primary School's nurture rooms and the school's learning mentor has presented at the network group meetings.

Other key network activities that are building capacity and support across the network and helping raise attainment are:

- the gifted and talented summer school initiative (the co-ordinator is involved in leading a local authority conference)
- headteacher meetings
- middle management courses
- graduate teaching and mentoring
- the use of advanced skills teachers across schools
- key stage working parties looking at raising achievement in literacy and numeracy
- the behaviour improvement programme (BIP), which is training all staff and providing equipment for personal, social and health education (PSHE) and circle time

Training for all staff, eg on the thinking skills project and the importance of play, is based in different schools and is increasing ownership and skills among staff.

Sustainability

Despite the vulnerability of resource-hungry initiatives in the long term, it was felt by the heads that the network was focusing on sustainability. They believe the network will continue through staff training and development when funding stops. In addition, co-leaders are developing and supporting headteachers, and the local authority has approached the Excellence Cluster network for help. The network has also increased schools' links with other agencies and there is a growing awareness of the network in Wigan.

Conclusion

Immediately evident from visiting the schools in the network are the passion and commitment among the leadership that their schools can and should make a difference to children, many of whom are living in very challenging circumstances. There is no evidence of any defeatism, only optimism and determination to find pathways that lead to pupil improvement, especially in the areas of attendance and disaffection.

A key to this improvement has been the impact of the network through the creation of the roles of learning mentors. Although there are obvious differences between schools and across key stages, there are many similarities in their approaches: as first call to the most vulnerable children, in their connection with parents, in the creation of specialist rooms or units to encourage social development and anger management, and in their influence with the whole staff.

Another key element in their success is the adaptation of the curriculum. At secondary level this is seen through the vocational approach at Key Stage 4 and how staff talk about pupils suddenly realising its value. In both phases there is evidence of a growing focus on teaching and learning and of adapting methods and approaches as a result. There is also evidence of the network's significance as an opportunity for staff to learn with and on behalf of each other. The willingness of staff in challenging and demanding schools to spend time talking about the network was indicative of their open approach to the pupils, to each other and to engaging with their community. Most noticeable, though, was how pupils talked enthusiastically about their schools and the role the staff played in their lives.

The network's school improvement training and development agenda is helping schools to focus their interventions and target support towards identified groups of pupils. Raising aspirations and standards of learning is at the heart of this intervention. The network also supports those schools in challenging circumstances to make appropriate curriculum adaptations, develop teaching and learning, and focus on tackling behaviour and attendance issues successfully. The schools are making significant gains as a result.

Methods and sources

Three-day visits were made (with two shorter follow-up visits) to the three schools and in-depth interviews were carried out with Mark Stenton, Karen McBride, Gwen Armstrong, the schools' headteachers and research associates on this enquiry. Interviews were also carried out with deputy heads and other key staff, including learning mentors. Small groups of pupils were also interviewed in each school.

Evidence available electronically

Research plan

Overview of impact data

Overview of process data

Overview of network data

Notes from initial visit to Kingsbridge network and reflections 8 June 2005 (DH/GP)

Notes from visit to three schools 19 June 2005: headteacher and deputy head interviews, learning mentors, pupils (DH)

Follow-up questions (GP)

Notes from visit 28 June 2005 (GP and DH)

Documentary evidence summarised 8 July 2005 (GP)

Lines of further investigation (GP)

Notes from visit 11 July 2005 (DH)

Hard-copy evidence

NLG data – facilitator's report, Year 2 review activity record, development and finance plan, Spring Enquiry 2004 analysis grid

Exam data from www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk for all schools in the network

Ofsted inspection report extracts for schools 2002-2005 where available

St Catherine's Church of England Primary School:

Link adviser visitor report, spring 2005

Completed Ofsted self-evaluation form 2005 world class arena mathematics results for its pupils

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Annual Absent Return Form 2004-05

Key Stage 2 results

Three disaffected children's assessment results; one attendance record

Britannia Bridge Primary School:

Year 6 targets for core subjects

Three children's Boxhall profiles

Sunflower Room consent form

Kingsdown High School (formerly Pembec Secondary School):

Learning mentor role

Targets for GCSE

Data on gifted and talented pupils – report and targets set

Absence statistics

References

Focus Group & Armstrong, V, 2003, *Citizenship and the Curriculum: A case study of a small primary school*, Lancaster, Department of Education, Lancaster University, pp 34, 310