

To the next level: good schools becoming outstanding

Research report

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Most schools are already good; we want to make sure that they have inspiring opportunities to support their ongoing development.

Introduction

For some time now in the UK, close attention has been given to schools, especially secondary schools, facing particular challenges in raising attainment. Initiatives have drawn extensively on research into change processes and into the broader principles of school improvement. Additionally, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (since May 2010 renamed the Department for Education – DfE), the UK government department responsible for education in England, has focused on underachieving ('coasting') schools, articulating its approach through the *Gaining Ground* programme (DCSF, 2008).

Policy makers' attention has more recently turned to how to achieve 'great' schools: 'Most schools are already good; we want to make sure that they have inspiring opportunities to support their ongoing development' (DCSF 2009c). The issue is critical not only for individual schools, which want to be as effective as they can be, but because the role of outstanding schools as change agents for others is increasingly being recognised by policy makers across the political spectrum.

The research that this report documents has been designed to analyse the processes by which good schools move on to be outstanding. The issues addressed are:

- To what extent is an understanding of what is involved in being an outstanding school fully articulated and shared?
- What are the implications of the criteria used by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), the agency responsible for the inspection of schools in England, as part of its inspection framework to judge schools as outstanding?
- What are the common features of leadership, organisation and culture which help good schools in their journey towards categorisation as outstanding?
- What is the story of those schools which have moved to the next level and what are the obstacles facing those schools still on the journey?
- What kinds of support (including collaboration with other schools) are most effective in achieving the transformation?
- How best can knowledge and practice of the journey from good to outstanding be shared, transferred or created anew in a variety of contexts?

The research took place in spring and summer 2010, a period which saw a change of government in the UK and subsequent changes in education policy. The policy change which bears down most obviously on this piece of work has been the decision to offer all schools in England judged by Ofsted to be outstanding the opportunity to apply for academy status. This status brings with it a number of freedoms, together with an uncoupling from local authority control.

The project involved:

- a desk study of processes described or implied in recent research, inspection and school improvement literature
- the identification of noteworthy practice in local 'good to outstanding' projects
- visits to and other contacts with local authorities and schools, to carry out structured interviews
- the production of case studies, eight of which are recorded in this report, that capture the narratives of change, the problems schools have encountered, their resolution and their outcomes.



Executive summary

Outstanding schools insist on excellence in the quality of classroom teaching, and have systems in place which mean that leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of all the teaching staff.

Evidence gathered from the range of sources consulted during the course of this project can be summarised as follows.

In outstanding schools, leadership is inspirational in providing clear vision and direction. Leaders who take a school from good to outstanding focus on: raising attainment and accelerating progress; improving the quality of teaching and learning; improving the conditions for learning; and developing the school as a professional learning community.

Outstanding schools place high expectations on all their students. They have a broad range of curricula to engage and support students, personalised to accommodate individual aptitudes and needs.

Outstanding schools insist on excellence in the quality of classroom teaching, and have systems in place which mean that leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of all the teaching staff. They operate an evidence-based approach to what is happening in classrooms. If staff teach less than very well, arrangements are in place to offer support. At the same time, outstanding schools have a relaxed collegiate culture in which teaching and classroom management ideas are shared unselfishly and problems acknowledged without fear of blame.

One of the key indicators of school effectiveness, firmly in place in outstanding schools, is the setting of challenging targets and the good use of arrangements for assessing and tracking pupils' progress. These arrangements are supported by sophisticated information technology to which all relevant staff have access.

Outstanding schools are highly inclusive, having regard for the educational progress, personal development and well-being of every student. They prove that socio-economic disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement. Speaking English as an additional language can support academic success.

Senior leaders make sure that the professional development of all staff, teaching and non-teaching, is relevant, continuous and of high quality. Most of this professional development takes place in school.

Building and retaining links with parents and local communities is integral to raising aspirations and ambitions for children in outstanding schools. They are also broad in their outlook, for example by having links with schools in other countries. Outstanding schools may well take on a responsibility to support other schools which need to improve.

A key difference between being a good school and being an outstanding school involves going beyond tight quality controls towards the quality assurance of a self-confident, self-critical community in which learning is interactive and permanent.

Based on the experience of the schools visited in this study, good schools seeking to be outstanding would be well advised to study closely the comparative criteria for 'good' and 'outstanding' judgements in Ofsted's inspections framework. They may want to set up working groups to plan how to get from good to outstanding across all the areas which an Ofsted inspection covers. They may also want to study reports on schools which have already been judged outstanding and apply lessons learned from those reports to their own context. Visiting schools recently judged outstanding is likely to be of particular value.



Highly effective schools have high aspirations for each child and believe that all children can and should achieve at least the agreed minimum standard for each key stage.

1. Review of research

Sources

Initial desk research was undertaken to identify existing knowledge around how secondary schools in England move from being 'good' to becoming 'outstanding'. The review searched written and web-based literature published by a number of organisations, including CfBT Education Trust, the DCSF (now the DfE) the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), and Ofsted. Electronic searches of a variety of databases and manual searches of books were also conducted. Only literature relating to mainstream secondary schools and published post-2002 was explored. Preference was given to literature relating to secondary education within England.

The evidence from the desk review is presented in this chapter. Chapter 2 explores the lessons that can be learnt from independent evaluation of a school's effectiveness, and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve.

To explore this subject more fully, eight case studies were undertaken to understand the journeys that good schools have taken in becoming outstanding. Chapter 3 of this research paper reports on each of the case study schools, identifying the key messages about their improvement journey.

Characteristics of outstanding schools

The characteristics of outstanding schools, as detailed in the literature, can be divided into six categories:

- 1. Pupil learning and behaviour, including personalisation of learning, high expectations, individualised support and inclusion**

In outstanding schools, high expectations are placed on students. These schools have a broad range of packages tailored to fit students' needs and the school context.

Key indicators of school effectiveness include staff providing stimuli, challenge and pace in facilitating students' learning, and students' voices being listened to and acted upon by the school. 'Highly effective schools have high aspirations for each child and believe that all children can and should achieve at least the agreed minimum standard for each key stage' (CfBT, 2009). Hopkins (2007) considers that for a school to be a great school there needs to be a move from standardised provision with uncontrolled variation in quality, to personalised provision based on consistently high quality, with variations controlled and actively tailored to individual students' needs and aspirations. He considers a common feature of strategies for raising achievement in schools to be the intelligent use of assessment data, progress-tracking, target-setting and provision of support for students who are slipping behind.

- 2. School leadership and vision, including reflection, monitoring and effective governance**

School leadership is inspirational in providing clear vision and direction in outstanding schools. 'At the heart of all good to outstanding schools is good leadership and the support for, and development of, good and outstanding leaders is crucial to school improvement.' (CfBT, 2009) Outstanding schools know themselves well and evaluate their provision and performance in a robust and inclusive manner.



A relevant and attractive curriculum reduces behaviour problems...

West-Burnham (2009) writes that those aspiring to be outstanding headteachers should develop the following:

- moral confidence based on deeply held personal beliefs
- significant relationships with a wide network of fellow professionals
- a real understanding of how to learn from experience
- a willingness to learn from students
- clarity and confidence about what works in terms of professional learning
- openness to learning from the example of other school leaders
- confidence in learning how to learn.

Effective school self-evaluation has the following characteristics:

- robust and comprehensive analysis and interpretation of performance data across all *Every Child Matters* outcomes (*Every Child Matters* is a set of policies and aspirations published by the DCSF in 2003, partly in response to a widely-publicised child-abuse case, which aims to 'join up' the efforts of all agencies, including schools, responsible for children's achievement and well-being)
- appropriate target-setting, tracking and intervention strategies, that at any given point can give an accurate picture of the progress of individual children across all areas of development
- effective systems for collecting and analysing the views of key stakeholders, including children, their families, the range of the children's workforce and the wider community, together with mechanisms for addressing the outcomes in a school's improvement or development plan
- clear systems for judging the quality of teaching and its impact on learning, together with focused workforce development strategies to improve the skills and impact of the workforce
- dynamic improvement planning which focuses on the key actions to be taken to address areas for development, is based on a clear link between activity and impact, and is constantly reframed in the light of evidence of impact (CfBT, 2009).

3. **Teaching, the curriculum and assessment**

A relevant and attractive curriculum reduces behaviour problems, and outstanding schools work to develop curricula which engage and support all their students (Ofsted, 2009b).

The professional attributes of excellent teachers are outlined in a report from the TDA (TDA, 2007). The report considers that excellent teachers should:

- be willing to take a leading role in developing workplace policies and practice and in promoting collective responsibility for their implementation
- research and evaluate innovative practices and draw on research outcomes and other sources of external evidence to inform their own practice and that of colleagues
- have a critical understanding of the most effective teaching, learning and behaviour-management strategies, including how to select and use approaches that personalise learning to provide opportunities for all learners to achieve their potential
- know how to improve the effectiveness of assessment practice in the workplace, including how to analyse statistical information to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning across the school



In terms of assessment, one of the key indicators of school effectiveness is the setting of challenging targets...

- have an extensive and deep knowledge and understanding of their subjects/curriculum areas and related pedagogy, gained for example through involvement in wider professional networks associated with their subjects/curriculum areas
- have extensive knowledge on matters concerning equality, inclusion and diversity in teaching
- have teaching skills which lead to excellent results and outcomes
- demonstrate excellent and innovative pedagogic practice
- demonstrate excellent ability to assess and evaluate.

Similar attributes are identified in the characteristics of Advanced Skills Teachers (DCSF, 2009a). (Advanced Skills Teachers are classroom teachers who have attained the highest level on a performance management structure in operation in schools in England.)

'In terms of assessment, one of the key indicators of school effectiveness is the setting of challenging targets and the good use of arrangements for assessing and tracking pupils' progress to raise standards' (CfBT, 2009). Hopkins (2007) acknowledges the importance of personalised learning if pupils are to fulfil their potential: 'the most powerful lever we can pull at the moment to achieve personalised learning is assessment for learning'.

4. **Continuing professional development of teachers**

Outstanding schools take very seriously the induction and continuing professional development of their workforce. In particular, they develop systems for identifying the needs and aspirations of the different parts of the workforce, including effective performance management, appraisal and reflection against professional and occupational standards (CfBT, 2009).

5. **Relationships within school and with those outside school, including support services**

Building and retaining links with parents and local communities is integral to raising aspirations and ambitions for children in outstanding schools. Evidence suggests that parental engagement outstrips every other single factor – including social class, ethnicity and disability – in its impact on attainment (DCSF, 2009b).

Harris and Lambert (2003) stress that in order to improve and sustain improvement over time, schools need to build and nurture the sense of a professional learning community. In the most effective schools, there is evidence of positive relationships both within and outside the school. A key indicator for school effectiveness relates to schools maximising the use of local integrated children's services (CfBT, 2009).

6. **School culture, ethos and values**

Outstanding schools demonstrate a positive overall ethos and consistently promote community cohesion (CfBT, 2009).

Harris and Lambert (2003) suggest that schools which improve continuously invest in the life of the school as a learning community, where members are constantly striving to seek new ways of improving their practice. School improvement is a process of changing a school's culture. To create sustainable school improvement, there must first be an understanding of the culture that exists in the school; secondly, the right decisions must be taken on strategies for change and development to match the school's particular context.



...four key themes are identified as necessary for taking a school forward...

The move from good to outstanding

Literature relating to factors which help move a school from being judged good to being judged outstanding is very limited. The most useful sources are reviewed here.

In the presentation *Taking your School from Good to Outstanding* (London Borough of Camden, 2008) four key themes are identified as necessary for taking a school forward: raising attainment and accelerating progress; improving the quality of teaching and learning; improving the conditions for learning; and developing the school as a professional learning community. The presentation also mentions the importance of 'made to measure' plans to raise attainment, and of pupil-tracking linked to expectations. It emphasises the significance of a range of analyses of assessment for learning, designed to support schools in using assessment information to improve and plan provision, as well as to improve the quality of the assessment programme itself. It considers the following to be of importance: pupil-progress meetings using recent tracking data; the targeting of particular groups and students; and professional development meetings giving opportunities for staff to reflect on current practice.

Thornley (Association of School and College Leaders, 2010) recommends using the 'space' between his summaries of Ofsted's definitions of good and outstanding lessons as the direction-finder for moving from one to the other:

'My starting point is to adapt the Ofsted definition of a good lesson. In summary, this defines a good lesson as one in which:

- All students make satisfactory progress; most make good progress.
- Most know what they are doing and why.
- Students behave well – little time is lost to behavioural issues.
- The classroom is a friendly and safe place – relationships are good.
- The teacher knows his/her subject and strategies for teaching it well; the teaching methods used are appropriate for the content.
- The teaching is well matched to the learners' needs; most are stretched by the teaching.
- The teacher encourages and praises frequently.
- Available resources (time, staff etc.) are well used.
- Assessment is regular and supports progress – most students know what they need to do to improve.

I've then tried to do the same thing for an outstanding lesson... An outstanding lesson is one in which all, or nearly all, of the features of a good lesson are present, plus some of the following:

- A All students are challenged and make good progress, especially those at the ends of the ability range and those who lack confidence; some make exceptional progress; a lot of ground is covered in the lesson but stragglers are not left by the wayside.
- B Enthusiasm and enjoyment pervade the classroom.
- C The teaching is exciting and interesting (for example, through use of stimulating resources or other adults in the lesson); it may be inspired, although it doesn't have to be.



Excellent school leadership is, in no small part, about rigorously enforcing the basics...

- D All the students are involved in the lesson and all contribute in some form.
- E Teaching methods are very well matched to the content and to the learners – some may be original or innovative; for example, content closely linked to students' experiences or to interesting practical situations.
- F The teacher checks progress throughout the lesson; assessment is regular and helpful.
- G Students evaluate their own and others' progress accurately and constructively.
- H All students know how to improve as a result of regular and constructive feedback; where appropriate this is linked to national criteria or examination requirements.
- I The teacher develops students' basic and other cross-curricular skills, for example literacy, numeracy, independent learning and PSHE.
- J Students have easy access to, and make use of, additional resources which they use independently to support or enhance their learning.
- K Students go out of their way to help each other; they provide mutual support.
- L The classroom is a lively and interesting place; it includes good displays of students' work (representing all abilities), things which give a subject-specific flavour to the room, and annotated examples of levelled work used to support learning.'

Outstanding leadership is essential to enable the transition from a coasting or good school to an outstanding one. 'Excellent school leadership is, in no small part, about rigorously enforcing the basics: good behaviour and discipline, a culture of excellence, an effective curriculum, and first-class teaching in every classroom.' (Adonis, 2008)

In schools where the development of an ethos based around mutual respect and a language of respect has been actively encouraged through the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award, there is evidence of improved student behaviour, greater engagement in learning, and better relationships within and between students and staff (Sebba and Robinson, 2009).

According to the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (Center for CSRI, 2009) the best school improvement plans are not rigid prescriptions for day-to-day action, but rather guides for ongoing improvements in critical areas. An effective plan sets forth action steps, establishes timelines, and identifies outcome measures to monitor and evaluate success. If a plan is to become a key resource and guide for school improvement, then it must be crafted and owned by all of the stakeholders – teachers, support staff, school leaders, students, families, district officials, community members and business organisations.



2. Lessons from Ofsted

The Ofsted inspection system: background

An outstanding school shows a consistently high quality of teaching and learning in the great majority of its classrooms.

An Ofsted inspection is designed to provide an independent external evaluation of a school's effectiveness, and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve. Ofsted inspectors make judgements and grade a school's performance within three main areas, which are then sub-divided more specifically: outcomes for students; the effectiveness of the school's provision; and the effectiveness of the school's leadership and management. Elements within each of these areas are graded as 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' (Ofsted, 2010b). A grade for a school's overall effectiveness, combining the judgements made in the three areas, is also awarded.

Ofsted has clear criteria for judging schools as outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate, in the three areas. (Examples of the criteria for judging a school outstanding or good in each of the specific sub-divisions of the three areas appear in Appendix 1.)

An outstanding judgement is only given when a school, having fulfilled all the criteria for a good judgement, has in addition demonstrated sustainable excellence in, for example: quality of teaching; pupil autonomy in learning; confident self-critical ongoing review of the school's achievements and development needs by its leaders; and sophisticated and mutually profitable communications links between the school and the wider community it serves. It is possible for schools even in the most challenging socio-economic circumstances to be judged as outstanding.

Advice by experienced school inspectors suggests that a productive way for a good school to advance to a prospective outstanding judgement is to consider the difference between parallel sets of criteria for the two levels, and to plan, in specific matters, how it can move its sustainable performance towards the 'outstanding' criteria.

An outstanding school shows a consistently high quality of teaching and learning in the great majority of its classrooms. In outstanding lessons, all the students make progress. These lessons are carefully planned and work is pitched appropriately for all ability levels. Communication of successful practice between colleagues is normal. Students are involved in the assessment of their own and other students' work, and approaches to assessment are consistent across the school. The school has consistent policies and practices on behaviour management and on the support and evaluation of students' social development. The school communicates frequently and fully with parents.

The Ofsted inspection system: judgements

During the last cycle of Ofsted inspections of maintained schools in England, which started in September 2005, there was a steady annual increase in the proportion of good and outstanding schools. Between September 2008 and August 2009, 1,071 inspections of maintained secondary schools were conducted. 22% of the schools were judged 'outstanding', 41% 'good', 31% 'satisfactory' and 6% 'inadequate' (Ofsted, 2009a).



*...disadvantage
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Characteristics of twelve outstanding schools

Twelve Outstanding Secondary Schools – Excelling against the Odds (Ofsted, 2009b) reports on secondary schools which serve disadvantaged communities and have achieved an Ofsted judgement of outstanding in two or more consecutive inspections. The following characteristics were considered to be present within these schools:

- The schools excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time.
- They prove constantly that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, that speaking English as an additional language can support academic success, and that schools really can be learning communities.
- They put students first, invest in their staff and nurture their communities.
- They have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed.
- They fulfil individual potential through providing outstanding teaching, rich opportunities for learning, and encouragement and support for each student.
- They are highly inclusive, having regard for the educational progress, personal development and well-being of every student.
- Their achievements do not happen by chance, but through highly reflective, carefully planned and thoroughly implemented strategies which serve them well in meeting the many obstructions in the path to success.
- They operate with a very high degree of internal consistency.
- They are constantly looking for ways to improve further.
- They have outstanding and well distributed leadership.

Ofsted's recommendations

Here is a selection of recommendations in Ofsted inspection reports on individual schools about actions that good schools should take to improve further.

In teaching, learning and assessment:

- Increase the proportion of lessons in which teaching and learning are at least good; strengthen further teachers' skills in questioning and other assessment strategies, and increase the level of challenge to students wherever possible.
- Make teaching and learning more consistent across the school by finding opportunities to disseminate best practice, thereby improving students' involvement in their learning.
- [Ensure] that students know what they must do to improve.
- [Make] greater use of differentiation in lesson planning and delivery, and greater use of teacher marking and assessment to help students know their next steps in making progress.
- Make assessment and marking practice more consistent across the school in order to give better feedback to students on their progress.



In outstanding lessons you would expect all students to have moved forward...

- Share the best practice evident in involving students in assessing their own progress and defining ways forward so that it becomes standard practice.
- Ensure that all teachers consistently apply good practice, especially in marking.
- Build on the work done so far in improving provision in ICT; improve systems for assessment and extend the use of ICT across the curriculum.

In behaviour and personal development:

- Improve behaviour by ensuring that behaviour management procedures are applied in all lessons.
- Ensure the monitoring and evaluation of students' personal development is used to check the impact of the school's work and refine it further.

In leadership and management, and communications with the school's wider community:

- Improve relationships between the governing body and the senior leadership team.
- Build on existing good relationships with parents to improve further the channels of communication and their contribution to school life by: producing regular newsletters; encouraging greater awareness and use of the school website, which should include a parents' area; expanding and regenerating the parents' association; and improving response rates to all concerns and queries from parents.

Good and outstanding lessons: one inspector's views

Clare Gillies, a former Ofsted inspector and more recently a contributor to the Teachers TV series 'From Good to Outstanding', offers this distinction between the two terms (Gillies, 2007):

'In a good lesson the majority of students will certainly make progress... In outstanding lessons you would expect all students to have moved forward... An accepted understanding of 'outstanding' compared to 'good' is that all students in a class have made at least the amount of progress you would expect in a lesson.'

She observes that an outstanding lesson has:

'...a quality of such interest that you want to be a pupil yourself, you find yourself enjoying the lesson just as much as the students clearly are...'

Students in an outstanding lesson:

'...have a rapport with the teacher where they are learning together. It's exciting and there's an ingredient that's hard to quantify. You can feel it in the atmosphere. Whoever is in the room is carried along with the interest, the stimulus and the content of the lesson...'

The vast majority of outstanding lessons:

'...will have been very carefully planned, and the resources will be right for what that lesson is covering... So a teacher's planning and thinking-through what the students are to learn and to get out of the lesson have to be key ingredients of an outstanding lesson...'



Gillies stresses the importance of pitching the work at an appropriate level for the learners:

'A lesson may have all the ingredients of outstanding in its atmosphere and level of interest and excitement but if work isn't pitched appropriately for all ability levels then the depth of their learning will be lacking. Looking at the lesson as a whole, if not everyone has learned enough or made enough progress during that particular lesson, it cannot be outstanding.'



3. What schools tell us

When the schools received a 'good' Ofsted inspection judgement, they saw the achievement of 'outstanding' as the natural next step.

This section reports on the experience of eight secondary schools which have moved from good to outstanding. The accounts describe the decisions and actions which have driven the schools' progress. First, a summary brings together the features common to most or all of the schools' individual stories.

1. There is no substitute for an evidence-based approach to what is happening in classrooms. Senior staff did not engage in anecdotal talk about, say, an under-performing head of department, because the senior team had clear and systematic evidence, rooted in regular lesson observations and teachers' own self-evaluations, on how all staff were performing in classrooms.
2. When the schools received a 'good' Ofsted inspection judgement, they saw the achievement of 'outstanding' as the natural next step. Senior leaders asked all staff to read the reports on schools which had already been judged outstanding. Staff then committed themselves to ensuring that the same kind of phrases they had been reading in outstanding reports could, in time, be readily written about their own school.
3. The schools placed great emphasis on the importance of everyone in the school knowing and understanding the language of the Ofsted framework. Professional development sessions ensured that all teaching and support staff gained a strong grasp of the difference between Ofsted's good and outstanding judgements, whether in relation to teaching and learning, personal development or community cohesion.
4. Schools on the journey from good to outstanding used the Self-Evaluation Form (available online from Ofsted, together with guidance on its use) as a key document. Different groups of staff were asked to focus on particular sections of the framework, alongside the Ofsted criteria, reviewing which aspects of practice needed to improve in order to cross the boundary from a grade two (good) to a grade one (outstanding).
5. Senior leaders in schools tried to 'climb inside the inspector's skin'. Leaders sought to share with all staff how the inspection process works, making it clear that inspectors are trained to focus on students' learning and progress as well as on quality of teaching.
6. Headteachers placed great store by how well they managed to create in schools 'a sense of urgency at the right time'. They recognised that not everything can be achieved at the same time, but that staff could 'shift gear' for a sustained period if there was a collective ambition to improve the school. Equally, leaders at all levels believed that if change was worth introducing, there was no virtue in waiting until a notionally convenient point in the calendar, say the start of the following term. If students' experiences could be improved sooner, then the school should change its practices without delay.
7. Headteachers and governors believed in a 'no surprises' culture and the importance of embedded systems that alerted staff to students at risk of under-achieving. Complementing the organisational systems across the school was an open, trusting culture, in which staff knew that success was applauded and failure supportively attended to, rather than blamed.



One headteacher observed: 'You have to tighten up to be good. You loosen to become outstanding'.

8. Headteachers focused on eliminating 'in-school variation', or at least reaching a point where this had been reduced to an absolute minimum. One headteacher still striving for the school to be judged outstanding made his mantra for the academic year: 'Let's all have a good year at the same time.'
9. A number of schools commented that a key feature of the journey from good to outstanding was the significant number of staff working on external agendas, sometimes linked to training-school status. These schools enjoyed partnerships with other schools and education providers; their staff were constantly bringing good ideas back into their classrooms from external sources. One headteacher described the outstanding school to be one which is, naturally and in all that it practises, 'an outward-facing school'.
10. Headteachers insisted that communication of the highest quality, modelled by senior leaders, was at the heart of an outstanding school. Such communication always anticipated staff's and students' interests and concerns, so that the school was not side-tracked by rumour and unproductive anxiety.
11. Some headteachers felt that creating a 'we' not 'I' culture lay at the heart of great schools. Senior leaders set out genuinely to see the best in people and to dwell on the positive, while at the same time being single-minded in rooting out mediocrity.
12. Governors considered that an outstanding school is one in which everyone feels that they are making a contribution. In personal and professional terms, all students and staff believe they have a next step to make within the institution, and that the institution supports, values and celebrates these next steps. Governing bodies believed that their role is to intervene if required, but is principally to ensure that the senior leadership team does not digress from its core activities.
13. A number of headteachers cited the value of 'external critical friends' who could be invited from time to time to see the school with a fresh pair of eyes. These critical friends validated changes, championed great practice and pointed out where there was room for improvement.
14. Of the journey to outstanding, one headteacher observed: 'You have to tighten up to be good. You loosen to become outstanding.' He was describing the process by which high levels of quality control, securing good provision, evolve into yet higher levels of quality assurance, so that a whole-school culture of excellence is created in which teachers and students alike feel empowered to take measured risks.



For a number of years now, all judgements on the quality of teaching and learning have been rooted in an extensive evidence base...

Case study 1: 11–16 Church of England mixed comprehensive

Context

The school is an 11–16 Church of England urban mixed comprehensive with just under 1,000 students on roll. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is below that found in most schools, while the proportion of students with special educational needs is above average. The school has specialist status for the performing arts, and holds several other awards in recognition of its work. Students' standards are high across a range of subjects taken at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education – the main examination taken by students in Year 11 in schools in England and Wales). The school moved from satisfactory, to good, to outstanding in successive Ofsted inspections. The headteacher has been in post for 12 years.

The journey to 'outstanding'

The school had experienced a number of years in which students' outcomes had bumped along in line with national averages; it was a satisfactory school in Ofsted terms. Despite a range of initiatives with students, the school felt as though it was in a rut of 'doing the usual school improvement things' but not having significant impact on students' attainment. Stirred by the realisation that the school was being watched by outside agencies, the senior team attended a national seminar and sensed amongst themselves 'a key golden moment of needing to change practices'. They refocused all the school's development work on three things: students' achievements, teaching and learning, and leadership and management.

Curriculum and achievement

The school harnessed its Church of England status to promote amongst students and staff a set of core values, which had been implicit rather than explicit. Firstly, a love of learning was promoted in words and actions across the school. Secondly, care and respect for self and for others became a touchstone for interactions between students and staff. Thirdly, success and its celebration underpinned daily practice and whole-school systems. Students' achievements were valued increasingly as much as their attainment. Year on year, after seeking students' views, the attractive curriculum offer was more sharply tailored to students' varying needs, while extra-curricular provision saw a significant broadening. Bespoke timetabling to meet particular examination needs in year 11 played a big part in raising outcomes, as did a programme of Saturday morning enrichment for GCSE students. Students now speak with passion about achievements in the performing arts. Achievement across the curriculum is now exceptional for all groups, and those with learning difficulties attain higher standards than would normally be expected.

Teaching and learning

The school had experienced variation between subject departments for many years. The senior team was determined to introduce a systematic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of classroom teaching, removing the anecdotal. Staff welcomed the opportunity to provide rich sources of evidence to the performance management process. For a number of years now, all judgements on the quality of teaching and learning have been rooted in an extensive evidence base: full lesson observations by colleagues and line managers; drop-ins by senior staff; external observations; work samples; marking and homework; and teachers' self-evaluations. Ofsted described this approach as exemplary, particularly the senior team's rigorous and supportive approach to full and drop-in lesson observations and to the development of a well judged coaching programme for all teachers.



Through visits to other schools, staff at all levels came to understand what 'outstanding' looks like.

As time has gone by, the school has adopted 'intervention in inverse proportion to success' across the school, with the most successful departments being the least monitored. Interestingly, these high-performing departments see regular mutual observation in classrooms as fundamental to their sustained successes. The leaders of these subject areas place significant store by the quality of regular assessment for learning, alongside the promotion of independent learning amongst their students.

Leadership and management

The sources of evidence upon which to build opportunities for future great classroom experiences constituted one cornerstone of the school's move from good to outstanding. Equally important was its determination to know what 'outstanding' looks like. Senior staff led sessions in which staff studied the reports of schools which had been judged outstanding by Ofsted. There was a united determination to understand the Ofsted criteria and to aspire to have key phrases from the 'outstanding' criteria applied to all aspects of the school's provision. This was accompanied by skillful work on the school's Self-Evaluation Form. Research and development groups worked on different aspects of the form, examining which areas of the school's practice needed to improve in order to cross grade boundaries from two to one. Through visits to other schools, staff at all levels came to understand what 'outstanding' looks like. They felt comfortable with a culture of relentless monitoring to reach that goal.

This is a school in which each member of the leadership team has published work-plan objectives, for which he or she is accountable to the rest of the team as part of the performance-management framework. The team has a clearly structured approach to data management. To ensure consistency and in order to spread best practice, a deputy headteacher line-manages all heads of department, in pairs and trios. A climate of consistent and supportive accountability is underpinned by four governors' committees. Of the journey overall from satisfactory to outstanding, the headteacher identifies his pivotal role in moving from quality-control practices to a quality-assurance role. Crucially, the school thinks in terms of possibilities, not limitations, for the students.

Key messages

- Do things differently, not just more of the same.
- A few priorities at any one time.
- An evidence-based approach to what is happening in classrooms.
- Intervention takes place in inverse proportion to success.
- Establish the ethos that ensures moral purpose counts.



The headteacher describes the journey as ‘a long and winding road, with lots of mistakes on the way but fun and rewarding’.

Case study 2: 11–19 mixed community comprehensive

Context

The school is an 11–19 mixed community comprehensive with about 1,000 students, serving a large rural town and surrounding area. It has specialist status in engineering and runs an extensive programme of family, adult and community learning courses. A smaller-than-average proportion of students comes from minority ethnic backgrounds, and the numbers of students with learning difficulties are lower than average. Students’ standards are high across a range of GCSE subjects. The school moved from good to outstanding in successive Ofsted inspections. The headteacher has been in post for 15 years.

The journey to ‘outstanding’

The school has served its students and local community well for many years, and Ofsted recognised these achievements when judging provision as good. At that point, the headteacher shared a vision and determination with the staff that a following Ofsted inspection in three years’ time would see the school judged outstanding. This moment coincided with the school undertaking a major review of its staffing structure and curriculum offer, particularly wishing to extend the impact of its specialist engineering status to all students.

The headteacher describes the journey as ‘a long and winding road, with lots of mistakes on the way but fun and rewarding’. He began by posing the question: ‘Are we going to be good for ever?’ He suggested to staff that ‘outstanding’ did not mean perfection, and asked: what were the extra steps the school needed to take? There was a shared understanding that there would be no quick fix, but that a ‘tipping point’ could be reached.

Curriculum and achievement

Staff felt that improving the curriculum map was a ‘golden key’ to moving the school to ‘outstanding’. Together with the governors, staff have a very good understanding of their local community and of how students can best be served. They believed that broadening the curriculum was an important way to raise the self-esteem and achievement of all students. Harnessing both the engineering specialism and a second specialism of applied learning, compulsory technology was introduced for all students at Key Stage 4; this had a significant impact on GCSE results. BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council qualifications) and vocational Diploma options are highly popular with students of all abilities. Equally, the range of innovative courses at Key Stage 3, which value the social aspects of engineering, significantly motivate younger students. The humanities engineering course for 11 to 14-year-olds has received national recognition. At the same time, investment and skillful timetabling have ensured that the needs of gifted and talented students are fully met, enabling some year 9 students to embark on examination courses in statistics and philosophy and ethics. Students themselves comment on the excellent range of extra-curricular activities, from cooking and astronomy to languages and music.

Teaching and learning

For a school of 1,000 students, there is a relatively large leadership team of nine, though all members of the team have a significant teaching commitment. This commitment to the classroom is cited by the headteacher as one of the keys to the school’s successes. These good and outstanding senior practitioners model effective practice day in, day out, and set a level of expectation in classrooms that is infectious. Staff display a culture of self-confidence in relation to their teaching, but there is no place for merely satisfactory lessons. Wise curriculum planning leads



The governing body has shown consistent faith in the school's leadership team and has served to keep the team focused on the path of improvement, never digressing from the school's core business.

to imaginative, well differentiated lesson planning, judiciously monitored by middle managers. There has been thoughtful harnessing of students' voices in evaluating lessons. Data on the performance of all students is shared between departments and teachers in an affirming climate of openness. Continuous professional development is embedded into the school's programme, with ten-minute teaching and learning sessions slotted into staff briefings on a weekly basis. The profile of the successful classroom is ever present in the school's routines.

Leadership and management

The headteacher's commitment to being a classroom teacher himself has been an important dimension to this school's journey. Beyond that, the headteacher sees his role as being the interface between the school and the community, reminding those outside the school gates just how much the school and its staff are achieving for their young people. Further, he sees himself leading a 'conversations-rich' school, where students and staff constantly talk to one other about their new learning. The organisational culture, which balances great systems and freedom to innovate, matters profoundly. Members of the leadership team have very specific responsibilities, though they are emphatically not territorial. Hierarchy is not oppressive. Consistent systems for managing the behaviour of students permeate, and there is no tolerance of lessons being interrupted.

The headteacher is a believer in 'a sense of urgency at the right time', making a judgement as to when the whole institution can afford to step up a gear without imploding. Other staff speak of an organisational culture in which 'it's never too late to make a change if we think one needs to be made for the students'. There is a restlessness to the school's culture which is productive; it tinkers when it needs to, it consolidates when it needs to. The headteacher believes that improvement comes from borrowing the best ideas from other schools and businesses, then weaving them together to create solutions in the school's own context.

The governing body has shown consistent faith in the school's leadership team and has served to keep the team focused on the path of improvement, never digressing from the school's core business. Governors have played a significant role in the growth of the school's community provision and in the school being seen as a vital source of continuing education.

The headteacher makes a further point about the importance of 'leading the actual Ofsted inspection with confidence'. The inspection team heard the same messages about standards, progress and quality assurance wherever they went, and became increasingly convinced that the school was consistently good, and therefore 'outstanding' according to the framework.

Key messages

- It's what happens in classrooms that matters.
- Grow your own staff.
- Be determined to reach 'outstanding', and don't be side-tracked by the latest initiative.
- Vary routines, keeping everyone on their toes.
- Move from quality control to quality assurance along the journey.
- Governors can play a significant role.



The philosophy of lifelong education is embedded in many aspects of its provision.

Case study 3: large 11–16 mixed community comprehensive

Context

The school is a large 11–16 mixed community comprehensive with over 1,300 students, serving a relatively prosperous rural catchment area. It is expanding to open its own sixth form. The vast majority of students are from White British backgrounds, and the proportion of students with special educational needs is broadly average. The school has sports college status and additional specialisms in language and vocational education, and is also a training school. Staff engage in a wide range of educational initiatives. The school was judged outstanding by Ofsted in its most recent inspection. The headteacher has been in post for ten years.

The journey to ‘outstanding’

The quality of education at the school has been good for many years. The school has long enjoyed a strong reputation with local families and serves as a centre for adult and continuing education. The philosophy of lifelong education is embedded in many aspects of its provision. The school’s drive to become outstanding coincided, for the headteacher, with its expansion in terms of growth of student numbers and a new building programme, alongside central government initiatives which enabled secondary schools to develop specialisms. The headteacher believes strongly in developing excellent systems for the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff, and then ‘growing your own leaders from within’. The school has more recently established itself as an educational trust with three core threads: the highest standards for all in the community; outward-facing education; and international dimensions. The headteacher declares that at the core of the school’s journey to outstanding has been the ‘outward-facing personality’ of all who work in and with it.

Curriculum and achievement

Over one third of all GCSEs recorded in recent examinations were A or A* grades, and achievements across different subject areas are excellent. The senior team believes that the school’s ‘outstanding’ status is partly owed to the inclusiveness of the curriculum offer for the approximately 10% of students who do not readily adapt to a traditional mainstream curriculum. Senior staff place great store by the differentiated Key Stage 4 curriculum, with its wide range of applied courses linked to the school’s specialisms. Individualised pathways serve to motivate potentially disengaged youngsters, while fast-tracking allows for AS levels in economics and critical thinking to be taken in year 11. The assistant principal for applied learning leads on the policy whereby all students follow the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme from year 9. GCSEs are available from year 9, and particular innovation in the use of ICT across all departments has served to raise aspirations of what Key Stage 3 students can achieve. The languages magazine provides one striking example of how far and wide the students travel to learn from other cultures.

Teaching and learning

The headteacher’s reference to the ‘outward-facing personality’ of the school is especially pertinent to the raising of the quality of teaching and learning, and to sustaining excellence. The school is active in a wide range of local, national and international initiatives, which means that in the course of an academic year almost all teachers have experience of other schools and settings. They return to their own classrooms having cherry-picked some of the best learning practices; and the climate of the school expects teachers to innovate and ‘surprise the students in class’. As a result, much of the teaching is inspirational, leading to very high student engagement. Thirteen of the 80 staff are Advanced Skills Teachers; the headteacher emphasises the key role these colleagues have played in creating a whole-school culture of high aspiration, mutual



This headteacher rejects any notion of single conversations: 'I don't want a single conversation, I enjoy lots of conversations, and that's what intelligent leadership is all about'.

support and critical self-evaluation. The Advanced Skills Teachers are at the heart of a system of peer-observation which has created an 'open-door approach' to teachers visiting one another's classrooms to see which creative teaching techniques are effective with which students. In moving to outstanding, the school has preserved strong systems while seeking to place performance management within a wider professional context, so that lesson observations are routine and developmental rather than anything for teachers to be anxious about. Excellent teaching and learning are givens.

Leadership and management

In reflecting on leadership and management across the school, the headteacher returns again and again to his belief that a significant number of staff working on external agendas has the effect of stimulating an appetite to 'move things on'. Thus leadership constantly reinterprets and refreshes how the school's specialisms are operating, and seeks to be part of new national agendas as they appear relevant to the needs of students. The headteacher asserts: that strong values and unambiguous, accessible systems are essential to any outstanding school; that success comes from securing the right people and then investing in them; and that outward-facing partnerships bring a natural dynamic to the institution so that it cannot stagnate.

The governors have long-standing associations with the school and, importantly, understand and shape its values and ambitions. They reserve the right to intervene when they need to, but see their key role as enabling the leadership team to focus on its core work and not digress.

When the School Improvement Partner strategy was first launched (by the DCSF in 2005, to challenge and support school leaders in assessing how well their schools are performing and to help them plan for the future), the proposed model was of 'a single conversation'. Tellingly, this headteacher rejects any notion of single conversations: 'I don't want a single conversation, I enjoy lots of conversations, and that's what intelligent leadership is all about. How you harness your informal and formal networks makes a real difference in improving a school.' Perhaps most illuminating about the school's journey from good to outstanding and its ability to sustain high performance at all levels is the headteacher's summative statement: 'You have to tighten up to be good. You need to loosen to become outstanding.'

Key messages

- Appoint good people and grow your own leaders.
- Harness and shape passing initiatives.
- Enable teachers to work outside the school.
- 'Outstanding' is about what you do for children on the margins.
- Move from quality control to quality assurance.



Striking new buildings combine contemporary design with practicality, so the ethos is a judicious mix of innovation and traditional values.

Case study 4: 11–18 mixed comprehensive

Context

The school is an 11–18 mixed comprehensive with 1,300 students, with a large sixth form of over 400, serving an urban community. The majority of students are White British; the proportion of students with learning difficulties is below average. The school has several achievement awards, including those for Healthy Schools and Eco School. Specialisms include technology, vocational and sports. The school has training-school status. Striking new buildings combine contemporary design with practicality, so the ethos is a judicious mix of innovation and traditional values. The school was judged outstanding in its most recent inspection. The headteacher has been in post for three years, having previously served as deputy headteacher at the school.

The journey to ‘outstanding’

The school has served its students and community well for many years, until recently as an upper school taking students from year 9. Moving from good to outstanding was in many ways a natural aspiration. The comfort zone of ‘good’, and an attitude of ‘don’t fix what’s not broken’, together with significant parental over-subscription; these features have needed to be challenged during the school’s recent journey. The headteacher believes that in long-established good schools the drive to become outstanding lies in building energy at all levels, so that excitement about learning and about reaching for new horizons permeates the staffroom. She believes that schools ‘live in the moment’ because they are dealing with children and young people, so it is vital that staff embrace a culture that is relentlessly optimistic and focused on what students want to do today and tomorrow. The headteacher’s role is rooted, she says, in ‘encouraging others to think and not just be’, and providing a range of support and challenge systems to make that happen.

Curriculum and achievement

Students enter the school with above-average attainment and achieve well in their Key Stage 3 tests at the end of year 8. In 2009, 95% of year 11 students achieved five or more higher grades at GCSE, 85% including English and mathematics. High levels of participation and performance in sports, music and other awards are achieved, with displayed evidence of that success. The school has created a small-school ethos in years 7 and 8, with an innovative skills-based curriculum which acts as a launching pad for high attainment. Lessons demonstrate clear targets, sharp prioritisation and wise use of excellent resources. At Key Stage 4, the impact of the sports and vocational specialisms is strong, certainly in the view of students. Investment in ICT is considerable and has led to a tradition of independent learning being nurtured from year 7. Sixth-form learning is impressive in content and style, enhanced by collaboration with other schools, colleges and external agencies. Students have made a number of telling contributions to curriculum development; there are clear and regular channels of communication for students to feed back to their teachers on the quality of teaching: ‘This is your school and you take it forward.’ There are no bells to interrupt the purposeful calm which characterises the working day. The headteacher believes that refreshing the curriculum lies at the heart of sustaining an outstanding school.

Teaching and learning

Senior leaders say that teaching and learning have moved from good to outstanding as a result of a combination of factors. The headteacher’s lead on the importance of generating excitement in learning was a starting point. Professional development has centred on creativity within sound pedagogy. Teachers enjoy being in their classrooms. Being in a training school and training others helps teachers feel good about their profession and professionalism. Teachers draw attention



As the headteacher suggests, ‘whole-school cultures do not just happen – you have to be tenacious and deal promptly with practices which are not up to the standard of the best’.

to the role of students in improving classroom practice; students help to identify their learning objectives within given parameters. The school has made a major investment in the training and development of classroom support staff, with professional development being an entitlement. As the headteacher suggests, ‘whole-school cultures do not just happen – you have to be tenacious and deal promptly with practices which are not up to the standard of the best’. Further, she believes that teachers will only sustain their high energy levels if they have the opportunity to work alongside visiting experts – for example musicians, curators, designers, local community leaders. In addition, ‘inviting well-deployed critical friends into classrooms to conduct learning walks’ is a form of external support the headteacher strongly recommends.

Leadership and management

The climate of leadership and management is founded on intelligent accountability and a spirit of optimism about young people. Management systems are secure and trusted, and thus risk-taking and a lack of fear of failure permeate. At the heart of the school is a feeling that ‘everyone has a next step, everyone feels they are moving forward’. The headteacher believes that the visibility and tenacity of the senior staff are vital and that high-quality communication must be modelled. Kindness, mutual respect and forgiveness are equally important aspects of a thriving organisation. The school has used its Self-Evaluation Form on a regular basis, to re-examine its practices in relation to Ofsted’s ‘outstanding’ criteria. Latterly, students and parents have contributed to the writing of the form. The headteacher maintains that defusing parental anxieties about change is one of her core functions. The governing body has a high level of interest in the school, and provides a forum for discussion and professional challenge for senior leaders.

The school has positioned itself to develop as a ‘world-class’ school, benchmarking itself internationally as a way of maintaining its excellence. Characteristic of daily routines is its entrepreneurship, professionalism and business-like efficiency, all of which have played a core part in its improvement journey. Pace, optimism and explicit focus on what goes on in classrooms pervade the school’s ethos. The headteacher has not changed traditions and annual events that work, but has added, at well judged moments, ‘new traditions that will stand the test of time’. She concludes: ‘Appoint teachers who are better than you are!’

Key messages

- Strong systems support creativity.
- Communication, communication, communication.
- Create energy at all levels.
- Listen to what the students say about their classrooms.
- Manage staff and parent anxieties, no matter how minor.



There is 'no hiding place for coasting students or members of staff'.

Case study 5: 11–18 mixed multi-ethnic comprehensive

Context

The school is an 11–18 mixed multi-ethnic comprehensive with 1,300 students, situated in a deprived urban area. An above-average percentage of students is entitled to free meals, with a lower-than-average proportion having learning difficulties. The school has technology and training status. It was judged outstanding in its latest Ofsted inspection. The headteacher has been in post for six years. Traditional buildings have been sympathetically updated to provide a strong learning environment.

The journey to 'outstanding'

With an established 'good' brand upon which to build, the school was well placed to secure an outstanding judgement from Ofsted. The headteacher viewed this journey as her central mission in taking up post. She focused her energies on establishing unequivocally high expectations amongst a critical mass of students and staff. Central to the vision has been microscopic attention to the classroom, so that at any one time the school knows the attainment and progress rates of every student. There is 'no hiding place for coasting students or members of staff'. The headteacher led a shift in the mind-set of some staff about students' behaviour. Some of the vocabulary of the staffroom had risked giving the impression that the school was preoccupied by poor student behaviour, when in truth there was a small minority of students whose attitudes to learning were poor. Senior leaders talk of 'enthusing the can-doers, marginalising the blockers' in having moved the school forward. For the headteacher, leadership is about timing, moving an institution forward at the fastest pace it can withstand to the point where all associated with the school are rightly proud of what is being achieved.

Curriculum and achievement

Students make very good progress through Key Stage 3 and outstanding progress at Key Stage 4, with 90% of students achieving five or more higher grades at GCSE. A and AS Level results are similarly impressive. The school has worked imaginatively and effectively with students who have English as an additional language, viewing bilingualism as a benefit, not an obstacle. In a culturally diverse context, special attention has been paid to a language and practice of inclusion, for which the school has gained national recognition. Students speak of 'the atmosphere here which really helps us understand our work'. The year 7 curriculum, with its emphasis on group work, thinking skills, active learning and building resilience, has been a key ingredient in affording students a springboard for later examination success. So too have the school's efforts to bring a wide range of visitors into the school, suspending the regular timetable if necessary; efforts matched by a plethora of visits to, and innovative partnerships with, local communities, faith groups and businesses. Technology status has promoted good links with partner primaries, smoothing transition. The headteacher points out that when innovation has not worked, the school, in the spirit of 'failing wisely', has drawn back from a particular initiative. She believes that 'measured risk-taking within a can-do culture, and admitting when you've got it wrong' are fundamental in moving a school to outstanding.

Teaching and learning

The school has taken what it believes to be a tried and tested route to moving all teaching and learning to being good or better. Thoughtfully planned professional development has been an integral aspect of all departmental planning, with a focus on securing the strong basics of classroom practice: clear objectives shared with students; teachers breaking down difficult ideas into simple



They believe that when the phrase ‘whole-school culture’ trips off leaders’ tongues, it should mean what it says, whether referring to students, teachers or support staff.

steps; snappy introductions and mini-plenaries; meaningful differentiation; skilled use of interactive whiteboards and related technologies; and marking with best-next-steps for students. Students’ minimum and aspirational targets, alongside departmental targets, are the essentials of meticulous tracking and monitoring. For the senior team, the recent spotlight on the percentage of A* and A grades at GCSE is a hallmark of a school truly ambitious for its students. With English being an additional language for three quarters of the students, successful efforts have been made to ensure that texts in English and English Literature are relevant and engaging. All teachers are expected to maintain personal portfolios of the work of students they teach, a whole-school practice which both celebrates what students can do and spreads a message about teachers’ mutual accountability. Governors’ links to departments, with appropriate protocols, have proved fruitful over a period of many years in placing the classroom at the centre of whole-school planning.

Leadership and management

The senior staff team of seven is passionate about what the school achieves day by day, and believe that *leading* an Ofsted inspection by demonstrating that passion and pride, is crucial to securing an ‘outstanding’ verdict. They believe that when the phrase ‘whole-school culture’ trips off leaders’ tongues, it should mean what it says, whether referring to students, teachers or support staff. The headteacher reinforces through her own leadership the principle that everyone is a learner and that to teach is to learn. In setting ever-higher aspirational targets at GCSE, she maintains that timing is everything; targets must be both challenging *and* plausible ‘if the occasional nay-sayer is to believe that *these* students in *this* context *can* do it’.

A professional approach to performance management; short annual interviews between the headteacher and each member of staff on an annual basis; professional development rooted in staff’s understanding of the Self-Evaluation Form; excellent training for middle leaders, ‘to grow your own’: these, the school says, are non-negotiable on the route to outstanding. The headteacher frequently refers to calculated risk-taking, for herself, staff and students: ‘That’s how we learn, isn’t it?’. The governing body has both encouraged and wisely restrained the leadership team at critical moments. Further, the school believes in the role of bespoke critical friends in challenging what it is doing, balanced with sharing its own best practices with other schools.

Key messages

- Persuade the ‘critical mass’ that change can be made.
- Don’t talk about ‘behaviour’ as if it is separate from other aspects of school life.
- Enable calculated risk-taking.
- Know every child and what s/he is capable of.
- Take pride in what you have achieved together.



A high-quality work-related vocational pathway includes subjects ranging from motor vehicle maintenance to horse care.

Case study 6: 11–16 voluntary-aided co-educational school

Context

This is an 11–16 voluntary-aided co-educational school serving a mixed socio-economic area of a coastal town. A specialist school for mathematics and computing, it has been designated a high-performing specialist school, a National Centre of Excellence for gifted and talented students, and a Leadership Partner School. The school supports another local secondary school, and the executive team and several staff are shared by both schools. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average, as are the proportions of students from minority ethnic groups and for whom English is an additional language. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is average. The school delivers some post-16 advanced apprenticeship courses and also manages a full-time nursery.

The headteacher was appointed 13 years ago, when the school was regarded as failing. He is now executive headteacher, leading improvements in a neighbouring school. The school itself is led by a head of school, who ensures that day-to-day standards and ideals are maintained.

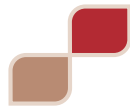
The journey to ‘outstanding’

From a very low point 13 years ago, the school moved to ‘good’ in 2007 and to ‘outstanding’ in 2010. Student outcomes in 1997 were 25% higher grades at GCSE; the 2009 results are 87% higher grades, with a projection of over 90% for 2010. In the first few years of its transformation, the school concentrated on four main levers of improvement. Firstly, the headteacher established a culture based on a school motto and mission statement ensuring that the basic expectations were in place, especially in relation to behaviour, uniform, attendance and punctuality. The belief in ‘the supreme value of every person’ is at the heart of this church school’s mission. Secondly, a curriculum was designed which gave a route to success for each student. Thirdly, classroom quality was ensured through raising the standards of teaching and learning. Fourthly, secure management systems were implemented. The headteacher thus delivered a transformational agenda whilst maintaining a high proportion of the school’s existing staff.

Curriculum and achievement

Students benefit from accelerated Key Stage 3 and extended Key Stage 4 programmes, which can give them up to double the usual curriculum time to prepare for GCSE, although there is no compulsion to start the GCSE course in year 9; some departments offer a foundation course first. The timetable remains fluid and can be rewritten at any time. For example, most year 11 students complete their GCSE courses in maths and English in November; when results are announced in January, the timetable is rewritten to offer students approximately eight different pathways thereafter, depending on the success attained in these subjects. A high-quality work-related vocational pathway includes subjects ranging from motor vehicle maintenance to horse care. This route is taken by about a third of the cohort. The school ensures a Level 2 pathway for every student, which results in 97% of students gaining at least 5+ A*-G grades at GCSE. Students are supported by guidance about curriculum choices in year 8.

Many students stay on after year 11 to follow advanced apprenticeships based in a post-16 training centre and training nursery. This provision enables trainees to gain double A Level qualifications along with an advanced NVQ (National Vocational Qualification).



Senior leaders have a clear view of the strengths of the school and its staff, and of what needs to be improved.

There is a sophisticated system of data-tracking and of monitoring and intervening in students' progress. Combined with the school's caring ethos, the system enables students, especially the more vulnerable, to make the best of opportunities in school.

Teaching and learning

The school operates a process whereby any teacher can request assistance from the senior leadership team for the management of classes which become challenging to them. The senior leader will plan with the teacher and in some cases model teaching in the classroom, while ensuring that ownership of the class remains with the teacher and then expecting that the teacher will continue to deliver 'good+' lessons.

The after-school meeting cycle is focused predominantly on developing teaching skills. The school endeavours to deliver outstanding training for its staff, where possible in school. Teaching has improved as a result, but the school recognises that more needs to be done to sustain a higher proportion of outstanding lessons.

Leadership and management

Senior leaders have a clear view of the strengths of the school and its staff, and of what needs to be improved. Line-management meetings have clear agendas, discussed in advance at senior management team meetings to ensure consistency in approach and outcome, and focused on evidence. Preparation on both sides for the line-management meetings is specifically required in the annual plan. Departmental self-evaluation is under constant review through the line-management meetings, so that updates occur in a planned and supportive way.

The monitoring of teaching and learning is comprehensive. Trends in each area of practice can be plotted and areas prioritised for further staff training or monitoring. This proactive process enables a wide range of intervention and support programmes to contribute to the achievement of students and the development of staff.

The senior leadership team operates a highly distributed approach to leadership, underpinned by a deep understanding of the school's mission. Members of the team work within a spirit of high trust and autonomy. Each member of the team is shadowed to support succession planning and to enable more senior leaders to engage in the support of other schools. There are strong, sustainable online communication systems.

Key messages

- A strong ethos permeates the school and underpins decision-making.
- A flexible and innovative curriculum designed to enable every student to gain a wide range of Level 2 qualifications.
- A timetable which is not set in stone.
- A mentoring system which takes a holistic view of need and adjusts frequently to changing priorities.
- A senior leadership team which has extra capacity built in, to enable the school to support other schools in the locality.
- A sophisticated data-tracking and monitoring system which supports learning.



The systems used for monitoring progress are rigorous and robust, and have been improved through the appointment of a data co-ordinator who provides high-quality training for staff.

Case study 7: 11–16 community comprehensive

Context

The school is an 11–16 community comprehensive with 920 students on roll. It opened in new buildings in September 2005 and the first cohort of students is now in year 11. The school was founded to serve a rapidly expanding town and new housing development on the fringe of a large city. This is a relatively prosperous area; the social and economic circumstances of the students are favourable. Facilities are currently being built for the first post-16 intake in September 2010; the school will then take students up to age 18. Most students are of White British heritage and the number of students whose first language is not English is well below the national average. The proportion eligible for free school meals is below average; the proportion who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is similar to the national average, although the proportion with a statement of special educational need is above average. The school shares many facilities with the local community. It achieved specialist status in languages and performing arts in 2008.

The headteacher opened the school in 2005. The school's core values, called the four Rs (resilient, reflective, resourceful, and responsible), were established at the outset, as was its motto: 'For the community, in the community'.

The journey to 'outstanding'

The school's first Ofsted inspection, in October 2006, judged it to be good and to have made a strong start. Its key strength was excellent procedures to care for, guide and support students. In the Ofsted inspection of November 2009, the school was identified as outstanding, with a strength in its inclusive and welcoming ethos. The inspection report noted that the headteacher provided the school with outstanding leadership and that he was well supported by a skilful and effective leadership team. It affirmed that the team had been successful in establishing the school at the heart of the community.

Curriculum and achievement

The school has worked hard to develop an increasingly personalised curriculum which reflects its four core values. Students receive a broad entitlement of subject 'domains' across each Key Stage. A significant amount of curriculum time is devoted to numeracy and literacy. The curriculum at Key Stage 4 is divided into essential learning for everyone, and an additional individual learning pathway. As a specialist performing arts and languages school, the school actively promotes these subjects through communication and performance.

The systems used for monitoring progress are rigorous and robust, and have been improved through the appointment of a data co-ordinator who provides high-quality training for staff. Data is presented so that vulnerable groups in every subject can readily be tracked. As the school had no validated external data for any cohort, Ofsted conducted a wide-ranging work sample to check levels and projections, and confirmed that the school's assessment and reporting processes were secure.

The students value inclusivity. The school is fully accessible to children with mobility difficulties and/or medical problems. Vulnerable children are accepted and nurtured. The school day is conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. A sense of calm and purpose is palpable around the corridors.

Teaching and learning

From the first year of the school's life, senior staff have focused relentlessly on maintaining high-quality learning and teaching. High proportions of staff join as newly qualified teachers; constant



Staff take a clear and active part in devising school policy and shaping the school's future.

monitoring means that under-performance in the classroom is detected quickly and support is provided. Senior staff have been trained in how to quality-assure learning and teaching; in recent years this training has extended to all teachers. All senior staff are expected to deliver outstanding lessons. The headteacher sets himself the task of knowing every child entering the school by teaching maths to the year 7 students.

Staff finish teaching early on Mondays for two hours of in-house training to ensure consistency in the development of policy and procedures and to provide opportunities to showcase best practice.

Leadership and management

There is absolute clarity regarding the requirements for leadership at the school – creativity, cultural literacy, high aspirations, an outward-looking approach, and the ability to maintain high-quality relationships in a fast-paced environment. The interview process for new recruits to leadership positions is rigorous and based on competence in teaching. Most senior leaders, teaching and non-teaching, are home-grown. The induction of new staff is a refined process. Expectations are high and staff absence low.

The chair of governors describes the headteacher as: having a clear sense of purpose and vision, attuned to the governors' view of a community school; a willingness to listen to staff, governors and parents; a remarkable ability to synthesise complex issues and then take appropriate action; a credibility through maintaining his teaching commitment; and a facility in communication both internally and with other schools.

The school has robust systems for self-evaluation. A fortnightly review focused on subjects or themes ensures that evaluation is based on evidence; action points follow evaluation.

There is an ethos of openness and collaboration. There are frequent staff and student surveys, providing confidential feedback to the senior leadership team. Staff take a clear and active part in devising school policy and shaping the school's future. Parents are active in expressing their views and are welcomed to the parents' forum, where they have advised on the assessment and reporting system, the format of parents' evenings and the parents' portal on the school's website. The students' voice is strong. Students are involved in appointments, the self-evaluation process, a thriving school council and an associate governor programme.

The school is relentless in its determination to secure excellence in all areas of its life and work.

Key messages

- An ethos based on 'For the community, in the community'.
- A personalised curriculum for students based on the school's four core values.
- Promotion of the performing arts and languages specialisms through the themes of communication and performance, building learners' confidence to play an active part in and beyond the school.
- A strong professional development programme to grow the talent in staff.
- Leading-edge information-technology systems for data capture and analysis.
- Students who value inclusivity.
- A highly consultative relationship with parents.



Students make excellent progress and attain exceptionally high test and examination results at the end of Key Stages 3, 4 and 5.

Case study 8: 11–18 comprehensive

Context

The school is a 11–18 comprehensive situated in a largely prosperous town in the south of England, and serving a wide area around the town. The school welcomes students from other Christian and religious backgrounds, with these students constituting about 25% of its intake. Student numbers are currently 1,200, including 200 in the sixth form. The proportion of children from ethnic minorities is slightly above average, as is the proportion of those who have English as an additional language. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities, including those with statements, has increased over the years but is below the national average.

The school is a specialist languages college, a Leading Edge school and a Leadership Partner school. Languages permeate the curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

The school's mission is to be 'a Catholic school where every individual is highly valued and where care and concern for others is central to our work'.

The journey to 'outstanding'

Posted around the school is the question: 'If this is going to be the best school in England, what are you going to do to help us get there?' This question underpins the aspirations of the highly motivated and energetic staff, who commented on the outstanding and inspirational leadership of the headteacher, held in the highest regard by staff and students alike.

The headteacher took up her post 15 years ago, when the school was regarded as coasting. Expectations were low, and GCSE results had remained around 45–47% A*–C for four years. After one year, the results moved from 47% to 59% A*–C.

The headteacher says, uncompromisingly, 'We are here to serve the children'. This belief has resulted in her unrelenting drive to ensure that all students achieve the best of which they are capable. Over the years, the headteacher has built a highly motivated and effective school leadership team, constantly striving for excellence. She is noted for having the ability to recruit staff of the highest calibre at all levels. Expectations of staff regarding punctuality, dress and lesson preparation are explicit in the staff handbook; non-compliance or under-performance is addressed immediately. Anyone not meeting these expectations will be supported in 'leaving with dignity'.

Curriculum and achievement

Students enter the school with above-average attainment, although within the school there is a comprehensive range of abilities. Students make excellent progress and attain exceptionally high test and examination results at the end of Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. The progress of students within the vulnerable groups is at least in line with, and in some cases better than, that of other students. The target-setting process is unusual. The school doesn't let students know their specific target grades; teachers are aware of them and use them for planning. Students are told that they are aiming for an A/A* or, for those of lower ability, at least a C. This strategy has resulted in departmental and whole-school targets being exceeded year after year.

At Key Stage 4, the curriculum is highly personalised, offering each student a clear pathway for learning post-16. Arrangements are made for those needing extra support in English and maths. The school's specialism creates opportunities to study a wide range of languages within and beyond the curriculum. The overwhelming majority of students stay on in a thriving and successful sixth form.



High-quality professional development is based on what is already working well at the school.

Senior staff and main-scale teachers alike refer to an unrelentingly positive approach to students.

Teaching and learning

Senior staff see it as their priority to ensure that the main objective of the teaching staff is to plan excellent lessons. Bureaucracy is reduced to a minimum to facilitate this. Senior staff are expert teachers. They visit every lesson every day, and rate staff on a 4-point scale each week. Where a lesson is judged less than good, the member of staff is supported in planning the next lesson so that the students in question do not experience anything less than a good lesson the next time they meet the teacher. This programme of intervention is combined with paired peer observations on a theme identified by the senior leadership team, which has created an open, supportive environment in which staff can learn from best practice within the school.

High-quality professional development is based on what is already working well at the school. Teacher bursaries are available, to stimulate research and to ensure that learning and teaching are at the heart of the school's work.

Leadership and management

Members of the senior leadership team undergo appraisals where up to nine members of staff may say what that person does well, suggest how he or she could be 'even better if...', and offer a piece of advice.

There is an acknowledgement that 'tight systems and structures allow you to be no more than good'. Fundamental to the success of the school's leadership is the concept of transparency and integrity, based on a belief that if staff are not doing a great job then it is a manager's job to tell them: 'If you don't and they fail, it's your fault'.

Middle leaders are extremely effective and share the senior leadership's vision. Induction of new staff is exemplary. Teachers new to the school in September are individually interviewed by the headteacher in October to ascertain if there is anything more that can be done to support them.

The concept of 'high challenge/low stress' is conveyed to teachers and students alike.

Key messages

- There is absolute clarity about what the overriding mission ('to serve the children') means in everyday practice.
- Leaders at all levels are clear about their role and the autonomy they have to fulfil their responsibilities.
- High expectations permeate every aspect of school life.
- Bureaucracy is minimised, to allow teachers to focus on developing and delivering outstanding lessons.
- Where concerns arise, support is implemented immediately.
- Senior leaders are positive and visible. Every lesson is visited every day – to celebrate and to support.
- Everyone knows the data.
- Recruitment is key. Only teachers who can deliver the very best experience for students are appointed.



Outstanding schools have systems and approaches which guarantee that the overwhelming majority of teaching in classrooms is at least good, and usually excellent.

4. Conclusions

Outstanding schools are different in their contexts, histories and styles, as well as in other ways. That said, research and inspection evidence suggest they have many qualities in common. This study of schools that have made the shift to outstanding identifies key aspects of their work on which the process of transformation has focused.

Consistency of and creativity in teaching

Outstanding schools have systems and approaches which guarantee that the overwhelming majority of teaching in classrooms is at least good, and usually excellent. These systems and approaches are evidence-based; they eschew the anecdotal. Senior leaders between them have a monitoring role which gives them a confident knowledge of the professional qualities of all the teachers in the school. Once consistency has been reliably attained, the emphasis is on maximising the frequency with which lessons are truly memorable experiences of pleasurable, demanding, collaborative learning, for teacher and students alike. Formative assessments of students' work, based on principles common across the school, maintain a clear sense of students' progress. The products of students' learning are celebrated through publication, performance or display.

A personalised curriculum

Outstanding schools adapt their curriculum offer to students so that every student has an individual pathway through his or her school career, agreed with staff at key moments in that career, in consultation with parents. Progress along the pathway is continuously checked. Sophisticated monitoring and data-handling systems give staff a constantly updated understanding of a student's progress, leading to prompt and apt interventions in the work of students who under-achieve.

Engagement of students

Students in outstanding schools see themselves as active partners in the school's life and work, not as passive consumers of a pre-planned product. This sense of partnership is realised through students' participation in regular reviews of their work and progress, and through the sincere attention that staff pay to their opinions on all aspects of the school's activity and organisation. Students' voices may be heard through the school council, through the influence of their representatives in the appointment of staff, or through a system by which students appraise the effectiveness of their teachers.

Relations with the outside world

Outstanding schools maintain mutually productive relationships with parents and the wider local community. Their communication systems are excellent. Parents have a genuine influence on the school's policies and procedures. Governing bodies of outstanding schools understand their strategic role in influencing or affirming the school's overall direction, while allowing senior leaders their executive space. Outstanding schools often have a formal responsibility as guide and mentor to other local schools which need to improve. They frequently also have contacts further afield, for example with schools in other countries.



Inspirational leadership

Headteachers of outstanding schools have had an overall, long-term vision of what their school could be, however distant that vision may have been from where the school was at the time, and have translated that vision into practical and successful effort on the part of a critical mass of staff, especially of senior staff. They know how to appoint excellent people to other leadership positions in the school, and then trust them to do their jobs; distribution of leadership is normal. While encouraging innovation and measured risk-taking on the part of staff, they are uncompromising and, if necessary, ruthless in addressing poor performance. They promote an atmosphere of confident pride in the school's culture. They fulfil their role as the principal representative of the school in its relations with the community it serves. They maintain their credibility with staff by continuing to do some classroom teaching.



5. Appendix 1: Examples of criteria for ‘outstanding’ and ‘good’ Ofsted judgements

Here are examples of Ofsted’s criteria for judging a school ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ in one each of the specific sub-divisions of the three main areas. They are quoted from *Evaluation Schedule for Schools – Guidance and Grade Descriptors for Inspecting Schools in England under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005* (Ofsted 2010a).

In ‘the quality of students’ learning and their progress and the quality of learning for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress’, within ‘outcomes for students’:

| Example 1: Ofsted’s criteria for judging a school | |
|---|--|
| Outstanding (1) | The students acquire knowledge, develop understanding and learn and practise skills exceptionally well. Students demonstrate excellent concentration and are rarely off task, even in extended periods without direction from an adult. They have developed resilience when tackling challenging activities in a range of subjects. Their keenness and commitment to succeed in all aspects of school life and ability to grasp opportunities to extend and improve their learning are exceptional. Progress is at least good in each key stage, key subjects and for different groups and is exemplary in some. |
| Good (2) | The students acquire knowledge, develop understanding and learn and practise skills well. The students are keen to do well, apply themselves diligently in lessons and work at a good pace. They seek to produce their best work and are usually interested and enthusiastic about their learning in a range of subjects. A very large majority of groups of students make at least good progress and some may make outstanding progress, with nothing that is inadequate. |

In ‘the quality of teaching and the use of assessment to support learning’, within ‘the effectiveness of the school’s provision’:

| Example 2: Ofsted’s criteria for judging a school | |
|---|---|
| Outstanding (1) | Teaching is at least good and much is outstanding, with the result that the students are making exceptional progress. It is highly effective in inspiring students and ensuring that they learn extremely well. Excellent subject knowledge is applied consistently to challenge and inspire students. Resources, including new technology, make a marked contribution to the quality of learning, as does the precisely targeted support provided by other adults. Teachers and other adults are acutely aware of their students’ capabilities and of their prior learning and understanding, and plan very effectively to build on these. Marking and dialogue between teachers, other adults and students are consistently of a very high quality. Students understand in detail how to improve their work and are consistently supported in doing so. Teachers systematically and effectively check students’ understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with striking impact on the quality of learning. |



| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Good (2) | <p>The teaching is consistently effective in ensuring that students are motivated and engaged. The great majority of teaching is securing good progress and learning. Teachers generally have strong subject knowledge which enthuses and challenges most students and contributes to their good progress. Good and imaginative use is made of resources, including new technology to enhance learning. Other adults' support is well focused and makes a significant contribution to the quality of learning. As a result of good assessment procedures, teachers and other adults plan well to meet the needs of all students. Students are provided with detailed feedback, both orally and through marking. They know how well they have done and can discuss what they need to do to sustain good progress. Teachers listen to, observe and question groups of students during lessons in order to reshape tasks and explanations to improve learning.</p> |
|-----------------|---|

In 'the effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement and the leadership and management of teaching and learning', within 'the effectiveness of the school's leadership and management':

| Example 3: Ofsted's criteria for judging a school | |
|--|--|
| Outstanding (1) | <p>The senior leadership team and other leaders and managers are conspicuously successful in inspiring the school community to share a strong sense of purpose which involves work towards meeting or sustaining ambitious targets for all students. Morale is very high and belief in the school's success runs through all levels of staff. Rigorous and extensive monitoring, searching analysis and self-challenge enable the school, together with its significant partners, to devise exceptionally well-focused plans. Actions taken by the school and, where relevant, its partners are implemented with precision and managed thoroughly. As a result, the quality of teaching is at least good and leaders and managers at all levels are taking highly effective steps to drive up the quality of teaching still further. Consequently, outcomes in achievement and well-being for most students are good, and some are exceptionally high.</p> |
| Good (2) | <p>The senior leadership team and many middle leaders and managers consistently communicate high expectations to staff about securing improvement. They galvanise the enthusiasm of staff and channel their efforts to good effect. Leaders and managers routinely make good use of a range of rigorous monitoring activities relating to teaching, other provision and outcomes. Planning involves any relevant major partners, and is founded on robust evidence and good-quality data. It is tackling key areas of weakness, including those in teaching, systematically and is building on areas of strength. As a result, teaching is at least satisfactory and improving. Target-setting is realistic and challenging. Consequently, outcomes are generally good, or there is substantial evidence that they are improving strongly.</p> |



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