

Education Action Zones:
commentary on the first six zone
inspections -
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INTRODUCTION

1. The first 25 Education Action Zones (EAZs) were designated by the government to begin in September 1998 or January 1999. EAZs are partnerships of schools and other local interests, including business, which have the autonomy and flexibility to harness partners' expertise and develop innovative educational strategies for the benefit of schools and local communities.
2. First-round zones were funded for three years in the first instance, extended to five years if their performance and forward plans were judged by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to display sufficient success and promise of continued progress. They receive a grant from the DfEE of £750,000 per year and are expected to raise a further £250,000 per year from private sources. Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) made initial visits to all first-round zones during the academic year 1999/2000 to acquire preliminary evidence of their work.
3. Six first-round EAZs were inspected in autumn 2000, in what was usually their sixth term of operation: Blackburn with Darwen; Halifax; Kitts Green and Shard End (Birmingham); North Southwark; Salford and Trafford; Weston-super-Mare. The zones for inspection were chosen to reflect a spread of size and location. All had been approved by the DfEE for extension before the inspection.
4. The inspections were carried out by HMI using a published framework.¹ The work of the zone was evaluated in relation to **the effectiveness of its management** (including planning, partnerships, monitoring and evaluation, and dissemination) and **the impact of its activities** (including the match to the zone's objectives, links with other improvement work, the contribution to raising standards and promoting inclusion, and cost-effectiveness and sustainability).
5. This commentary is based on the findings of the six inspections.²

¹ *Framework for the Inspection of Education Action Zones*, OFSTED 2000; available on the OFSTED website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

² The individual reports can be found on the OFSTED website.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

6. The zones inspected are making some useful contributions to raising standards in schools, though they are not yet doing so consistently. All have effective elements within their programmes and, in four of the zones, the overall impact of their work is good. Activities tend to be stronger and their benefits greater in primary schools than in secondary schools. Management is now mostly satisfactory after what was a difficult start in most zones, although there are weaknesses in the monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of initiatives in all of the zones.
7. Working to a tight timetable, zones were expected to draw together schools and other partners in order to devise and run programmes that would tackle entrenched problems of underachievement and social exclusion in disadvantaged areas. Among the schools are many where standards have been at a relatively low level and some judged by inspections to have serious weaknesses or to be in need of special measures.
8. Zones were introduced to enable schools to work together and with other agents in a focused, integrated and radical fashion. Their introduction was accompanied by some concern about their role and their relationships with existing policies and structures, for example those for teachers' pay and conditions, school governing bodies, LEAs and education-business partnerships. They were to complement and not duplicate other improvement programmes in areas where there were often many such programmes funded from different sources. They were expected to innovate and, at the same time, to produce tangible results rapidly. They needed to appoint staff, set up organisational arrangements and establish new patterns of working appropriate to their period of funding.
9. The inspection of these six zones indicates that, in the main, following early difficulties affecting four of them in particular, they have made reasonable progress nearly two years into their five-year life. Commitment and energy have been in good supply and participation by schools and the support offered by partners are now generally at a high level.
10. Some zones have made more consistent progress and had a greater impact than others. They have not often been test-beds for genuinely innovative action. What they have offered has sometimes been new to the schools or the area. More often, they have offered programmes which enhance or intensify existing action, such as that through the national strategies for literacy and numeracy and for the improvement of information and communication technology (ICT) provision and capability. Their impact has been greater in the primary schools, which are by far the majority of the schools involved, than in the secondary schools.
11. Among the features which account for the more successful or promising work are these:

- planning that is based on a commitment to shared action by schools and other partners, but also on an understanding of individual schools' needs and a capacity to respond quickly to those needs when required;
- good communication and consultation, ensuring that teachers, as well as representatives of other agencies, have a role in the development and implementation of policy;
- good links with other improvement work, especially that sponsored by the LEA, for example through its data service, literacy and numeracy consultants and school advisers;
- programmes focusing on a small number of well-targeted, practical activities with a straightforward connection with clear, agreed objectives and with a realistic prospect of impact beyond the life of the zone;
- good use of effective specialist teachers and other support staff;
- an approach that minimises the additional burden on schools of organising and administering new provision while keeping the zone's own overheads modest;
- astute management by the schools of the additional resources and expertise;
- processes of monitoring and evaluation which quickly inform decisions about changes needed in the activities and aid systematic dissemination of and debate about practice.

12. These features were not demonstrated consistently well by the zones inspected and, in the practice of a minority of the zones, a few of them were largely missing. Although the profiles of zones' strengths and weaknesses differed, some common recommendations for improvement made in the reports included the need to:

- make better use of data in deciding how and where to direct action;
- differentiate programmes and the funding associated with them according to need;
- reduce the spread of activities;
- intensify and deepen attention to the needs of secondary schools;
- integrate zone action plans and initiatives into school development plans;
- give more deliberate support to schools' management of improvement;

- introduce better monitoring of activities against clearer success criteria in order to inform decision-making and dissemination;
- give more consideration to the sustainability of the activities and of their impact.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ZONE MANAGEMENT

Planning, ways of working and use of resources

13. Zones have an Action Forum which is responsible for their activities. In each of the zones inspected, forum members represent a wide range of local interests and the great majority of them are committed to the zone's work. Local business people often play a significant role in the leadership of the forum. To enable the involvement of all the schools and partners, some forums were large. This often made them cumbersome for decision-making; responding to this, all the zones, some more quickly than others, have created committees with delegated powers. At the outset headteachers did not always have sufficient representation in zone management structures. All the zones have now introduced ways of ensuring that headteachers – and, occasionally, other school staff - are more closely involved in developing plans.
14. Each zone has an action plan, approved by the DfEE, which incorporates its objectives and a programme of activities through which it intends to achieve them. In almost all cases, the objectives were initially wide-ranging and the programmes of activities on which zones started were too ambitious to be realised within their lifetime and resources. All of the zones have now refined their programmes, but some elements of them remain over-ambitious or vague, or both.
15. In four of the zones there are now clear links between objectives and most activities, with success criteria against which progress can be checked. In other cases, the activities are inadequately linked to the objectives and important elements are not being addressed. In the best practice, the zone's activities are incorporated into individual school development plans.
16. All zones have set overall targets for attainment and some have done so for attendance and exclusions. At best, these are incorporated in individual school targets which reflect the school's baseline position, the LEA's expectations and an additional element which takes account of the zone's input. However, three zones did not initially have access to adequate data and had only recently begun to acquire it. At the time of the inspections, targets were up-to-date, and their basis was clear to all schools, in only one zone.
17. Two of the zones were able to put their programmes of activities in place quickly. The other zones made a slow start in appointing staff, building a relationship with schools, and agreeing and running programmes of activities.

18. The management of funding and the creation of adequate accounting systems were difficult for all the zones in their first year of operation. There was debate about zones' liability to pay value-added tax. These problems led to uncertainties about the exercise of financial responsibility, delays in clearing accounts, expenditure of grant money at short notice and, in one case, substantial investment in consultancy. The situation is now much improved. The National Audit Office has cleared all first year accounts and all the zones inspected have better financial systems in place.
19. All zones are expected to raise at least £250,000 a year, in cash or in kind, from private sector sponsors. Four of the zones inspected have done so and one of these, Southwark, has substantially exceeded its target this year. Several zones have also helped schools and communities to acquire additional funding, for example through Single Regeneration Budget and applications for specialist school status. For the two-year zone extension, the grant basis has changed. Zones will receive an annual grant of £500,000, with additional government grant matching contributions from the private sector on a pound for pound basis up to £250,000. Two of the zones inspected were appointing staff specifically to raise sponsorship.
20. The zones' resources are mostly being used efficiently in relation to the key objectives. Definitions of activities and outcomes, and accountability on the part of schools for these, are sometimes too loose. Two zones allocate small amounts to individual school-initiated proposals which match the objectives. This is valued by schools, although it can also prove burdensome where schools have to prepare detailed bids. One zone which, at the outset, delegated significant sums to schools found it difficult to link the schools' activities with its objectives and to achieve coherence in its work.
21. Expenditure on zone management and administration ranged between eight and 18 per cent of the annual budget. The more successful of the zones inspected had lower expenditure on management and administration and were able to devote more of their funding to activities.

Partnerships

22. All the zones have established useful partnerships, particularly with local businesses and with other education providers. Southwark has also established valuable and productive links with national arts organisations based in the area. Individual zones have also benefited from business participation in zone management.
23. Many of the zones arose from LEA proposals, while others have had to establish a relationship with the LEA. In the more effective zones, there are clearly defined links with the LEA at the level of strategy and, usually, at the level of individual activities. In two, a close strategic relationship with the LEA, combined with effective existing structures, supported zone development from the outset. Others - including Salford and Trafford, where two LEAs are involved - have had to work harder to create productive links.

24. Relationships between the zones and almost all of their schools are good, as a result of the ability of zone staff to work effectively in the schools and respond to their needs. Links between schools in the zones are generally weaker, notably between the primary and the secondary schools and between the secondary schools, although there are encouraging signs that schools are seeing the value of working together and sharing practice under the auspices of the zone.

Monitoring and evaluation

25. Monitoring of zone activities is variable at zone level and often weak at school level. Only in two zones is overall monitoring thorough, usually through a combination of clear planning and simple procedures which do not impose an unnecessary burden on schools. At school level, monitoring is most effective where an initiative focuses on a small, specified group of pupils, where a baseline is established at the start of the work and where measurement of progress and feedback on the quality of the provision are integral parts of the activity.
26. Evaluation of zone programmes is not, as yet, rigorous enough. Zones appreciate that their lifetime is short and that they need to know quickly which activities are working and how to alter or terminate those which are not. Their evaluation procedures do not generally put them in a strong position to do so.

Dissemination

27. Dissemination has not been a strong feature in the early stages of zone activity but zones are now beginning to share practice locally and nationally. In some cases, weaknesses in links between schools have hampered dissemination. In others, the lack of knowledge about which activities are having an impact has made it hard for the zone to know what to disseminate. While most zones have developed sound communication systems with schools and other partners, the potential of these to share experiences are not, so far, being fully realised.

THE IMPACT OF ZONES' ACTIVITIES

28. In each inspection, three or four of the zone's activities were investigated as illustrations of its work.

Match with objectives

29. Overall, there is a good match between activities and objectives in half of the zones. The most effective activities are linked directly to schools' and teachers' needs. In Weston-super-Mare, for example, teachers have a high level of involvement in the design of activities which focus on the classroom and on events for pupils. This has ensured the relevance of the zone's work, and has made the sustainability of activities more secure.

30. Activities designed to raise standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools are found in all the zones inspected. These activities are having a beneficial impact in most cases, with specialist teachers adding to classroom teachers' skills and giving them more confidence in using the national strategies. Many zones have also provided classroom assistants to support literacy and numeracy. Their work is effective where they are given training by the zone and have clear targets, working consistently with small groups of pupils. In some cases, their impact is restricted by poor definition of their role and inappropriate use of them by schools.
31. Work with parents to increase their involvement in their children's education is also a common theme. Parents' aspirations are raised where the zone provides them with good, accredited, training. This contributes to the effectiveness of the primary schools who participate; in many cases there are also marked improvements in the school's relationship with the local community.
32. Some zones have run activities in which professionals in the arts work with schools. When related carefully to curriculum programmes, these have had a lasting impact, improving pupils' confidence and teachers' skills. Where they are isolated activities, the impact is weaker.
33. Most zones have devoted substantial resources to ICT, including the purchase of interactive learning systems and digital whiteboards. In all the zones inspected, schools' ICT provision has improved, often from a very low base. Most have also provided expert ICT staff to improve teachers' capability and technical support to keep equipment running. Some of the work, for example in Blackburn with Darwen, has been innovative. ICT developments are much valued by schools. However, most zones have not yet focused sharply enough on using ICT as a tool to support more effective teaching and learning.
34. There is a wide range of other, smaller-scale activities, which are having varying degrees of success. Less effective activities are often poorly co-ordinated; they are characterised by inadequate links with schools' main needs, vague objectives, lack of consideration of training, and insufficient collaboration between participating schools.
35. Zones have found it harder to mount and manage effective activities in secondary schools than in primary schools. There are individual examples of good work on transition to secondary school, on attendance, on multi-agency working and in providing alternative courses for disaffected or lower-attaining pupils at Key Stage 4, but the success of such projects in the zones inspected has so far been limited.
36. In common with schools in similar areas, many zone schools have difficulties in recruiting senior managers and some have weaknesses in management. Four zones have provided management training to address these problems.

In all but one case, this work is helping managers to improve their skills, albeit mostly on a limited scale.

Connections with other improvement work

37. In the majority of the zones, good links have been established with LEA and national improvement work. In the best practice, zone literacy and numeracy expert teachers are able to liaise with LEA co-ordinators and to train alongside them, ensuring consistency in their work. The situation in ICT is more complex: as well as the zone's own programmes, schools have to co-ordinate national activities, including New Opportunities Fund training and National Grid for Learning resources.

Contribution to raising standards and promoting inclusion

38. In the zones inspected, activities are contributing, to a greater or lesser degree, to improvements in primary schools. Attainment in literacy and numeracy in zone primary schools has generally risen at least as fast as, and sometimes at well above, the national rate, and zone work has supported this improvement. This encouraging picture is not generally reflected in zone secondary schools. Some schools have made progress at Key Stage 3, but the gap between zone schools and the national average is not closing overall. The situation in Key Stage 4 is similar.
39. Work to involve parents more closely in their children's education is successful in several zones, and should have long-term benefits. Most of the zones are also pursuing some valuable if small-scale activities to tackle disaffection amongst older pupils. Whilst there are benefits for the individuals concerned, there are few instances of significant zone-wide improvements in pupils' attendance. This remains an issue for the zones, particularly in the secondary sector.

Cost-effectiveness and sustainability

40. Most zone work seen is cost-effective. Some activities which cost relatively little, for example, work with parents, represent good use of resources. Investments in specialist teachers who work across zone schools, although expensive, is usually repaid by the improvements in provision which result. A few high-cost activities, for example the provision of classroom assistants, have not yet made a clear impact in some zones.
41. Only two of the zones inspected have given sufficient thought to the sustainability of programmes beyond their lifetime. These zones have started to adapt their work to transfer responsibility to the participating schools and to reduce the reliance on zone resources.