



NAHT Aspire Pilot Evaluation

Executive Summary

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Schools participating in the NAHT Aspire pilot

Barming Primary School	North Borough Junior School
Burnbush Primary School	Sea Mills Primary School
Bersted Green Primary School	Somerhill Junior School
Blidworth Oaks Primary School	Springbank Primary School
Bournemouth Park Primary School	Springfield Primary School
East Borough Primary School	St Francis of Assisi Catholic Primary School
Easton Primary School	St George Church of England Primary School
Eastwood Primary School	St George's Catholic Primary School
Elmwood Primary School	St James' Church of England Aided Junior School
Greenfield Community Primary	St Mary's Catholic Primary School
Greenhill Primary School	St Nicholas CE Primary School
Haddon Primary and Nursery School	Temple Sutton Primary School
Hangleton Junior School	Thorpe Greenways Junior School
Headcorn Primary School	Two Mile Hill Primary School
Janet Duke Primary School	West Borough Primary School
Lovers Lane Primary and Nursery School	

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Executive Summary

Abstract

The NAHT Aspire Partner Schools programme is based on a multi-strand approach to school improvement. It utilises a five strand design focusing on, leadership, assessment for learning, learning environment, pedagogy and curriculum, and student and family support. This is delivered within clusters groups, underpinned by distributed leadership and supported by external advisers. The model is aligned with current international research on school improvement and effectiveness. It aims to support schools to progress from a Requires Improvement Ofsted assessment to a Good grading within three years.

This evaluation reports on the implementation and the impact of NAHT Aspire at just over the two-year point in the programme (six of the nine term cycles of activity).

Participants believe that it has improved their school, has empowered teaching staff and built leadership capacity. In addition, it is cost effective and has provided value for money when compared with the costs of forced academisation.

Key findings

- 95% of survey respondents believed that the NAHT Aspire school improvement programme was either very appropriate or appropriate for the whole school
- 88% of survey respondents found that the five strand design covered all or most areas of school improvement
- 63% of pilot schools have been inspected by Ofsted and rated as Good over the course of the NAHT Aspire programme with more forecast by the end of the third year
- Pilot schools have made twice the improvement of schools nationally for both progress and attainment with strong gains in Mathematics at level 5
- Gains shown over the two years are comparable to those found in sponsored academies
- Both case studies and survey respondents (90%) were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences and the impact on the whole school
- 78% of survey respondents believed that NAHT Aspire has provided good value for money
- Scope for improvements moving forward focus on the transitioning of schools into the programme, bringing forward aspects that target pupil progress and tailoring the model for small schools

The evaluation highlights opportunities for government, the NAHT and schools in harmonising the ways in which school to school support is accessed and funded to encourage holistic approaches to school improvement such as the NAHT Aspire Partner Schools programme.

Introduction

This is the final of three reports prepared throughout the evaluation of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Aspire pilot. The programme has been developed with EdisonLearning who were commissioned as the delivery partner through a competitive tender process. The evaluation was conducted between May 2013 and September 2015. The programme will formally end in May 2016.

NAHT Aspire was designed to close the gap between Good and Outstanding schools and schools which Require Improvement. The programme was piloted in 31 primary schools judged as Grade 3 (either Satisfactory or Requiring Improvement) on their two previous Ofsted inspections. Pilot schools were disproportionately Junior Schools, were generally larger (average 340 pupils versus 255 pupils nationally), and they served relatively more disadvantaged communities (27% of pupils entitled to a free school meal versus 22% nationally and more than 50% of schools in the top two quintiles for free school meals). All these factors are associated with lower Ofsted inspection outcomes.

The NAHT Aspire school improvement model

The NAHT Aspire Partner Schools programme is a structured whole school approach intended to empower staff to take responsibility for and embed continuing school improvement. The programme provides expert consultancy, peer support clusters and mechanisms to distribute leadership and embed structures that will support the school to continue to improve after the pilot has finished. The programme is underpinned by the EdisonLearning five strand design which is central to the school improvement model. The strands comprise: Leadership, Assessment for Learning, Learning Environment, Pedagogy and Curriculum and Student and Family support. Alongside the work within the strands, Precision Pedagogy aids subject leaders and class teachers to focus on the highest priority pupils, skills and pedagogy, initially as a timely intervention and then to 'seed' the development of teaching and learning strategies across the school as a whole. In addition, a range of tools and activities are used and include:

- Core values – these define the behaviors that the school feel are important in guiding expectations, relationships and are a means of helping their children to develop.
- Achievement Teams - which consist of teachers (and teaching assistants in some schools) who work together to share ideas and strategies to overcome pupils' barriers to learning, A specific technique, 2-6-2, dedicates 10 minutes to focus on a specific issue - two minutes are allocated for the ideas, six minutes to discuss and the final two minutes to identify actions. The process is now being used by some of the schools' governing bodies.
- Termly Learning Conferences (TLC) – provide a forum to discuss pupil progress whereby the teacher, parent and child all contribute to the process
- Achievement statements - are a set of 'I can' statements mapping to years 1-6 for Reading, Writing and Mathematics. These support teachers and children to assess and plan learning (part of Precision Pedagogy)
- The Quality Framework for Learning & Teaching (the QFLT) and Coaching- the QFLT provides a common language to describe Good and Outstanding teaching and a focus for peer to peer coaching using models such as TGROW (Topic, Goal, Reality, Options and Way forward).

There are currently 26 schools engaged in the pilot with 6 also acting as case studies. The schools are clustered in four geographical areas;

- North - Nottingham/Derby/Sheffield,
- South - Kent/West Sussex,
- East – Essex
- West - Bristol.

Schools were each required to part fund their participation in the programme with £5,000 provided by the Department for Education (DfE) plus £10,389 provided by each school per annum. Some schools paid using their pupil premium funding while a few had additional financial support from their local authorities. The DfE agreed that while the schools are participating in NAHT Aspire and making progress, they will be exempted from any involuntary external intervention and more specifically enforced academisation.

Methodology

Prior to the start of the evaluation a literature review was undertaken which this suggests is that the NAHT Aspire programme was resonant with current research in the field which identifies:

- that school improvement is predicated upon leaders and leadership and is of critical importance,
- teaching should support student engagement and attainment,
- the learning environment matters,
- effective schools draw on a wide range of help and support,
- context matters not all schools are the same
- school improvement takes time and sustaining is difficult.

The evaluation consisted of three surveys; case study visits to schools and stakeholder interviews with local authorities' school improvement representatives and NAHT cluster representatives.

All schools were invited to participate in the surveys which were disseminated at three points throughout the evaluation. School response rates were high at 80%, 90% and 67% respectively representing senior leaders, strand leads and governors. Eight case study schools were originally included but two withdrew from the pilot. Interviews in schools took place with senior leaders, strand leads, parents, governors, classroom teachers and pupils.

Summary of key findings

Implementing the NAHT Aspire Programme

- School survey respondents believed that the programme was either very appropriate or appropriate for the whole school as an approach to school improvement. This was confirmed by 95% of survey respondents. No respondents found the programme as inappropriate for their school.

- Schools survey respondents stated that the five strands; leadership, assessment for learning, learning environment, pedagogy and curriculum and student and family support covered all or most areas of school improvement (88% of survey respondents).
- School survey respondents reported that the initial implementation of the programme was successful and the support of the Achievement Advisers contributed to confidence and capacity building (94% of survey respondents).
- Network and Development Days were highly valued –(98% of survey respondents reported that Network and Development days were professionally delivered and 97% of respondents gained new insights and were able to apply them to their school context)
- There is strong evidence of whole school involvement – (93% of all stakeholders, including teachers, governors and others, reported feeling engaged with NAHT Aspire)

“Network days have always been a pleasure to be on. Great ideas, really great atmosphere to work in and honest and constructive dialogue”

- NAHT Aspire has improved governance and contributed to governors being more engaged and more confident in speaking about school improvement
- The head teacher’s leadership was highlighted as crucial to successful implementation. The development of distributed leadership has provided a catalyst for change, built capacity, confidence and enthusiasm
- The case studies indicate that NAHT Aspire has helped teachers and teaching assistants to manage their time, focus on children who need most support and empower them to find their own solutions to identified problems through the use of

the Achievement Teams.

2. Evidence of impact

- Two thirds (63%) of the pilot schools have been Ofsted inspected and graded ‘Good’ while engaging with the NAHT Aspire programme. A further 10% are forecast to be ‘Good’ or better by the end of the pilot.
- Pilot schools have twice the rate of improvement compared to schools nationally for both progress and attainment, with particularly strong gains in Mathematics at Level 5
- Half of the schools have demonstrated a transformational improvement of 10% or more in the percentage of pupils attaining Level 4 or above in Reading, Writing and Mathematics combined.
- The feedback from the case study schools and the surveys was overwhelmingly positive about their experiences and the impact on the whole school including the teachers, children and the wider community (90% of survey respondents reported NAHT Aspire had been successful in their school).
- Pupils in the case study schools were able to talk confidently about their schools’ values and their own learning.

- Schools reported a low level of local authority engagement with NAHT Aspire (*70% of survey respondents reported non engagement*) however positive examples were cited by local authority advisers working closely with the school and the Achievement Advisers.
- The role of the NAHT Aspire cluster representative continues to evolve but not all head teachers had a clear understanding of the cluster representative's role.
- School stakeholders believed that NAHT Aspire provided good value for money (78% of survey respondents agreed with this statement -no one disagreed and 72% agreed it was better value than other school improvement activities).
- School stakeholders indicated the NAHT Aspire model will be sustainable in their schools for the long term and that they would like to maintain contacts with their cluster at the end of the pilot (92% of survey respondents).

What works?

The programme has successfully supported school improvement across the five strands. Schools were able to provide examples of impacts against each of the strands. For example head teachers were able to suggest that overall pupil behaviour improved, resulting in reduced numbers of exclusions and increased confidence in teaching and learning. As the programme progressed the five strands were seen by stakeholders as interrelated and mutually supportive. A number of activities within the strand have been both successful and popular with the schools. These activities included; school values, Network and Development Days, Achievement Teams, 2-6-2 meetings, support of the Achievement Advisers and coaching. School stakeholders reported that governing structures and engagement of the governing body within school improvement had improved as a result of the programme.

The leadership model and the focus on building middle leaders provided a necessary area of development that many local authorities were unable to provide. It addressed many of the criticisms of Ofsted who often judge middle leadership as poor. The success of the programme is predicated on the capacity of the leadership to improve. The programme has supported head teachers to develop their leadership capacity with many schools moving from Requires Improvement to Good in leadership and management. One school moved to Outstanding for Leadership and Management during the life of the programme.

One of the main outcomes of the programme is that it has contributed to the professionalisation of staff including classroom teachers and teaching assistants. Staff reported they have greater responsibility for their work and what they do. In many schools the coaching model has been particularly effective in driving this change.

School stakeholders felt that NAHT Aspire provided value for money and some schools indicated that they did not need to financially source other external activities because NAHT Aspire provided the support they needed for their school improvement and staff development activities. The cost of forced academisation to the public purse is significant. At a minimum all schools receive a £25,000 flat rate grant and on average £40,000 improvement grants are provided to primary schools requiring improvement. The evidence from the NAHT Aspire pilot schools suggests that it has a similar impact on pupil performance when compared with academies over a two-year period.

Limitations of the programme

School improvement is a complex activity and there are no quick fixes. It is also unlikely that any one programme can be the panacea. School improvement is an ongoing and continuing journey. The schools in the pilot were at different levels of Requires Improvement and consequently there are a number of factors which will influence speed of progression. There was no consensus as to whether the programme was suitable for all schools in Requires Improvement and the majority of stakeholders believed this depended on the school and where they were in the Requires Improvement continuum, i.e. School leadership was a critical criterion to be considered prior to schools embarking on NAHT Aspire.

There were concerns from the local authority school improvement advisers concerning the pace of progression. Ofsted can re-inspect a Requires Improvement school no later than two years within the new Ofsted framework (Ofsted, 2015) and as such some stakeholders thought the programme needed to have a greater sense of urgency in the first year with schools expected to progress faster.

Although much of the evidence supports the holistic nature of the programme there were criticisms from some schools and local authorities as to how well the programme supported data tracking and the robustness of the data collected. There were concerns from stakeholders about accountability of head teachers in the process and the extent to which challenging conversations were happening with head teachers about what changes needed to be made within their schools.

If schools are increasingly expected to take responsibility and commission support, consideration needs to be given to funding streams. Although part of the funding for the programme was subsidised by the DfE the remainder of the funding was found from various sources including LA sponsorship, pupil premium and school budgets. Schools need to have access to funding and freedom to choose the school improvement package that is most appropriate for their school. In addition, the restrictions on schools to carry over an unspent budget, does not allow schools the opportunity to 'save up' for larger projects such as NAHT Aspire.

Embedding and sustainability

Embedding the programme within the school is crucial. Risks for schools are staff turnover - particularly in relation to head teachers and senior leaders. Schools where the programme is insufficiently embedded may be at risk if the new head teacher has a different view of school improvement, or if senior leaders leave and a whole school approach has not been achieved.

Clusters potentially provide an important scaffold for the programme as they are a collection of head teachers who share similar issues, school improvement goals and ethos. Clusters have also been warmly welcomed by the strand leads as a way of networking and learning about practice in other schools.

Measures for long-term success will need to be identified. There are a range of factors which can be assessed for this purpose and could include: the extent to which whole school improvement is embedded; if schools are able to maintain Good over the long term; the percentage of schools progressing to Outstanding; and to map the dispersion of the programme as it moves to other schools within a geographical area through the transitions of staff into new roles and particularly management responsibilities.

The programme is currently being rolled out to 59 new schools in Bristol, Cornwall, Brighton and Hove, West Sussex, Essex, Havering, Milton Keynes, Staffordshire and Bromley.

Recommendations

There are a number of areas that the NAHT Aspire programme team may want to consider in moving forward.

Developing the model

- **Schools preparedness for NAHT Aspire.** Schools and NAHT Aspire should consider preparedness to engage and benefit from NAHT Aspire on a case by case basis. Preparedness criteria should include: the security of senior leadership, a willingness of senior leaders to embrace distributive leadership widely, the ability to maintain low levels of teacher turnover, and a willingness to commit to the NAHT Aspire programme for three years.
- **Addressing urgency.** Precision Pedagogy should be brought forward in the programme as the approach can offer some early impact.
- **Support for small schools.** There are specific challenges for small schools within the programme. A pilot of a small schools version of the programme is currently being planned.
- **NAHT Aspire alumni.** Alumni, regional conferences and a national award should be established in order to extend the recognition for NAHT participant schools.

Rolling out NAHT Aspire

- **Teaching school alliances.** This may provide a new potential market for the programme.
- **Partnerships with local authorities.** For those local authority areas with limited resources for school improvement a partnership or commissioning relationship with NAHT Aspire could provide complementary support.
- **NAHT cluster representatives.** Cluster representatives are a highly experienced resource that could be used to further support the clusters, build relationships with local authorities and teaching school alliances, and to promote the programme.
- **Developing the clusters.** The clusters should be formalised so they can provide the communities of practice and act as transition support in schools during time of change.
- **Network days.** The days were widely valued but the programme may want to consider rebalancing the number of days staff are out of school.
- **Sustainability strategy.** The programme may want to consider developing an annual health check for schools to self-assess how embedded and integrated the programme is within the school and to identify new areas for school improvement focus.

Policy considerations

- **Rolling out the programme.** The roll out is already underway. Those providing the NAHT Aspire programme may want to build on the existing target group as well as promote the programme to 'coasting' and Good schools.
- **Funding opportunities.** The Department for Education has invested considerable resource in this project. The evaluation has demonstrated that the programme is value for money when compared with the costs of academisation and offers an economic alternative. The policy makers in the DfE should consider how the investment to date can be maximized by promoting the programme to schools that would benefit.
- **School improvement funding.** The DfE should consider the way funding is made available to schools that have been graded Require Improvement by Ofsted to support them in commissioning school improvement support. Consideration should also be given to removing current barriers relating to funding which may prevent schools being able to fund NAHT Aspire.
- **Intervention funding.** Consideration should be given to the ways that supplementary/ intervention funding for school improvement is made more coherent. It should foster school improvement that is research based, holistic, school-to-school and sustainable. such as the NAHT Aspire.
- **Future evaluation.** NAHT Aspire may want to consider commissioning a longitudinal evaluation. This could assess continued and sustainable school engagement and improvement. This would contribute to the evidence base for the impact of the programme within the evolving political and economic climate.

Conclusions

The NAHT Aspire Partners Schools programme was established to support schools that had been graded as Requiring Improvement by Ofsted to progress to Good and to embed quality school improvement processes. This pilot programme will complete in Spring 2016. During the programme 63% of participating schools have achieved Good, and it is expected that this will rise to 73% before the end of the programme period. The programme is already rolling out to new schools in new areas of the country. Many of the schools on the programme have seen NAHT Aspire as a transformative experience: it has changed the way the schools see themselves, improved progress, attainment and pupil behavior and increased the confidence levels of many staff. School stakeholders saw NAHT Aspire as good value for money. Further studies are needed to determine the long-term impacts of the programme.