No-one is more ambitious for the young people of our country than those who work in our schools”
Russell Hobby, General Secretary NAHT
What do we know about what makes great schools and how can we help schools to achieve greatness?

The Challenge

A great school is one that delivers great outcomes. Often these are narrowly defined around tests of subject knowledge at defined points in a young person's school career. No one would deny the significance of such standards, and good schools must deliver on them, but if this was all students took from their schools most of us would be disappointed. The Qualifications & Curriculum Authority in England (now defunct) coined three aims for the curriculum \(^1\) that resonate with many within and outside the world of education across the globe- to produce Successful Learners, Confident Individuals & Responsible Citizens. A great school will be organised to deliver all three and not just the first.

Schools are highly complex institutions. They have passionate and influential stakeholders at every level from the national to the local and require the bringing together of effort from many semi autonomous professionals to serve large numbers of consumers. As a consequence the instigation and management of change is inevitably complicated, and the rewards for achieving any level of greatness outside those described by our inspection system's narrow boundaries, extremely limited.

What can we learn from research about highly effective schools?

Scheerens's (2005) authoritative meta analysis of almost 30 years of school effectiveness research highlighted a set of 'Effectiveness Enhancing Factors' that span aspects of leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, climate and relationships (these can be reviewed in Table 1). Even a brief perusal suggests that many of these are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. No doubt, future research will reshape and add to these factors, however it is self evident that enabling a 'weak' school to become much more effective must involve working across at least a range of these factors, if not all of them - too narrow a focus may not lead to improvement, and if it does it is unlikely to be nurtured so as to become sustained.

Dr Allan Sigston
Director of Education Services, EdisonLearning Ltd.
July 2012

What does seminal research tell us about transforming schools?

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) conducted a landmark study published in the book Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons for Chicago (Bryk, 2010). Using CCSR's one-of-a-kind longitudinal data archive of over twenty years of data from the Chicago Public Schools, a hypothesized framework of key essential supports and contextual resources necessary for urban school improvement was tested. The essential supports proposed were: school leadership, parent and community ties, school learning climate, professional capacity of the faculty, and instructional guidance (see also Table 1). This framework was used as the basis of a detailed retrospective analysis of why students in 100 public elementary schools in Chicago were able to improve substantially in reading and math over a seven year period and students in another 100 schools were not.

When working together, the five essential supports identified proved to be critical in driving student success. In fact, data showed that “schools that measured strong in all five supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools with just one or two strengths to achieve substantial gains in reading and math. Moreover, a sustained weakness in just one of these areas undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning”.

The study (in hindsight) tells us that the schools that worked on multiple foci across these domains made the best progress. The message is clear, interventions to improve schools depend on the integration of strategies across a number of fronts to have a marked and sustainable impact.

In the world of public policy everyone likes to see quick impact, but how quickly can a school turnaround? The analysis so far tells us that schools are complex and interventions must be multi faceted. There is an emerging consensus around a balance between the urgency and the scale of the challenge expressed in Mass Insight’s² definition of Turnaround:

“Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low performing school that: (a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and (b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization.”

(see Kutash et al, 2010)

In reality, even if it was possible to do everything differently for a cohort of students from the outset, it would not be until the youngest students had benefitted from these changes over the rest of their journey through the school before fully transformed outcomes would be realised. The straightforward conclusion is that to take a failing school to a point where it can consistently deliver great outcomes takes time, probably between 3 and 7 years, though this is not to say that very significant improvements would not be made along the way.

²http://www.massinsight.org/
Michael Fullan is the most renowned and cited author on educational change. Some of his thinking is encompassed in the Six Secrets of Change (Fullan, 2008):

**Love your employees:** create the conditions within which they can succeed

**Connect people with purpose:** fostering intra school collaboration around the school’s goals and mission

**Capacity building prevails:** developing principals’ and teachers’ change management and assessment for learning skills

**Learning is the work:** seamlessly linking professional learning and day to day practice

**Transparency rules:** open data and a culture and opportunities which make it normal for teachers to observe each other’s practice

**Systems learn:** distributed, confident and competent leadership that is prepared to manage risk

In summary, Fullan’s secrets can be summarised as building the school’s capability to manage change rather than schools adopting wholesale prescriptions. The message for any school improvement partner is that they need a dual agenda that involves bringing external expertise whilst developing the school’s capacity to do things for itself.

Many of Fullan’s themes are echoed in research on the effectiveness of continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers. Helen Timperley and colleagues (Timperley et al, 2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 97 studies that linked CPD with student outcomes and highlighted seven characteristics of effective CPD. Timperley (2011) has succinctly summed these up in three points:

“Firstly, professional learning must become core school business because what happens every day has far greater impact than one-off events that happen outside school. Secondly, professional learning must build deep knowledge and expertise about the curriculum, teaching and the kinds of assessment that promote student learning. Thirdly, learning environments must recognise that teacher learning that makes a difference to students takes time and lots of practice and support.”

In summary, contemporary research lays out the necessary foundations and conditions for powerful school improvement partnerships:

- An integrated design that enables the school to address interdependent factors systematically and coherently;
- An implementation schedule that paces development realistically;
- Competent and confident distributed leadership within the school;
- Professional development activities that are built into the fabric of day to day life.
But is this enough? How do we ensure that improvement efforts focus not only on creating the ‘Successful Learner’ but also on the ‘Confident Individual’ and the ‘Responsible Citizen’? A great school will also be intentional in fostering core values that guide student’s choices, relationships and behaviours. In England the percentage of 16 year old students entitled to a free school meal attaining 5 A*-C GCSE passes including English and mathematics rose from 23% in 2002 to 40% in 2008\(^3\). However, the gap between this group and other young people has grown in terms of admission to university, especially the most prestigious ones. Academic success is necessary but not sufficient and a great school must purposely develop aspirations and the personal, social and cognitive skills that are fundamental to success and fulfilment in adulthood.

**Building insights from research into the NAHT Aspire approach**

The key findings described here have informed the development of EdisonLearning’s Design for School Improvement which underpins the Aspire approach.

The Design is built upon five strands that reflect the key findings reported here in respect of both content and process. The Strands are:

- **Leadership**
- **Learning Environment**
- **Assessment for Learning**
- **Pedagogy & Curriculum**
- **Student & Family Support**

(Further information on the major themes within each Strand is shown in Table 1)

Each Strand has an internally consistent scope and sequence of foci and activities which are cross linked with the other Strands.

The Strands are delivered through an implementation plan, usually but not necessarily spread over three years, broken down into part year milestones and success criteria. Distributed leadership is developed through the school through assigning Strand leadership roles and the establishment of Achievement Teams working with cohorts of students who meet regularly to review data and share practice. Coaching support is built in at every level and professional learning is collaborative and built around everyday practice and students’ needs. Critically the Design has a major emphasis on developing school wide Core Values that are consistently represented and reinforced, and the intentional teaching of Core Learning Skills – a framework and spiral curriculum linked to personal, social and thinking skills.

\(^3\) [http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/TIM/m002021/index.shtml](http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/TIM/m002021/index.shtml)
### EdisonLearning’s Five Design Strands - an Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EdisonLearning’s Five Design Strands</th>
<th>Five Essential Supports (Bryk et al, 2010)</th>
<th>‘Effectiveness Enhancing Factors’ (Scheerens, 2005)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership [L]</strong> develops...</td>
<td>School Leadership [L]</td>
<td>Educational leadership general leadership skills [L]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• clarity of vision;</td>
<td></td>
<td>• time, monitoring of absenteeism; time at school; time at classroom level; classroom management; homework</td>
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<tr>
<td>• distributed leadership;</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Climate in terms of effectiveness orientation and good internal relationships [LE and L]</strong></td>
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<td>• effective team working and planning processes at all levels;</td>
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<td>• priorities in an effectiveness-enhancing school climate; perceptions on effectiveness-enhancing conditions; relationships between pupils; relationships between teacher and pupils; relationships between staff; relationships: the role of the headteacher; engagement of pupils; appraisal of roles and tasks; job appraisal in terms of facilities, conditions of labour, task load and general satisfaction; facilities and building</td>
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<tr>
<td>• high reliability systems.</td>
<td>School Learning Climate [LE]</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Environment [LE]</strong> develops...</td>
<td>Instructional guidance [P&amp;C]</td>
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<td>• a value based culture that underpins a Community Code, policies, relationships, behaviour across the school community;</td>
<td>Professional Capacity of the Faculty [P&amp;C and AFL]</td>
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<tr>
<td>• spaces that support learning;</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Achievement, orientation, high expectations [AFL]</strong></td>
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<td>• mentoring for learning and effective student support;</td>
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<td>• clear focus on the mastering of basic subjects; high expectations (school level); high expectations (teacher level); records on pupils’ achievement</td>
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<td>• the Learning Environment beyond the classroom and school.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogy &amp; Curriculum [P&amp;C]</strong> develops...</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Evaluative potential evaluation emphasis [AFL]</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• the quality of learning and teaching through a shared framework for evaluating and monitoring;</td>
<td></td>
<td>• monitoring pupils’ progress; use of pupil monitoring systems; school process evaluation; use of evaluation results; keeping records on pupils’ performance; satisfaction with evaluation activities</td>
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<td>• responsive and collaborative CPD modules;</td>
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<td>• coaching;</td>
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<td>• student engagement and strategies;</td>
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<td>• a spiral Core Learning Skills curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment for Learning [AFL]</strong> develops...</td>
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<td>• an online test system;</td>
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<td>• responsive and effective use of assessment data at every level within the school to drive improvement;</td>
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<td>• day-to-day classroom assessment practices;</td>
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<td>• a focus for teachers sharing learning strategies through the forum of Achievement Teams.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student and Family Support [SAFS]</strong> develops...</td>
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<tr>
<td>• partnerships with all parents;</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Parental involvement emphasis on parental involvement in school policy [SAFS]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• planning, systems and resources for students with additional needs;</td>
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<td>• contacts with parents; satisfaction with parental involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• partnerships beyond the school.</td>
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About NAHT Aspire

NAHT Aspire is a partnership approach to school development, created through an innovative collaboration between the NAHT and EdisonLearning Ltd. There is no catalogue of courses and no imposed set of strategies within Aspire. Instead, there are flexible tools and resources to be shaped to meet the distinctive needs and priorities of each school, wherever they are on their journey.

Get involved

You can find out more about NAHT Aspire or register your interest in becoming part a Partner Schools Programme network at our website www.nahtaspire.co.uk, by calling us on 0844 8099219 or by email to info@nahtaspire.co.uk.

“...it is trust, collaboration and inspiration that will trigger the innovation we need”.

Russell Hobby, General Secretary NAHT

Bibliography