

Evaluation of the Mayor's London Schools Excellence Fund

Executive Summary

March 2016

The logo for SQW, consisting of the letters 'SQW' in a bold, dark red, sans-serif font.

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1. Executive summary

1. The London Schools' Excellence Fund (LSEF) is a major element of the Mayor's Education Programme, a programme that was established following the Mayor's Education Inquiry in 2011-12¹. The LSEF (amounting to a total of just over £24 million, with £20 million of that coming from the Department for Education)² was disbursed over three funding rounds, to a total of 110 projects.
2. In setting up the Fund, the Greater London Authority (GLA) intended it to be a 'bottom-up' approach, which would focus on issues of priority to schools. The LSEF sought to test three distinct hypotheses:
 - Investing in teacher subject knowledge and subject-specific teaching methods/ pedagogy will lead to improved outcomes for pupils' attainment, subject participation and aspiration.
 - Effective school networks and partnerships support improved schools and teacher collaboration which impacts on pupil outcomes.
 - A focus on teachers and subject expertise supports cultural change and helps raise expectations in the London school system.
3. Every successful bidder (of which 95 were in scope for this meta-evaluation) was expected to monitor and evaluate³ their own project, both to support their own learning and in order to enable learning from the different approaches and activities, and to assess the impact of the Fund. In doing so, they were supported by the GLA and by Project Oracle⁴, who provided targeted support to projects, particularly since many of the projects were new to self-evaluation. The support programme had a capacity building role, contributing to the evaluation and research skills in the sector. In turn the projects with good quality evaluations provided useful insights for practitioners and policy-makers.
4. This report draws on the self-evaluation reports of 78 of these 95 funded projects (those that had submitted complete documentation - Theories of Change, Evaluation Plans and Final Reports) by the end of November 2015. This constitutes 82% of the projects in scope for the meta-evaluation. It focuses specifically on:
 - the achievements of the funded projects
 - the learning that has occurred as a result of the LSEF, in relation to the outputs and outcomes that the funded projects identified
 - the implications of these findings for the commissioning of similar projects

¹ Greater London Authority (2012) The Mayor's Education Inquiry Final Report: Findings and Recommendations [Online] Available:

<http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Mayor's%20Education%20Inquiry%20Final%20Report.pdf>

² One of the project elements (*English: the key to integration in London*) attracted additional European funding.

³ Project Self Evaluation Reports can be found at www.london.gov.uk/LSEFresources

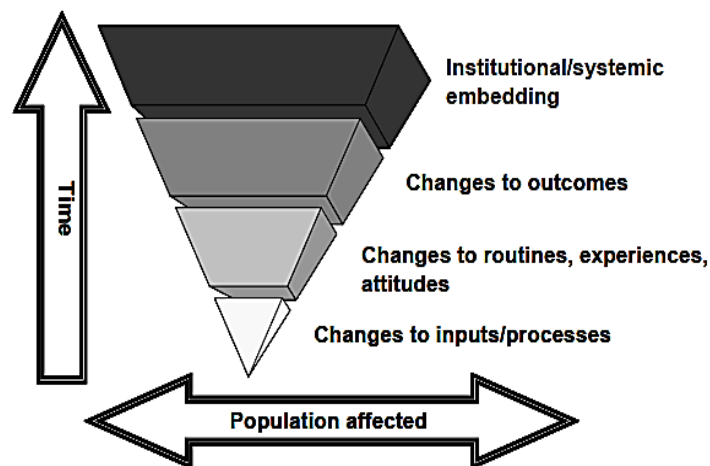
⁴ Project Oracle is a children and youth evidence hub managed and implemented by The Social Innovation Partnership (TSIP) and London Metropolitan University (LMU) and funded by the GLA, the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

- the conditions necessary to ensure that projects can be effective
- the strategies and activities that appear to be associated with the most robust outcomes.

Emerging impact

5. The information provided by the projects in their Final Evaluation Reports suggested that many were enthused by the opportunity to try out new approaches or expand existing approaches to increase subject knowledge amongst teachers and improve classroom pedagogy.
6. The evidence from the project reports indicated that the main successes of the LSEF, to date, have been in improving teacher confidence and in improving subject knowledge and content-specific pedagogy. Not surprisingly, given the length of time over which projects had been operating, projects found it harder to identify (or attribute) improvements in pupil attainment or pupil engagement or aspirations as a result of the funding, though some projects reported a number of early indications of improvements in pupil outcomes. As set out in Figure 1-1, such changes in pupil outcomes would rarely be expected at this stage in the lives of projects. However, as discussed below a number of the earlier stages were clearly evident.

Figure 1-1: Assessing impact over time: The four stage model of impact



Source: Morris M and Golden S 2005

7. In considering the impact of the LSEF since its launch, an analysis of the projects' submitted reports suggest that:
 - There have been some marked changes in **first order impacts** (the inputs and processes identified in Figure 1-1), with schools and other stakeholders able to access

significant funds and expertise to set up and test a wide range of different approaches to achieving outcomes for teachers and (in the longer-term) pupils.

- These changes in **inputs and processes** have led to changes in **infrastructure**, and to changes in staff **routines, experiences** and **attitudes** (with staff showing willingness both to have their skills and confidence assessed and to allow peers to observe their practice in the classroom, for instance).
 - In particular, the LSEF has supported and promoted **the establishment of peer-to-peer networks, coaching and mentoring** and the establishment of **intra- and inter-school collaboration** and (through the use of **subject experts**) activities across local authorities.
 - For **teachers**, the projects recorded a range of **outcomes** (particularly in relation to **improved confidence, subject knowledge** and **content-specific pedagogy**). These characteristics that (as Leu, 2004⁵, and Goe and Stickler, 2008⁶, summarised) have been associated with those most likely to improve pupils' outcomes. Where projects had been successful in these areas, it would suggest that over the longer-term, such outcomes may be associated with improvements in pupil attainment.
 - Outcomes included early signs of improvements in **pupil attitudes and engagement**, with some projects also being able to identify increases in subject-specific skills⁷.
8. The ongoing challenge that remains is to embed these changes in the system; not all projects were confident that progress would continue towards attainment outcomes for pupils or institutional/systemic embedding (Level 4 impact, Fig 1-1 above) without further infrastructural and/or funding support.

Learning points and recommendations

9. This section considers the main learning points from the meta-evaluation of the LSEF and presents a number of recommendations for consideration by commissioners, policy-makers and those involved in the development and delivery of targeted interventions to support improvements in the quality of teaching and, ultimately, in pupil learning outcomes.
- **Establishing an appropriate theoretical basis for a project supports effective project planning, delivery and evaluation.** The findings from the meta-evaluation suggest that the projects that were most effective were those where the staff developing and delivering the project were clear about their underlying theory of change and about the links between what they were doing and what they were trying to achieve. Such projects were also more able to identify the types of evidence they needed to monitor and assess their progress and were robust in their application.
 - **Investing in scoping activities (including audits or needs assessments) to establish whether a proposal meets a recognised need should be encouraged.**

⁵ Leu E., (2004). Developing a Positive Environment for Teacher Quality. Working paper #3 under EQUIP1's Study of School-based Teacher In-service Programme and Clustering of Schools. U.S. Agency for International Development

⁶ Goe L., and Stickler L. M., (2008). Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: Making the Most of Recent Research. National Comprehensive Centre for Teacher Quality

⁷ This was most evident amongst younger pupils, where the nature of the assessment strategies used enabled detailed changes to be both monitored and recorded

The more successful projects were those that had taken steps to assess the actual (not just the anticipated) needs of the target group (whether of schools, teachers or pupils). This meant that their project delivery model was more effectively tailored to the context in which it was delivered. Early engagement with proposed target groups means that the viability of the delivery model can be tested and refined, and the aims and objectives of the project can be better clarified. Time is needed to undertake this work, and may delay project implementation (a challenge when funds are time-limited) but taking this staged approach has the potential to improve the overall effectiveness of project activity.

- **Sufficient resources need be set aside for project management and coordination.** The availability of staff and time to coordinate project implementation was crucial and was sometimes overlooked at the start of some projects. The continuing lack of any such resource in a number of these projects hampered their delivery (whether there were multiple delivery partners, or where delivery was the remit of a single stakeholder). However, where resources were set aside, they often proved critical to project success.
- **Facilitating peer-to-peer collaboration places additional demands on a delivery organisation.** While the establishment and operation of peer-to-peer networks were a particular success of the LSEF, it needs to be recognised that organising such interaction requires oversight, time and a clear focus on the purpose and role of such networks.
- **Peer-to-peer networking can be more effective when it is embedded within all facets of project delivery.** A number of projects demonstrated effective practice in developing and managing peer-to-peer networks, but also emphasised that the willingness of potential beneficiaries to work in this way should not be assumed. Activities to develop trust between participants and to demonstrate the value of joint working (whether to share learning or to develop shared resources) were often critical.
- **Putting appropriate quality assurance processes in place is important.** One of the challenges faced by projects was ensuring the fidelity and quality of training, particularly where cascade models were in operation, or where multiple stakeholders were involved in delivery.
- **To optimise beneficiary engagement, steps should be taken to align project delivery with the availability of beneficiaries.** As projects noted, even with good senior leadership support (an essential element for success), releasing staff for training during the school day (particularly in smaller schools) can be challenging and although the potential benefits of the project may be recognised by all potential participants, engagement can be seriously affected if activities are not planned in a way that recognises teachers' other commitments.
- **Although not always feasible, training and support activities can be most effective where they are tailored to meet the needs of individual beneficiaries.** A number of the more successful projects combined group training sessions with individual mentoring and coaching (whether by subject experts or by other staff in

the school or from within the project cohort) to help beneficiaries apply their learning and review their performance in a dynamic way.

- **Evaluation approaches should be both realistic and proportionate.** At the outset, projects should be encouraged to consider the resource implications of their proposed approach to evaluation and ensure that this is both proportionate to the outcomes they anticipate and realistic when they consider the available amount of funding. It should also be recognised that it may take time to identify the most appropriate monitoring or testing tools and to ensure that they are available ahead of the project launch in order to provide a baseline against which progress can be assessed.
- **Clarity about the intentions of programme-level evaluation and support for project self-evaluation is critical to ensure quality and to enable cross-project comparability.** The GLA had helpfully designed a series of detailed templates in order to gather comparable data from funded projects and had put in place a support strategy to assist them in the design and conduct of their evaluations. They were also very responsive in introducing appropriate amendments when the formative meta-evaluation indicated that some projects appeared unclear about the nature of the data they needed to include in their reports. Even so, some elements of the necessary data required to enable, for example, a value for money analysis were incomplete at the final reporting stage and, because of the limited timescale, pupil outcomes and the wider system impact (Hypothesis 3) could not be assessed.
- **In delivering teacher CPD it is important to acknowledge that different types of expertise may be required to support an all-round improvement in teacher performance.** Many of the projects combined the development of teachers' subject knowledge with training that demonstrated how that knowledge could best be deployed in the classroom. The meta-evaluation suggested that the sharing of subject expertise was often insufficient by itself, but was more effective when delivered by experts who had the skills to link subject knowledge to pedagogical content knowledge.
- **Success in projects was more often reported where training in specific subject-knowledge content was combined with general and subject specific pedagogical theory and practical skills.** Using subject champions in school and focusing on teacher collaboration were both effective approaches.

About the meta-evaluation

10. All of the 78 projects included in the meta-evaluation had been validated to Standard 1 of the Project Oracle Standards⁸, 66 of them had put themselves forward for assessment under Standard 2 and six under Standard 3 (three projects chose not to seek validation)⁹. At the time of the meta-evaluation, they were still being assessed in relation to the higher standards and

⁸ See <http://project-oracle.com/standards-of-evidence/standard-one/>

⁹ Data from Project Oracle shows that a total of 77 projects put themselves forward for validation at Standard 2 and seven for Standard 3. A further 10 were recorded as not putting themselves forward for validation. A number of the funded projects (under English as the Key to Integration and Fostering Achievement) were being evaluated separately and so have not been put forward for validation.

this meta-evaluation report is based on the evaluation reports submitted to the GLA prior to the Project Oracle validation process. Some of these projects may have amended their self-evaluation report, following feedback from Project Oracle, in order to achieve validation at Standard 2 or Standard 3. The descriptive material from these documents was first used to understand the nature, focus and delivery model of each of the projects (discussed in Section 2), and to provide a limited assessment of value for money.

11. The meta-evaluation was conducted using a framework of 16 indicators that reflected the nature and context of the LSEF against which projects were reviewed¹⁰. This process was adopted in order to ensure a systematic, consistent and comprehensive analysis. Reviewers were asked to make a judgement of the quality of the evaluation evidence against a number of key questions. These judgements contributed to the calculation of a total score for each indicator and each evaluation phase (Evaluation Set Up, Evaluation Conduct and Evaluation Reporting) for all 78 projects. This enabled us to calculate the overall strength of the evaluation evidence for individual projects and, subsequently, to reflect on the outputs, outcomes and impacts from the projects for which there was credible and robust evidence, giving an indication of the impact of the programme as a whole.
12. Finally, we explored the lessons that had been learnt in relation to programme set-up (what did this indicate about the nature and scope of the evidence base on which funded projects need to be based to ensure objectives can be met), implementation (what needs to be in place to ensure that projects can be effective) and context (including the ways in which projects are evaluated).
13. A full analysis for the lessons learnt from the LSEF is provided in the meta-evaluation final report, which can be accessed here: <https://www.london.gov.uk/WHAT-WE-DO/education-and-youth/improving-standards-schools-and-teaching/london-schools-excellence>.

¹⁰ This framework was based on indicators developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) based at the University of Iowa. More detail on our approach to the meta-evaluation is provided in the supporting Technical Annex.