

LEA strategies to challenge and support schools with weaknesses, especially where pupils are underachieving or where high standards could be achieved for larger numbers of pupils



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Introduction

Background

The legal context	1	<p>The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 highlights the ways in which local authorities should help to raise standards. Key tasks for local authorities in this respect include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• preparing education strategic plans focused on proposals for raising standards of education for pupils and improving the performance of schools;• monitoring the standards of performance at each school and drawing the school's attention to any concerns;• supporting schools and challenging them to do better;• disseminating good practice between schools; and• intervening in schools when monitoring has identified weaknesses or underperformance that the school is not addressing with enough rigour.
LEA intervention	2	<p>LEA intervention means any action that the LEA takes to get a school to do things, which, left to itself, it would not do. In some schools, the LEA might make decisions about the schools' conduct and operation in areas normally reserved for decision by the school itself, such as the appointment of additional governors.</p>

The survey

The survey	3	<p>In autumn 2004, Estyn conducted a survey into the strategies used by local education authorities (LEAs) to challenge and support schools with weaknesses, especially where pupils are underachieving or where higher standards could be achieved for larger numbers of pupils.</p>
The purpose of this report	4	<p>The purpose of the survey was to identify good practice and the factors that contribute to effective challenge and support by LEAs. This report is intended to inform national policy and to help local education authorities evaluate and improve their provision.</p>
The evidence used for the survey	5	<p>The report draws on evidence from LEA inspections of school improvement in 20 LEAs and documentation from all 22 LEAs such as the Education Strategic Plan and Supplementary Education Strategic Plan.</p>

During the survey inspectors visited a sample of 5 LEAs and 8 schools. Inspectors examined documents and held discussions with officers from local education authorities, with teachers and head teachers.

- 6 The report highlights the key features of good practice and illustrates these with case studies.

In addition, for more information on how low performing schools have improved their standards of education; please see the Estyn report on low performing schools 2004-2005.

Main findings

The vision and goals of LEAs and the structures developed to deliver them

Features of best practice 7

What marks the best LEAs is how well they fulfil their strategic leadership of school improvement and convert their strategic vision and goals into effective practice.

In the best practice, the following features are evident:

- the LEA's policy documents state clearly the key role that learning has to play, for example, in the development of a healthy community, economic regeneration and sustainable development;
- the LEA management structure reflects the importance of school improvement by ensuring all education service teams play their part in raising standards in schools;
- the LEA's decision-making has credibility with heads and governors, even when decisions are not popular with some of them;
- the LEA takes careful regard of the Code of Practice on LEA-School relations 1999 so that it works in close partnership with its schools to raise standards;
- the LEA monitors schools' performance effectively and addresses under-performance through support, challenge and, in a few schools, direct intervention;
- headteachers, teachers and governors understand clearly the LEA's criteria for different degrees of support;
- schools trust the LEAs to use information sensitively and all schools agree to the transparent use of information; and
- the LEA has a well reasoned rationale for how any additional financial support will be targeted at individual schools.

LEA systems for identifying areas for improvement

Features of good systems	8	<p>Effective LEAs have good systems for identifying:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• areas of weakness that are common to schools across the LEA, such as standards in key skills, attendance or behaviour;• individual schools that are low-performing or under-performing;• individual subjects in which standards are below those for similar schools or for other subjects in the same school; and• aspects of management and teaching that are relatively weak in individual schools.
Features of the most effective systems	9	<p>The most effective systems include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• a profile of information on each school including an analysis of performance data, financial data, and provision for special educational needs;• the use of performance data to robustly challenge the targets set by schools for pupils;• the scrutiny and analysis of Estyn inspection reports;• reports of regular visits to schools by LEA senior officers, link officers, and subject specialist advisers, that are discussed with governors and are available to elected members;• attendance by LEA officers and advisers at governors' meetings; and• meetings and case conferences about particular issues in individual schools.

Taking effective action to improve schools

Targeting resources	10	<p>After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of all schools, effective LEAs target human and financial resources in proportion to need.</p>
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Ensuring that schools understand the criteria for support	11	As this means that some schools will get more support than others, good LEAs make sure that all schools understand the criteria for additional support. They ensure that successful schools, which do not need much extra support, remain part of the process of school improvement within the LEA.
Strategies to improve schools with weaknesses	12	<p>Good LEAs employ a wide range of strategies to improve schools with weaknesses. These include challenge and support which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • targets support at specific areas of weakness identified from analysis of examination data and other information held by the LEA; • involves senior management of the LEA in challenging schools over which the LEA has concerns; • improves behaviour and attendance (including the co-ordination of alternative curriculum arrangements for pupils in key stage 4); • develops schools' capacity for self-evaluation; • improves learning, teaching and assessment; • enhances provision in individual subjects; • develops pupils' literacy and thinking skills; • encourages a culture of learning through facilitating networks of teachers who meet regularly to share good practice; • supports leaders and managers, with strong intervention in schools in which management is weak; and • increases support for local schools within their communities.

Recommendations

The Welsh Assembly Government should continue to:

- 13 work with LEAs to produce comparative data on school performance to enable LEAs to identify weaknesses in schools and in aspects of the work of schools; and
- 14 facilitate the sharing of good practice in the relevant areas through local and national conferences, seminars and workshops.

LEAs should ensure that they:

- 15 identify areas of weakness in schools by compiling a profile of information on each school, including an analysis of performance data, financial data and provision for special educational needs;
- 16 seek the agreement of schools to the open sharing of performance data and benchmark information between all schools in the authority, governors and elected members;
- 17 target human and financial resources in proportion to the differing needs of individual schools;
- 18 use the profiles to challenge, support and, as a last resort, intervene directly in schools where standards of achievement are low, or when leadership and management are weak;
- 19 develop schools' capacity for honest self-evaluation that is linked to the identification of training needs and, where appropriate, to the LEA's school review cycle;
- 20 work closely with schools to improve learning, teaching and assessment in areas of weakness that are common to schools across the LEA, such as standards in key skills and behaviour management;
- 21 facilitate networks that help teachers to share good practice;
- 22 disseminate good practice through publications or websites in which individual schools describe successful initiatives; and
- 23 use highly effective headteachers and practitioners to work alongside headteachers and teachers in schools with weaknesses.

Case studies

The use of data to target support for specific areas of weakness

Electronic systems	24	<p>In one LEA, which has a very good track record of successful monitoring and support in schools, the school advisory service has a well-developed electronic system for recording information about its schools. The information is derived from the analysis of performance data and officers' visits to schools. The system includes information about each school on ten key areas of school performance, including standards, attendance, behaviour, and leadership and management. Each of these areas is graded to identify the extent to which there are issues that need to be addressed.</p>
Information provided through the system	25	<p>The system provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an effective framework for recording information, which officers use to come to clear judgments about the performance of each school; and• clear information about the nature and extent of the support, challenge and intervention that the advisory service provides for schools.
Developments of the system	26	<p>The LEA continues to develop the range and scope of performance information that it uses. Recent work has enabled the LEA to identify groups of pupils with similar needs, and to identify common areas of weakness across schools within particular subjects. The LEA takes contextual information, such as gender, ethnicity and language into account in interpreting the data. The information has extended further the LEA's ability to prioritise its support in schools, and to identify general issues for in-service training.</p>
Other uses of the system	27	<p>The LEA keeps a detailed electronic record of training sessions and of support provided by officers in schools and other settings in the LEA. This record ensures that the support and challenge provided by officers can build effectively on what has gone before. The LEA maintains systems that offer much potential for evaluating the impact of the challenge and support in schools.</p>
Open sharing of data	28	<p>Several LEAs openly share performance data and benchmark information on individual schools between all schools in the authority. Schools trust these LEAs to use information sensitively and agree to the transparent use of information.</p>

The impact of open sharing of data on school improvement	29	These LEAs report that this approach has a significant impact on school improvement. Headteachers of schools with similar levels of social disadvantage are contacting colleagues to find out why they having greater success in addressing issues such as the literacy of boys. There is no hiding place for schools in which pupils are underachieving or where higher standards could be achieved for larger numbers of pupils.
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Improving behaviour and attendance, including the coordination of an alternative curriculum

Targeting attendance support officers	30	One LEA in South West Wales employs assistant attendance support officers who are additional to the education welfare officers. The authority prioritises Welsh Assembly Government grant funding for these posts. Each attendance officer is linked directly to several secondary schools. They have carefully specified roles to support pupils who are reluctant attendees and work with their families on strategies that change the attitude of the pupil and their families towards school. These support officers have had a positive impact in terms of a significant improvement in attendance in the LEA's secondary schools. Secondary school attendance is one of the best in Wales and, fewer days are lost through unauthorised absence than in any other authority.
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Making the curriculum relevant to the needs of all learners	31	Another LEA has initiated a key stage 4 alternative curriculum programme for a group of its schools. The programme provides accredited courses in a range of venues, including further education colleges, training companies and the schools themselves. Up to twelve pupils from each school, follow a course of their choice on one day a week. The schools themselves are responsible for tracking and monitoring pupils, and each school has a co-ordinator with time allocated for monitoring, mentoring, tutorial sessions etc. The initiative has significantly improved the attendance, motivation and achievement of the pupils involved and hence of the schools as a whole.
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Support for school self-evaluation

Use of the Estyn Common Inspection Framework	32	One LEA has appropriately placed much emphasis on the need for schools to develop effective self-evaluation procedures. It has developed a framework for self-evaluation for schools, based on Estyn's common inspection framework, and is providing training for schools in its use.
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The LEA framework provides advice to schools in grading different aspects of their work. The LEA expects all schools to carry out regular self-evaluation using the framework, and it is a topic for one of the termly visits of each school's link adviser.

Using the views of pupils	33	The LEA is developing a way of enabling each school to include the views of pupils in its self-evaluation. As part of this, the LEA has canvassed the opinions of about 4000 secondary pupils on their education and passed an analysis of these on to their respective schools.
Linking school self-evaluation to the cycle of LEA reviews	34	Some North Wales LEAs, have promoted self-evaluation for several years and supported it with extensive, helpful documentation. This documentation includes examples of self-evaluation reports for individual subjects and for the whole school. The LEAs' recommended procedures for self-evaluation were developed by a working party and piloted in several schools before being published. These LEAs supplement self-evaluation with a detailed review of each school by a small team of LEA advisers about every five or six years, usually in the middle of Estyn's inspection cycle. This review is carefully linked with the school's own self-evaluation.
Training schools in self-evaluation	35	Another LEA has provided training on a model of self-evaluation that has been successfully implemented in a number of schools in the LEA. Schools have also received effective support in developing other self-evaluation procedures where the head and staff feel that these meet their needs better.

Support for improving learning, teaching and assessment

Examples of successful initiatives	36	<p>In recent years, one LEA serving a large urban area has placed particular emphasis on improving teaching and learning. The LEA's initiatives have had a profound effect on teaching methods in some schools and have helped to improve pupils' learning significantly. These initiatives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• support for improvement in key stages 1 to 3 in key skills and in science;• a key stage 2/3 transition project, which has helped improve curriculum links between primary and secondary schools;• a directory of good practice for dissemination to other
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schools, in which individual schools describe their own successful initiatives; and

- a focus on the need for secondary schools to improve their learning and teaching in key stage 4, including the encouragement to establish a 'Learning Forum' in each secondary school, in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas between departments.

Making use of effective practitioners

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Another LEA disseminates good practice by enabling effective to teach on training courses, to work alongside teachers in other schools and to pilot initiatives in their own schools. The LEA has a good track record of promoting a range of initiatives that enable schools to work directly with nationally and internationally recognised educationalists and generate much thought and discussion in schools about effective teaching and learning. The programme has led to teachers developing working links with schools and higher education institutions in Wales, the rest of the United Kingdom, Europe and the USA. There is a strong sense of partnership between schools and the LEA. With very few exceptions, schools engage in, and benefit from, the initiatives of the LEA, which is one of the highest performing LEAs in Wales.

Supporting transition

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In several LEAs, link advisers provide good support to primary and secondary schools in agreeing, planning and teaching the curriculum to support the transition between Year 6 and Year 7. This work has done much to improve the curricular links and reduce the achievement gap between key stages 2 and 3.

Enhancing provision in individual subjects

LEAs facilitating networks for sharing good practice

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A few LEAs facilitate networks for sharing good practice. They organise regular meetings of teachers from secondary subject departments. In subjects for which they do not have their own LEA advisers, they organise a programme for these meetings, sometimes by buying in specialists from other authorities or organisations. One LEA, for example, organises an annual consortium day on which all secondary schools have subject meetings.

Advisory teachers	40	Many LEAs make good use of advisory teachers, who are seconded from their schools for a year or more to work alongside teachers in other schools. In one example, an LEA has provided a secondary school with advisory teachers to act as mentors for several heads of department who needed to improve their effectiveness in carrying out their middle-management roles.
The performance of secondary school subject departments	41	Two LEAs in northwest Wales have very good knowledge of the performance of individual subject departments in each secondary school. Subject advisers write a brief annual report on each school's subject results, and visit secondary subject departments that require support.
Targeting subject specialist advisers	42	In one secondary school, the LEA used performance data to identify a department that had been under-performing. As a result, the LEA provided a lot of effective support. This included arranging for the school to obtain curriculum materials and plans for units of work from a successful department in another school. Subject specialist advisers visited the school to observe and discuss classroom practice with teachers. Advisers marked and discussed samples of coursework with teachers using external examination criteria, so that the teachers developed a better understanding of the standards that pupils should achieve.
Targeting additional funding	43	Another LEA provided specialist help in a secondary school department that had been achieving consistently poor examination results. Short-term support included paying for an additional specialist teacher. This meant that the department could engage in regular observation and discussion of teaching in classes and focus attention on particular groups of underachieving pupils. In the longer term, the LEA helped the department to develop pupils' learning and thinking skills, and supported teaching and learning in the subject in partner primary schools. The impact of this initiative is evident in recent improvements in pupils' assessment scores in key stage 3.

Developing pupils' literacy and thinking skills

LEA initiatives	44	One west Wales LEA, under the title 'Ffocws ar ddysgu' has prioritised the development of pupils' thinking skills. It has introduced a range of strategies in a large proportion of schools, aimed at improving thinking skills. LEA advisers have provided support and training for school staff, with schools gradually taking on the management and development of initiatives. The LEA's aim is to ensure that teachers develop an improved understanding of how pupils
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learn.

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| Supporting pupils in year 7 | 45 | In one school in this LEA, teachers focused on learning activities with a target group of year 7 pupils that emphasised oral work and active participation in pairs and small groups. The speaking and listening skills of the target group developed much better than those of other year 7 pupils, and the reading ages of the group increased more. The success of the programme has led to its extension to all year 7 pupils. All teachers have received training in the teaching and learning skills adopted and there has been extensive discussion on teaching and learning styles in all subject departments. |
| Supporting pupils in years 3 and 4 | 46 | In a number of its primary schools, the LEA has provided advisory teacher and LSA support to help schools improve the language skills of lower achieving pupils in years 3 and 4. The pupils involved have made significant progress and the initiative has developed the skills of school staff so that they can continue to use the methods adopted in the project when LEA support is no longer available. |

Support and training for leaders and managers, with strong intervention in schools in which management is weak

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| Using headteachers as mentors | 47 | Many LEAs arrange for experienced headteachers to act as mentors for new headteachers. In the best instances, mentors regularly discuss with new headteachers management issues they face and the effectiveness of methods employed to address them. One LEA places 'lead practitioners' for a period of time in some schools to work alongside longer-serving headteachers whose leadership and management is less effective than it should be. In several instances, the in-depth advice and guidance that the lead practitioner has provided has resulted in significant, lasting improvements in the headteacher's management skills. |
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Case conferences 48 In another LEA, schools causing concern are the subject of regular formal meetings of a specific group of LEA officers, including the school link adviser, finance officer, personnel officer and a member of the LEA inclusion team. This allows the LEA to consider all issues influencing the school's performance at the same time. For example, the LEA inclusion service identified weak special needs provision in certain schools. As a result, the LEA targeted additional support to these schools from the school improvements service for special needs. In addition, the LEA personnel service helped the schools to address difficulties in appointing SEN specialists.

Encouraging parents and communities to support their local school

Catchment and admission policies 49 Often, LEAs are keen to encourage schools to implement strategies for improving learning and teaching, in order to increase the confidence of parents and pupils in their local community school. This encourages pupils to opt to attend their local school rather than another some distance away, and thus helps to improve the longer-term viability of schools that might otherwise suffer from falling rolls. In order to support these moves, a few LEAs have given very careful attention to secondary catchment areas. In one notable example, a school has combined LEA support for raising standards with the development of strong links with partner primary schools and local businesses, and the promotion of adult and community learning on the school site that has encouraged adults to use the school's facilities. Coupled with changes to LEA admission policies that limit the intake from outside the catchment of popular schools, the school now recruits almost all pupils from its catchment, including the more able pupils and those pupils who receive frequent, active support from parents. Over time, this has prevented the school from entering a cycle of decline, and helped it to secure better results. This has in turn improved the reputation of the school and helped the school maintain a cycle of improvement.