

Achieving sustainable improvement in secondary schools

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School Improvement through good practice

**Adrian Percival,
National Director,
School Improvement**



The suite of programmes developed by the National Strategies to support school improvement has grown out of the range of very good practice we have seen across the country. Through our work with School Improvement Partners and with schools that have been underperforming, we have been able to identify the key areas of school improvement that need support.

In particular, to complement the wide range of leadership programmes available, we have developed our school improvement planning guidance (the Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) management guide) and Stronger Management Systems with the objective of giving leaders the tools to turn their vision into a reality. Middle leaders in the core subjects are supported through our Core Plus programme for English, mathematics and science. The very successful Stronger Governance Systems programme fills a clear gap in providing support to governors on their role in school improvement.

Although these resources were developed to support schools that have been underperforming, as you can see from the case studies, the plain good sense of the approaches described are equally applicable to all schools looking for support in aspects of their development. For example, the RAP management guide provides a really firm foundation to help any school with developing its school improvement plan.

Achieving sustainable improvement

The National Strategies' School Improvement programme is playing a key role in supporting school leaders in their commitment to continuous and sustainable improvement.

Working in partnership with local authorities (LAs), the National Strategies is not only working to ensure high standards and progress in schools across the country, but supporting and challenging the implementation of effective school improvement strategies.

The programmes of support available include the Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) management guide, Stronger Management Systems (SMS), Stronger Governance Systems (SGS) and Core Plus English, mathematics and science – all of which are helping schools to achieve sustainable improvement.

Raising Attainment Plan

The RAP is designed to be used in schools where the priority is to raise pupil attainment and accelerate progress, but its approach can be used by any school needing to improve the quality and impact of planning with respect to any identified priority, and subsequently improve outcomes for its pupils.

As well as providing longer-term strategic direction, the RAP is a tactical short-term plan with a particular focus on increasing the number of pupils who achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C, including English and mathematics.

The RAP management guide, along with a range of other resources available on the National Strategies web area, outlines the essential features for effective improvement planning. It provides

'RAP management groups have been so successful that they have spread across the system to high-performing and primary schools'

National Challenge Advisers Steering Group, Feb 2010.

quality standards, exemplification and guidance on everything from setting objectives to monitoring and evaluation.

An important aspect of the RAP guidance is the establishment of a RAP management group (RMG). The RMG is set up as the key group holding corporate responsibility for the initial implementation and subsequent monitoring of the RAP, ensuring it is kept on track. Membership of the RMG includes the headteacher, core subject leaders and a selection of other staff members. The core task of this group is to ensure delivery of the priorities identified according to the timescale set out within the RAP.

Stronger Management Systems

Meanwhile the Stronger Management Systems (SMS) programme, developed by the National Strategies in 2008 and fully revised early this year (2010), is designed to highlight the important

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Core Plus English, mathematics and science

The Core Plus programme consists of specialised materials to support leaders of core subjects – English, mathematics and science – and their teams, to ensure high-quality teaching and learning, including the effective use of the Secondary Frameworks.

Each aspect of Core Plus provides a CPD programme of six elements. Each element has been written to support core departments in addressing particular development needs to be selected, tailored and mediated to support the improvement work identified in the school's RAP.

The elements address ways to bring about long-term, sustainable improvement alongside related, short-term actions. Each element describes and exemplifies a process by which the department can work together over a short, specified period of time to bring about improvement and consistency in an aspect of its work, so that pupils' progress accelerates, standards rise and these improvements are sustained.

role leaders and managers at all levels play in raising standards. It focuses on practical and essential elements of management and provides materials to help schools 'review, refocus and improve' their management systems and structures.

The materials are intended to be used flexibly by schools to achieve short-term impact, focus and alignment, alongside longer-term capacity-building and sustainable improvement.

The suite of materials starts with an overview and user guide aimed at headteachers and School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and features ten elements that explore the ten key aspects of management systems and structures.

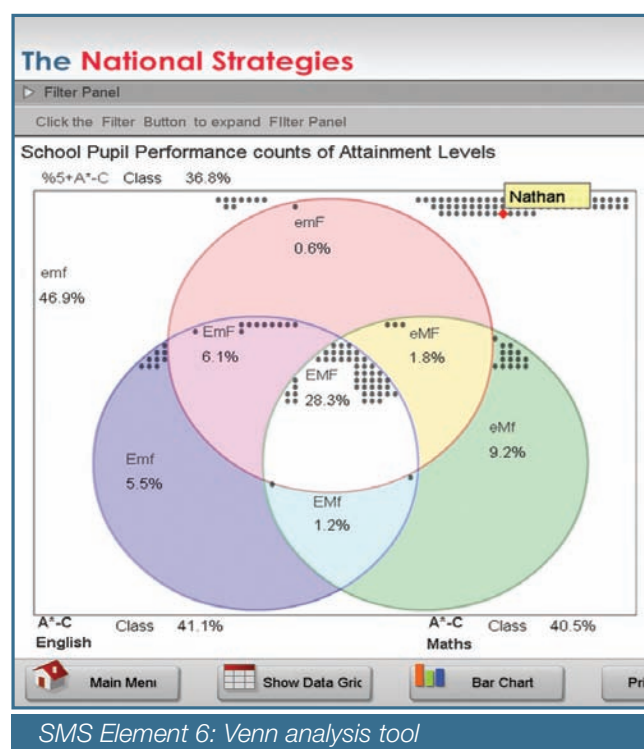
These elements cover a wide range of areas, including high-quality and effective line management structures and practice, achieving consistent policy and practice across the whole school, specifically in relation to teaching and learning, behaviour and attendance and assessment for learning, and monitoring and evaluation for impact and improvement.

Every quality standard is accompanied by exemplification and linked continuing professional development (CPD) materials and activities to assist schools in developing areas where they need further development.

It's important to remember, however, that schools aren't expected to work their way through every section of the materials. Rather, schools are encouraged to focus on the elements applicable to them and use the materials to support them in areas of management where they need to improve.

Element 6 features the highly effective Venn analysis tool, used to track those pupils who are on target to achieve 5+ GCSEs at grades A* –C including English and mathematics and those who aren't. It divides pupils into eight groups each denoted by the letters E (for English), M (for mathematics) and F (for five GCSEs), in a mixture of lower and upper case where upper case shows the group are on track to achieve, and lower case that they are not. For example, EmF is the group of pupils tracked to achieve English and five GCSEs but not mathematics, whereas EMf shows those pupils on target to get both English and mathematics but not the five GCSEs they need.

The Venn analysis provides an automated analysis of the performance of all pupils across a cohort not just those at the borderline. This analysis can then be filtered by pupil profile according to gender and Free School Meals allowing schools to identify and support underachieving and vulnerable groups of pupils within each cohort.



Raising Attainment Plan

Up until two years ago, the idea of using the Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) guidance materials at Arden School, an outstanding school in Solihull in the West Midlands, hadn't crossed headteacher Ann Green's mind.

But after using the materials at a struggling neighbouring school, she firmly believes that they are suitable for use by all schools.

In January 2008, as well as running Arden School, Ann was asked to take over Park Hall School, also in Solihull, which had been in special measures for four years.

Soon afterwards Ann and her team duly wrote the school's RAP – a tactical short-term plan with a particular focus on increasing the number of pupils who achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C, including English and mathematics. At the start of its partnership with Arden School, the number of pupils achieving this at Park Hall was 22 per cent (31 per cent gained five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C).

As well as providing the Park Hall team with a detailed and precise plan to improve pupil outcomes, the RAP guidance also helped them to monitor and evaluate progress and to drive improvement through staff performance

'This approach made a real difference'

management processes.

"Park Hall had been at quite a low ebb and what the RAP did was to stop any of us losing clear sight of what we were there to do – which was to enable children who had been poorly served in the past to achieve," explained Ann.

"It helped the school to really focus on its key priorities, such as inclusion, attendance, behaviour, children's pathways and building much closer relationships with parents and the community.

"At the same time it helped us to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and ensuring that every child was tracked very carefully. We could closely identify who was responsible for each of these things. Everything was dated, with a very specific person taking responsibility for it, and every week the senior leadership team met to assess exactly where we were on the plan.

"The third area we focused on was data analysis. The RAP was crucial in identifying which children

we were going to do particular work with. In the past there had been a bit of a scattergun approach and the RAP steered the intervention, making sure that the right people were doing the right things.

"This approach made a real difference. There had been a danger in the past that the school felt it had to try and cover everything. But a school in that sort of situation needs a very clear and very precise focus – and that is the strength of the RAP. We refused to allow ourselves to be thrown off task or to be diverted from the key priorities."

An invaluable resource

The RAP made a huge impact on Park Hall. In 2009, 84 per cent of its pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C, while 34 per cent gained five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C including English and mathematics. Last autumn (2009) it became Park Hall Academy (Arden School is its sponsor) and Ann now works as consultant headteacher across both schools.

Ann found the RAP so invaluable at Park Hall that she has now chosen to use its processes and structure at Arden School too.

"We call it a School Development Plan, rather than a RAP, but it looks and feels like a RAP," said Ann.

"My work at Park Hall completely shaped the way I set up the RAP at Arden. We have 100 per cent of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C here but the RAP helps us to be more precise and get more done. Having this clarity about people's responsibility and accountability makes it much easier for everyone to do their jobs and we can track the impact very precisely."

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Stronger Management Systems

At City of Ely Community College, principal Catherine Jenkinson-Dix was convinced that the Stronger Management Systems (SMS) materials would help to raise attainment and increase progress.

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Catherine took up her post at the 1,250-pupil rural community college in Ely, Cambridgeshire, in April 2009 and was keen to open up a debate about school improvement.

She was convinced that the SMS materials would help the college to reflect on and improve its management systems and structures. As an experienced headteacher – she previously worked for the National Strategies and City of Ely Community College is her second headship – she knew it was vital to get the school to look itself more “critically.”

“When I arrived, the school had been on an improvement trajectory and results and outcomes had gone up, but I was conscious that there were some clear things that structurally weren’t in place,” she explained.

“For instance, I wasn’t clear that it had a real sense of purpose and pace about what it was doing and I felt that some of the elements of Stronger Management Systems would be really helpful. I wanted to stimulate focused debate and discussion and get the school to reflect critically on itself, which was something I had identified as an issue.

“I also wanted to make sure that I was getting my team on board with how we were going to need to work to increase the pace, and to raise this awareness with middle leaders.”

Rather than working their way through the SMS materials, Catherine and her senior leadership team chose to look at the elements of management systems and structures related to their own school’s needs that they felt needed closer scrutiny.

‘The real measure of impact will be on pupil outcomes’

“We worked with the elements that we felt were priority areas,” she said.

“This isn’t a resource where you start at page one and work through it until you get to the end. It’s a flexible resource that you can genuinely tailor to the specific needs of your school. It’s very much like when you are planning teaching. You take things that are going to work for you for a particular aspect.

“We used the sections of Stronger Management Systems on high-quality and effective line management structures and practice and effective performance management and objective setting informed by whole-school priorities. We have also used Assessment for Learning (AfL), done some work on tracking pupil progress and are currently looking at the quality standards used in lesson planning.”

Although it’s too early to judge the impact that using the SMS materials has had, Catherine is delighted by the fact that she and her team have been able to tailor the resource according to the college’s priorities.

“The real measure of impact will be on pupil outcomes,” she said. “But I think that this resource has raised awareness and provided frameworks and thinking about systematic approaches for some core fundamentals that I expect middle leaders to be doing as part of their leadership role.

“These materials are really helpful for schools whatever their spectrum. I think they can promote discussion and debate about all the things that are fundamental to effective and sustainable school improvement.”

Core Plus English

Core Plus English consists of six elements with the aim of supporting English departments in addressing particular development needs. To get the most out of these, it is important that each element is carefully selected, tailored and mediated to support the improvement work identified in the school's Raising Attainment Plan.

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Each element of Core Plus is designed to help focus the work of the department, alongside support and coaching from external consultants, colleagues from other departments or schools and National Strategies regional advisers. Subject leaders are encouraged, however, to tailor the programme to their pupils' needs.

At St Wilfrid's Catholic High School in Sefton, Merseyside, Core Plus English has helped to raise the number of pupils gaining grade C and above in GCSE English from 32 per cent in 2007 to 55 per cent last year (2009). Results are expected to be even better this year (2010).

Karen Wallis, head of English, chose to focus on element 4b of Core Plus English – improving pupils' attainment at GCSE through assessing and tracking progress. As well as delivering "very focused

'The children felt lessons were pacy and much more tailored towards them'

and targeted lessons linked to the assessment objectives" to the Year 10 and 11 cohorts. The English department was also able to bring in an extra teacher in the run-up to the GCSE exams. As a result, the five groups in each year became smaller and teachers could offer pupils one-to-one "learning talks" to help them focus clearly on their targets.

"All the English teachers said Core Plus enabled them to teach in a more focused way and gave them more time for planning, preparation and marking, tracking of pupils and data-crunching," said Karen. "The children felt lessons were pacy and much more tailored towards them."

Peter Gaul, assistant headteacher at St Wilfrid's, said the staff immediately recognised the "quality" of Core Plus and went to great lengths to incorporate the programme. He puts the

improvement in English results down to "an integrated model of intervention, of which Core Plus was a very useful element."

"The key issues were the attitudes in the classroom that it created and the effect it had on pupils of every ability," he said. "We are very pleased with the progress we have made and the upturn in student results."

Another school that has used Core Plus English to make a difference is The Hayesbrook School in Tonbridge, Kent.

The all-boys school, designated as "outstanding" three times by Ofsted, has drawn on aspects of Core Plus to make its successful English department even better.

The department comprised a relatively new Curriculum Leader and several newly qualified teachers.

Co-executive headteacher Debbie Coslett suggested the team might find it helpful to use the Core Plus English self-assessment tools to look at the department's areas of strength and areas for improvement. As a result, the team focused more on developing the Key Stage 4 English curriculum further, engaged in some team-teaching and altered the timetable to enable the curriculum leader to support some of the less experienced teachers.

"Core Plus has some excellent material in it that can be used by any school at any stage of its development," said Debbie.

"Our curriculum leader used the audit tool to highlight the areas that needed improvement. This has now happened, with the result that we entered 81 of our year 11 students for early entry in their English GCSE in November 2009 and 76 of them achieved a grade C and above."

Core Plus Mathematics

Core Plus Mathematics is a CPD programme consisting of six elements. From improving mathematics subject pedagogy to focusing on intervention and personalisation, each element has been written to support mathematics departments in addressing the needs of their pupils.

At The Grange School in Christchurch, Dorset, the mathematics department has used a range of the elements from Core Plus mathematics to raise standards in mathematics – with impressive results.

Situated in a disadvantaged area and with 17 per cent of its 650 pupils eligible for free school meals.

“When we received the Core Plus materials we took what we thought were the elements that would work for us and adapted our Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) accordingly,” explained headteacher Mark Stenton.

“Then, working with our local authority adviser, we used the materials as a foundation to plan what was going to happen in the

department during that year.”

As well as focusing on leadership and management, element 1a of Core Plus mathematics, the department reorganised the five sets and assigned the three most effective teachers to the “three most critical classes.”

“Using Core Plus element 2, the teachers analysed in minute detail every child’s strengths and weaknesses in mathematics and then tailored lessons so pupils knew exactly where they had to put in extra work,” said Mark.

“We held heavily-personalised after-school revision classes and a two-day Easter school. Another key factor was that we timetabled planning time as a department. Our LA adviser attended these meetings

‘We learned things which helped us to sharpen our practice and we are building on it this year’

as often as she could and Core Plus was a central part of our planning, so the head of department knew what was happening in every class and made sure that the learning was closely targeted and appropriate.”

As a result, the school saw tremendous achievements in mathematics last year (2009). A total of 40 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C, including English and mathematics, easily beating its 33 per cent target.

“Core Plus was a very useful element in our success,” said Mark. “We learned things which helped us to sharpen our practice and we are building on it this year.”

Stronger Governance Systems

Stronger Governance Systems (SGS) is an adapted specialist version of Stronger Management Systems (SMS) aimed specifically at school governors. It supports governors to understand what is meant by school improvement and to carry out their strategic role of challenging and supporting school leadership teams.

A professional development programme, SGS aims to help governors to improve the quality and impact of the contributions they make to school improvement. It details the areas that governors need to be proficient in, such as the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of governing bodies, school improvement planning, key indicators of how schools are doing and the role of governors in schools' self-evaluation.

'there is something in there for every governing body'

The National Strategies' team is currently in the process of rolling out the SGS materials to LAs and SIPs across the country.

Ian Clayton, who as well as being principal of Thorpe St Andrew School in Norwich, is one of the National Strategies consultant headteachers, is helping to raise awareness of the materials in the East and East Midlands region. In Norfolk, for instance, he is helping eight schools to work with SGS and he has also shared elements of the

materials with new members of the governing body at his own school.

"Stronger Governance Systems gives guidance on thinking about and identifying the critical questions governing bodies need to ask," said Ian.

"Governing bodies don't have to start at unit one and work their way through these materials but there is something in there for every governing body in some shape or form."

Key web-based resources:

School Improvement

Stronger Management Systems

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/sms

Stronger Governance Systems

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/sgs

The National Challenge: Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) management guide

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/rap

Core Plus English

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/coreenglish

Core Plus mathematics

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/coremaths

Core Plus science

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/sup6/corescience

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