



**Office for Standards  
in Education**

# **Advanced skills teachers**

**A survey**

**HMI 1767**

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## Introduction

1. Advanced skills teachers (ASTs) were introduced by the government in 1998 to help schools attract and retain excellent classroom teachers and to increase staff motivation, raise pupils' achievement levels and broaden the skills and knowledge base of schools. ASTs are required to undertake a range of additional duties, over and above their own teaching and other responsibilities, to help raise the quality of teaching and the standards of attainment in their own (or 'home') school and in other ('outreach') schools. Around 20% of their time should be given to this 'outreach' work.

2. In 2001, Ofsted published a report of a survey on the work of ASTs carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) during the academic year 1999/2000.<sup>1</sup> This further report is based on a survey of a larger sample of ASTs in primary, secondary and special schools, carried out by HMI in 2002/03. The survey focused on the work of ASTs and their impact on teaching, learning and standards in the home and outreach schools. It also looked at how ASTs are recruited, trained, managed and monitored. Visits were made to over 60 schools in 27 local education authorities (LEAs), including county and small unitary authorities, and metropolitan boroughs. In addition, a survey questionnaire was sent to the 1,550 ASTs in post at the time (350 primary and 1,200 secondary), of which nearly 800 were returned and subsequently analysed (a 55% response).

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<sup>1</sup> *Advanced skills teachers: appointment, deployment and impact*, HMI 273, Ofsted, 2001.

## Main findings

- ASTs are generally skilled teachers who set themselves high standards and expect high standards from others. They possess well-developed interpersonal skills, are very hard-working, and promote good standards of attainment in their home schools and in their outreach work.
- ASTs have significantly improved the quality of teaching and learning in over three quarters of the schools inspected in the survey.
- Procedures are rarely in place for schools to make clear judgements about the value for money ASTs are providing. Headteachers, nevertheless, often state their belief that the improvements in teaching and learning attributable to the ASTs are well worth the extra cost of their employment.
- ASTs are deployed in a variety of ways. They continue to spend most of their dedicated time in the following ways: advising other teachers on classroom management and teaching methods; producing teaching materials; disseminating materials relating to best practice; and advising on the provision of in-service training (INSET). Many of them give support to teachers who are experiencing difficulties. Both secondary and primary ASTs, the latter to a more limited extent, participate significantly in initial teacher training (ITT) and in work with newly qualified teachers (NQTs). This is a considerable change in emphasis in their role from the time of the previous inspection.
- Reasons why headteachers appoint ASTs include: retaining skilled classroom practitioners; meeting particular development needs in their schools; improving the quality of teaching; and raising pupils' attainment.
- As at the time of the previous inspection, headteachers often find it difficult to recruit ASTs from posts in other schools.
- Effective arrangements are in place in the majority of schools for teaching the classes of ASTs during the 20% of time that they are likely to be absent from their own classrooms.
- Secondary ASTs commonly have timetabled time for their outreach work. In contrast, the time that primary ASTs can give to their support role is frequently unspecified by their headteachers, which makes it difficult for them to plan their outreach commitments.
- The management and deployment of ASTs have improved since the previous inspection, largely as a result of the more active leadership of their outreach work by LEAs. The effectiveness of ASTs in bringing about change outside their home school often depends on the strategic involvement of the LEA in their recruitment,

training, deployment and monitoring. LEAs have increasingly recognised the potential for ASTs to help to meet the objectives in their Educational Development Plans (EDPs). Where there is little direct support from the LEA, the ASTs frequently encounter difficulties in establishing their wider support role.

- The training needs of the teachers and the schools with which the ASTs work, and the criteria for measuring their success in meeting these needs, are not always sufficiently clearly identified. They are occasionally sent into schools in very challenging circumstances with unreasonable expectations of what they can achieve in a short time. This was also true at the time of the previous inspection.
- Performance management is generally not used effectively to channel and support the ASTs' work. It is rare for performance management objectives to include reference to the distinctive features of their role or, in particular, to include specific reference to the outreach activities that they undertake. At the time of the last inspection, there was considerable confusion over who had responsibility for monitoring and commenting on the effectiveness of ASTs in this aspect of their work. ASTs employed in the LEAs that are active in managing their outreach work, however, now have better and clearer performance management procedures.
- Performance management rarely includes an analysis of the development needs of ASTs for their specific role. Overall, opportunities for their professional development are few.

## Role and deployment

3. Whether in primary, secondary or special schools, ASTs are almost all successful and experienced teachers who wish to remain in the classroom and share their expertise with other teachers. They are usually specialists in a subject or aspect, for a particular age-range or phase of education, with primary school ASTs generally claiming more than one subject specialism in relation to that phase.

4. Around half of the ASTs in secondary schools had relinquished their role as head of department. This helped them to concentrate on their new role and make a more significant contribution in their own and in other schools. A minority of primary ASTs continued to retain significant management responsibilities, sometimes at deputy head level. This sometimes worked effectively: for example, an AST with expertise in literacy and English teaching continued to lead the subject as part of a whole school focus to drive up standards of literacy. She also used this expertise effectively in her outreach work. Mostly, however, as at the time of the previous survey, management responsibilities distracted from the central focus of the AST's principal role. Very occasionally, continuing management responsibilities took precedence and undermined their ability to act effectively as an AST.

5. Most were able to retain a subject-specific focus for their outreach work but tended to concentrate more on generic aspects of improving teaching and learning in their own schools. A significant minority felt dissatisfied with the balance of their work because they felt it gave too much emphasis to the home school and too little to work in other schools. For the majority of ASTs, however, the balance of their work was good, and they appeared to work very effectively. In almost all cases, their role was matched well to their previous experience and expertise, as in the following example:

*The AST had considerable experience of teaching modern foreign languages (MFL) to able pupils in a boys' grammar school. His work as an AST in his home school was focused on developing teaching strategies with teachers of other subjects and in supporting NQTs. This work was matched carefully to the school development plan aim of increasing the range of styles of teaching and learning across the school. His outreach work was also effective. For example, he had worked with MFL teachers in a local school in 'special measures' to improve their daily planning, teaching and class management. Another school had decided to introduce a post-16 French course similar to the one the AST had been teaching successfully in his own school. He made a significant contribution through supporting the head of department in drawing up a scheme of work, producing teaching resources, and giving guidance on the standards expected for the qualification.*

6. ASTs spend a high proportion of their time advising other teachers on class organisation and teaching methods, and helping those who are experiencing difficulties in their teaching. Few are involved directly in the appraisal of other teachers; most headteachers, and ASTs themselves, see their role more as supporting and developing teachers rather than assessing them. There are some significant differences between the phases in aspects of deployment. A substantial proportion of those in primary schools, for example, produce and disseminate high quality teaching materials, especially in their home school, as well as advising on and providing INSET. However, fewer primary ASTs are involved in ITT or the induction and mentoring of NQTs, although the numbers are increasing. For many secondary ASTs, this has become an important part of their role.

*One secondary school had suffered from a high turnover of staff, particularly following an inspection that found it to have 'serious weaknesses', and there had been some subsequent reorganisation of teaching posts. The headteacher had been successful in appointing a number of enthusiastic and capable NQTs and saw this as crucial to turning the school around. The ASTs in the school spent a significant amount of their time monitoring and supporting these new teachers. For example, specific training sessions on behaviour management had been run to help them cope in some challenging situations. All NQTs and trainee teachers at the school spoke highly of the quality of this support and were enthusiastic and committed to their own professional development. The school was taken out of the 'serious weaknesses' category and, after two years, was judged to be one of the most improved in the country. Standards were rising rapidly. The headteacher attributed much of this improvement to the work of the ASTs.*

7. The precise balance of time ASTs spend on different activities is difficult to determine as few keep detailed records, and there is often overlap between activities. It is, however, clear that there is considerable variation in the ways in which outreach time is used. Many newly appointed ASTs build up their outreach commitment gradually and sometimes this takes an unacceptably long time to establish, particularly for those in primary schools. This is particularly likely to occur where there is a lack of support from the LEA in making outreach arrangements. Where ASTs are able to use their time most effectively, the schools have built in a high level of flexibility, so that work in the home school or for outreach can be planned in blocks of time and varied according to need and the time available.

8. Secondary school ASTs commonly have two half days dedicated to their support work. A minority of primary schools cover the ASTs' absences particularly effectively by making additional part-time appointments or by using 'floating' teachers. Such teachers are known to the pupils and to the AST which facilitates continuity in the pupils' learning.

*The arrangements in one primary school brought additional benefits. An existing part-time teacher increased their time by one day to cover the AST's class. The teacher was trained and supported by the AST. For the*



*whole of the first term, the AST was able to use her protected day for work in the home school. In this way, she was able to train and work with the part-time teacher for the term. This provided valuable professional development for both, and gave the AST confidence that she was leaving her own class in safe hands while providing support in her own or other schools.*

9. A few primary school headteachers were struggling to cover lessons effectively when the ASTs were working away from their own classrooms, relying on daily supply cover. This sometimes resulted in a deterioration in the behaviour of the pupils. In one school, the headteacher had given up using supply teachers to cover a difficult Year 6 class on the day that the AST was providing outreach support, and took the class herself. This was a far from ideal arrangement as it placed unnecessary additional pressures on the headteacher.

10. Where the LEA managed the outreach time well, tasks were clearly specified, so that the ASTs were sure what they had to do and were able to make the best use of their time.

*In one LEA, the officer with responsibility for ASTs circulated a list to all schools detailing their expertise. He then matched their outreach work to the needs of the schools, partly on the basis of their section 10 inspection report, and partly on the areas identified by the headteachers themselves. The deployment of the ASTs was also related to the action plan the LEA had drawn up as a result of its Ofsted inspection. The ASTs' work formed a significant part of the overall subject advice to schools and was being linked to the specialist schools in the area. The ASTs in this LEA were sharply focused in their work with other schools.*

11. Even where the LEA took a strong role in setting up visits to other schools, the training needs of the teachers and the schools with which the AST worked, and the criteria for measuring their success in meeting these needs, were not always clearly identified. In primary schools, tasks were often imprecisely specified, so that the ASTs were sometimes unsure what to do and did not always make the best use of their time. A few ASTs were sent into schools which were in very challenging circumstances and where there were unreasonable expectations of what they could achieve in a short time.

## Impact on teaching and learning

12. This survey confirmed the finding of the previous inspection that ASTs are mostly good or very good at what they do. Their impact on teaching, learning and the standards achieved by pupils was good or very good in over three quarters of the secondary schools visited and in two thirds of the primary schools. Schools were able to provide more evidence of the impact of ASTs on teaching and learning than on the standards achieved by pupils.

*One secondary AST had drawn up a programme of observation and feedback to a colleague who was not performing effectively in the areas of planning, teaching and class management. In a science lesson she carefully identified the key points that were affecting the way the pupils responded. Her feedback to the teacher at the end of the lesson was thorough. It addressed all the key issues in a way that the class teacher clearly understood; it made accurate judgements on progress made since the last observation, and set targets for the next lesson to be observed. The class teacher was full of praise for the way the AST had helped her make progress after many years of struggling to teach effectively.*

13. Headteachers of schools in 'special measures' or 'serious weaknesses' were generally able to specify clearly the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning that resulted from the input of the AST. The teachers in these schools agreed that their practice had improved significantly as a result of working with the AST. For example, one teacher felt that she had received invaluable advice on dealing with a particularly difficult pupil who regularly disrupted lessons and affected the learning of the whole class. The pupil was now far better behaved and, as a result, the learning of the whole class had improved.

14. Many headteachers were beginning to realise that they needed to gather better information about the ASTs' impact on standards if they were to make judgements about whether or not they provided good value for money. Some reported being so impressed with the effect of an AST on the quality of teaching and learning across the school that they were planning to increase the number of such posts in their school. Headteachers also recognised the benefits that can accrue from having a teacher on the staff who regularly visits other schools and is thereby able to bring back a wider perspective. For example, during some outreach work one AST observed a reception class working with a particular phonics scheme, and suggested that it would be beneficial to trial this scheme at their home school. The school had then adopted the scheme with much success.

15. The work of ASTs was often praised warmly by those in other schools who had contact with them. They were particularly good at encouraging others to do well, and often produced very high quality teaching and learning materials in support of their staff development role.

*One specialist music AST worked alongside a music teacher in another school. The teacher was delighted with the progress his pupils made in a relatively short time and with the progress that he had made as a teacher. He was now confident in leading vocal work, which he had previously found difficult. He was delighted with the quality of support provided by the AST, in particular the teaching materials that she had supplied. He also felt that the behaviour of his pupils had improved. The AST had very high expectations, both in terms of the pupils' musical skills and their behaviour, and these expectations were very clearly conveyed to staff and pupils. The AST had helped by being a good listener, easy to talk to, and a source of valuable ideas. She had given the teacher opportunities to observe her teach, and provided an excellent role model.*

16. Well over three quarters of the training sessions for teachers led by ASTs were good or very good, and none was unsatisfactory. NQTs and trainee teachers often praised the support given to them by ASTs. Much of this was due to the high quality of their mentoring skills. They generally have excellent interpersonal skills and are expert practitioners who can apply their knowledge of effective classroom organisation and management to teaching in a range of subjects.

*In one excellent lesson given by an AST, a group of pupils with special needs had each put together a PowerPoint presentation based on games that they had designed for disabled children. The pupils presented their work to the rest of the class using an interactive whiteboard; the presentation was then evaluated by the AST, the class teacher and other pupils. Standards were remarkably high, and all pupils were extremely confident in their use of the resources. In another lesson, a history teacher, trained by the same AST in the use of information and communication technology (ICT), was observed using ICT to develop historical concepts very effectively with a class. All the teachers interviewed in this school were full of praise for the AST, and felt that they had benefited significantly from his work.*

17. Many headteachers and teachers from outreach schools confirmed that the AST had helped raise pupils' standards, even though the ASTs themselves were often unable to produce much direct evidence to support claims of higher standards. Primary school headteachers, for example, spoke highly of the effect some secondary ASTs had had in raising standards for Key Stage 2 pupils in their specialist subject, often by teaching alongside the class teacher but also by training groups of primary teachers who were not specialists in the subject. This was particularly true in subjects with specialist components in which primary teachers often have little expertise, for example the dance aspect of the PE National Curriculum, or three-dimensional work in art.

18. Only a minority of headteachers and ASTs used records of pupils' progress in order to monitor the effectiveness of the ASTs' interventions. In one school, however, the headteacher held detailed data on pupils' attainment which showed remarkable progress since the appointment of the AST. Much of the improvement was attributed to how the AST had changed the approach to using data to set

targets. In this school, attainment had risen from well below average to well above average when compared with similar schools.

19. The previous survey had found the impact of ASTs in sharing good practice across an LEA or a number of schools to be weak. Much progress had subsequently been made in those LEAs that were active in managing the work of ASTs. For example, one AST had provided training in ICT for teaching assistants in her home school. This had led to significant improvement in the use of ICT in lessons because the teaching assistants had acquired advanced ICT skills. Plans were in place for her to carry out a structured training programme with teaching assistants across the LEA.

## Recruitment

20. Well over 90% of ASTs had been recruited from an existing post in their home school. Headteachers generally appeared to have had little difficulty in attracting suitable internal applicants. Where schools had sought to make an external appointment, they had rarely met with much success. External advertisements were commonly unsuccessful in attracting applications either from those who were already experienced ASTs or from those who showed the potential or willingness to become an AST. Schools in 'special measures' or having 'serious weaknesses' had particular difficulties in attracting suitable applicants. This had also been a problem for such schools at the time of the previous inspection.

21. The profile of age and teaching experience of ASTs differed between primary and secondary schools with secondary ASTs being, on average, older and more experienced. Around two fifths of primary ASTs had taught for ten years or fewer; the corresponding figure for secondary was around a quarter. In contrast, almost a half of secondary ASTs had over 20 years' teaching experience compared with a quarter of those in primary schools. Many primary ASTs see the role as a step towards headship, whereas this is not as common in secondary schools. Around 60% of ASTs had permanent contracts, and this was causing some concern to headteachers as continued funding for the posts became uncertain towards the end of the survey. Those on fixed-term contracts were often dependent upon the extension of additional funding for the continuation of their posts.

22. The majority of headteachers had recruited ASTs either because they wished to retain skilled classroom practitioners, or because they had identified particular development needs in their schools. For example, in secondary schools some had been appointed initially to manage a bid for specialist school status and then to lead on the initiative. There were some unusual but successful examples of recruitment.

*In one school, four ASTs were recruited from heads of department posts, and responsibility for these departments was then given to other teachers. The school was able to keep its good heads of department, albeit in another role, but at the same time to retain and promote younger members*

*of staff to head of department positions, use the experience of the ASTs to strengthen its senior management team, and to support other schools within the LEA, especially its feeder middle schools.*

23. Recruitment of ASTs was only rarely carried out in full cooperation with the LEA and there was often relatively little consultation, especially in primary schools. Where consultation did occur, however, recruitment was usually very well planned, allowing the school to retain good, experienced and enthusiastic teachers, and the LEA to gain access to excellent teachers to disseminate good practice to other schools.

*In one case, a special school and its LEA had appointed one of the school's teachers as an AST to develop work in the area of 14–19 vocational courses for pupils with moderate and severe learning difficulties. The outreach work provided opportunities for the special school's pupils to work with the AST in mainstream schools with other teachers and alongside mainstream pupils. The LEA had supported this appointment because of the potential of the outreach work in fostering inclusion in the mainstream schools.*

24. There has been a significant increase in the number of ASTs nationally since 2001, largely as a result of additional targeted funding. Most headteachers found the financial support adequate to cover supply or temporary teachers and other associated costs involved in the AST carrying out their duties. They could at times see a shortfall in funding beginning to emerge, but this was partly related to uncertainties about supporting the ASTs' movement up the pay spine and to performance-related pay increases in general.

25. There were few other major issues over funding. All headteachers felt that the high quality of the work done in school by the AST justified any additional costs. The vast majority of ASTs stated that they were satisfied with the level of salary they received for the post.

## **Performance management**

26. While all the schools carried out performance management for their teachers, including setting objectives, it was rare for such objectives to include reference to the distinctive features of the AST role. Many schools failed to set appropriate criteria for judging the success of the work of the AST or to establish monitoring and review procedures that took account of the full range of their responsibilities, in particular to include specific reference to outreach work. Although an increasing number of LEAs have introduced systems for monitoring the quality of outreach work, including the use of feedback forms from other teachers, the review of outreach work often relied too heavily on the self-assessment of the ASTs. The LEA had made an input into the performance management of only around one in five secondary ASTs. One LEA officer in charge of ASTs evaluated performance according to an agreed format and against targets, and fed back in writing his judgements to the headteacher of the home schools, but this thoroughness was rare.

27. LEAs were not, in general, involved in the performance management procedures for primary ASTs. Even those that were active in establishing and directing the ASTs' outreach commitment were slow to recognise the implications for the performance management system.

28. In a few cases, the ASTs' performance management arrangements were particularly well-designed and effective. In one primary school, for example:

*The AST had a very clear job description, linked to explicit performance management objectives which covered work in the home school and outreach. Success criteria were set, for example 'to improve by 20% pupils gaining level 2B in the 2002 Key Stage 1 tests in mathematics.' An action plan and training plan were drawn up to support the objectives, and a review held at which her AST role and responsibilities were fully discussed and evaluated, drawing on a range of evidence including monitoring of the outreach work.*

29. Few of the primary ASTs and some, but by no means all, secondary ASTs were aware of the intended relationship between performance management and their movement up the pay spine. The position of individual ASTs on the pay spine varied considerably and was determined by the headteacher, sometimes with guidance from the LEA. The average was scale point 13 in secondary, while in primary the majority were in the points range two to eight. While some moved annually up the pay spine, for others, especially those in small schools, headteachers felt there was little room for movement because of the effect this would have on salary differentials between ASTs and teachers in the leadership group. One headteacher reported that the AST, on point 7, was aware that the school could not sustain her salary, or movement up the pay spine, without an unacceptable knock-on effect on the pay budget. As a result, the AST was considering a movement to a deputy head post elsewhere. The evidence of high quality performance to merit movement up the pay spine was rarely collected systematically through monitoring and review. Consequently, headteachers were not able to make secure judgements about whether or not the ASTs were providing good value for money.

## **Training and support**

30. Only around half of the ASTs had received specific training in their role. Support for ASTs, however, is improving and in some LEAs the training is becoming well-structured. ASTs found training on their roles and responsibilities, codes of conduct, contracts for outreach work, classroom observation, and supporting other teachers, to be particularly valuable. Many also found it useful to attend subject-related INSET. Most met in cluster groups in their LEAs, and found that these meetings provided useful training. For example, one group that specialised in special educational needs met at least once a term to discuss their work and consider examples of good practice. However, many ASTs felt that the hardest part of their

job was in leading whole-school INSET, yet none reported receiving any training in this role.

31. One LEA appointed a consultant to act as training co-ordinator for its 50 ASTs, to advise and support them in their role, including identifying their training needs. Here, the ASTs met as a group for half a day each half-term, to discuss issues and receive training, for example protocols for visiting schools, or updating on the National Strategies. They were also allocated one day per year for professional development which they themselves identified.

## Conclusion

32. In the two years since Ofsted last reported on the work of ASTs, there has been a very considerable increase in their numbers. It is, therefore, particularly encouraging that the scheme continues to recruit highly competent teachers who are able to make a difference in their own and other schools.

33. Some of the concerns identified by the earlier inspection have generally been dealt with satisfactorily. In particular, many of the weaknesses in the organisation of the ASTs' outreach function have been addressed. There remain other matters, however, which continue to require further attention. For example, better use of data on the attainment of pupils and clearer targets for ASTs and those they work with, should enable schools and LEAs to get a firmer grasp on the impact ASTs are having on standards.

34. There are, too, important findings about recruitment and support which cannot be ignored if the initiative is to maintain its momentum. Teachers continue to be very reluctant to apply for AST posts in other schools, especially schools in special measures. Also, arrangements for the performance management and professional development of ASTs pay far too little attention to the distinctive features of their role. Overall, however, this inspection has found much encouraging and effective work done by these skilled teachers, and the examples of good practice which are emerging suggest scope for further development and expansion of the initiative, providing the necessary resources can be made available.