



# Evaluation of the NAHT Aspire

Executive Summary  
Second interim report  
January 2015

## Acknowledgements

This report has been written by a team of researchers at the University of Derby; Jo Hutchinson, Siobhan Neary, Tristram Hooley, Des Hewitt, Ruth Mieschbueler, Vanessa Dodd and Emma Langley.

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### **Schools participating in the NAHT Aspire pilot**

Barming Primary	North Borough Junior
Bersted Green Primary	Porters Grange Primary
Blidworth Oaks Primary	Sea Mills Primary
Burnbush Primary	Spring Bank Primary
Bournemouth Park Primary	Springfield Primary
Eastborough Primary	Somerhill Juniors
Easton Primary	St Francis of Assisi Catholic Primary
Eastwood Primary School and Nursery	St George's Catholic Primary
Elmwood Primary	St George's C of E Primary
Greenfields Community Primary	St James' CE VA Junior
Greenhill Primary	St Nicholas CE Primary
Haddon Primary	St Mary's Catholic Primary
Hangleton Juniors	Thorpe Greenways Junior School
Headcorn Primary	West Borough Primary
Janet Duke Primary	Temple Sutton Primary School
Lovers Lane Primary	Two Mile High Primary

## Executive Summary

### Abstract

Data collected for this second interim report through a survey, telephone interviews and site visits indicates that the NAHT Aspire Partner Schools Programme has over a short period of time demonstrated an effective approach to school improvement. Significant is that 14 schools have been rated 'Good' by Ofsted. Schools have particularly welcomed and benefited from the adopted approach which emphasises;

- Distributed leadership which empowers staff to take on a leadership role for the five strands;
- Achievement Teams which build problem focused solutions, a positive climate for staff to feel valued and improved use of data within schools;
- A whole school approach to school improvement through adoption and implementation of core values;
- Peer support provided through Network Days and in school through Development Days; and
- Staff development through training, coaching and the 2-6-2 meeting models.

Survey evidence suggested that school leaders and teachers have a lot of confidence now that their school will change for the better (97% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement). Furthermore they reported that they have the right strategy and short term priorities to effect change that will impact upon teaching and pupil attainment. There was overall a high level of confidence (99%) that teaching and pupil's learning would improve as a result of involvement in the programme.

The dedicated support provided by NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers offers a unique and valued aspect to the programme which provides localised bespoke training and consultancy to schools in the programme.

Leadership capacity was identified as a concern by Ofsted in the three pilot schools that were judged to be 'Inadequate' and this factor was reflected in termly reviews of the schools' success in implementing NAHT Aspire prior to the inspections.

The programme is considered to provide value for money by schools, and may represent especially good value when compared with the costs of academisation. There have been a few withdrawals to date and these have been predominantly as a result of Ofsted inspections where schools have been judged 'Good' or have moved to 'Special Measures'. It would be interesting to continue to monitor the outcomes of the programme over the coming years and to assess progression from 'Good' to 'Outstanding.'

## Introduction

The National Association of Head Teachers has developed NAHT Aspire as a primary school improvement programme and commissioned EdisonLearning, a school improvement company, to deliver it on their behalf. This is a three year pilot programme which is running within four geographically distinct cluster areas. The pilot began with 30 schools and has involved 32 in all. All the schools had been judged by Ofsted to be Satisfactory or Requiring Improvement in two successive inspections. The NAHT Aspire approach seeks to empower schools to improve through the use of expert consultancy and the creation of clusters of peer support. The project is aimed at schools whose most recent inspection at the start of the programme assessed them as Grade 3 (Requires Improvement) by Ofsted.

Each school is linked to a NAHT Achievement Adviser and a cluster of local schools. Schools are involved in 12 Network Days where they work with advisers and other schools which are then followed up by advisers on 12 Development Days within school (the two smallest schools had fewer Development Days). Schools are supported in their school improvement activities through the NAHT Aspire five strand approach. This approach focuses the school improvement efforts in the following areas:

- leadership;
- pedagogy and curriculum;
- assessment for learning;
- student and family support; and
- the learning environment.

It is predicated upon a model of distributed leadership to empower members of the teaching team to take a leadership role for each of these strands. In every school therefore there will be the head teacher with four other strand leads. In addition Achievement Teams are established, these consist of a group of teachers (and possibly support staff) who meet regularly to discuss and agree how achievement can be raised and problems solved, making them one of the main engine for continuous improvement.

The early stages of the process focused mainly on supporting the head teachers and the strand leads for pedagogy and curriculum, and assessment for learning. These strand leads work alongside their NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers to undertake a Collaborative Quality Analysis (CQA) which audits current practice against the school improvement model. This is then used to identify priority action areas for each school which are compiled as an improvement plan.

With this plan in place there are a number of support mechanisms for participating schools. These are:

- NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers, provided through EdisonLearning, who work within schools, provide training and associated support materials and tools;
- NAHT Cluster Representatives who support clusters of schools; and
- networks of peer support which are developed to facilitate schools to support and learn from each other.

Other activities which support the implementation of quality improvement through team working includes the 2-6-2 meeting model which allocates 10 dedicated minutes of meeting

time to focus on a specific issue and the coaching model which also contributes to staff development.

The methodology for the evaluation project is mixed methods and utilises:

- a literature review;
- a review of dashboard data provided by EdisonLearning;
- an online survey with all schools participating in the pilot;
- case study visits with 8 schools;
- telephone interviews with local authority school improvement partners; and
- telephone interviews with NAHT Cluster Representatives.

The project evaluation takes place over 3 years and will be completed in November 2015.

Figure 1 below summarises the various data collection points for the project.

	2013		2014				2015			
	July - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - March	April - June	July - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - March	April - June	July - Sept	Oct - Dec
Inception		●—●								
Survey		●—●		●—●				●—●		
Regional stakeholder interviews			●—●			●—●		●—●		
National stakeholder interviews		●—●				●—●				
Case studies		●—●		●—●				●—●		
Reporting		#1 Dec				#2 Dec				Final Nov

## Literature review

There is a considerable literature which addresses the issues of school improvement and effectiveness. Given the policy focus on these issues it is very likely that the literature will continue to grow in the future. At present it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from much of what has been done. The definition of school improvement is often highly variable, at times focusing narrowly on Ofsted or attainment and at other times focusing on a broader definition of school effectiveness.

Despite the limitations of the existing school improvement literature there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the literature which may be useful in informing the development of school improvement programmes like NAHT Aspire. The following summary may be helpful in drawing this together.

- **Teachers are at the heart of effective schools.** Well motivated, skilled professionals are key to effective schools. Schools need to attend to the quality of teachers using a range of monitoring strategies. Teachers should have access to opportunities for formal and informal professional development and understand the value of this for the school's objectives and their own careers.
- **Leaders and leadership are critically important in offering a vision and enabling it to be realised.** School leaders can make a big difference to the effectiveness of a school. Effective leaders have a vision for the school and are good at communicating it and motivating staff around it. Effective leaders also distribute leadership and surround themselves with talented middle leaders who they develop.

- **Teaching and learning should support student engagement and attainment.** There are a range of debates about the best approach to teaching and learning. These strategies include having teachers who know their subject, can use a range of instructional strategies, create a good climate in the classroom and manage student behavior. They may also include involving families and parents in learning and using active “assessment for learning” type approaches.
- **The learning environment matters.** Effective schools offer positive learning environments that provide a good context for the schools teaching and learning. They also make effective use of new technologies.
- **Effective schools draw on a wide range of help and support and build partnerships with other schools and stakeholders.** School improvement requires schools to change. This change is often facilitated by the involvement of external stakeholders and consultants where resources can be found. In the long term effective schools build collaborative partnerships for mutual benefit with other schools and key stakeholders.
- **Context matters, not all schools are the same.** Schools which operate in low socio-economic contexts or which experience other kinds of challenging circumstances may have to approach school improvement in different ways to other schools.
- **School improvement takes time and sustaining it is difficult.** School improvement requires a large number of different actors (school leaders, teachers, parents, students) to change the way that they act and the way that they perceive the school. Furthermore, where school improvement has been driven externally (e.g. by a poor Ofsted rating) there are challenges in sustaining school effectiveness once the immediate crisis is over.

Much of this literature aligns well with the approach taken by NAHT Aspire.

### Interim findings

Data from various sources including surveys, case studies, interviews and EdisonLearning data are collected and analysed at different points throughout the project.

The following present the key themes that the evaluation is addressing:

- the context for school improvement;
- the implementation of the programme within schools;
- the network of pilot schools and the relative value and impact they have had;
- the impact of the delivery partner and the effectiveness of their working relationships with the pilot schools;
- quantifying the impact; and
- how partners measure and assess the value for money of the project.

### The context for the programme

The schools that comprised the original 30 ranged in size from a pupil roll of 91 in the smallest school to 783 in the largest school; 15 of the schools have more than 250 pupils. They also varied in terms of deprivation determined by eligibility for free school meals. The schools varied from 7% of pupils eligible for free school meals through to 54% in this category; 12 of the 30 schools had more than 20% of pupils eligible. Many of the participating schools therefore faced some structural challenges due to their size and the socio-economic background of their pupils.

Motivations for engaging in the pilot varied by school. The decision was generally driven by the head teacher alongside members of their senior leadership teams and input from governors.

Evidence from the survey and case studies suggest that motivation to participate arose out of an acknowledgement that change was necessary and the belief that NAHT Aspire offered them a way to achieve this change. NAHT, working with EdisonLearning, was seen as a trusted provider in a complicated market, and the NAHT Aspire programme was welcomed because it was seen as holistic and sustainable rather than a quick fix. Participants particularly liked the support for implementation combined with a focus on leadership and teaching.

*We wanted external support which was independent of the LA. We had lost confidence in ourselves as a school and wanted something to give us hope that we could move on. We wanted someone to help us see the positive and good things about the quality of our provision. We felt that it was an offer we couldn't refuse.*

In some cases the programme arrived at an opportune time, or it filled a gap in support options. Although avoiding forced academisation was initially seen as a potential motivator this was not cited as a particularly important motivation for the majority of participants.

The geographic spread of participating schools meant that EdisonLearning worked with a large number of local authorities. For example the northern cluster has schools that are located within three different authorities. This has its benefits for the pilot as it provides experiences across a range of different contexts but it does generate challenges for the NAHT Cluster representatives who need to build relationships with a greater number of key stakeholders in their areas.

Across these different contexts the role of the local authority and their school improvement teams vary. As the pilot has developed, and as the NAHT Aspire model becomes more widely known and understood the relationship between the schools, the NAHT/EdisonLearning and the local authorities has become more established. In most areas there has been positive support for the model as evidenced by our conversations with school improvement partners.

*It dovetails in – and has been designed that way so that Aspire schools get SIP support through the improvement programmes for specific teachers and all the Ofsted support that we provide. They keep us informed about what they are doing – we have a shared Google Docs folder where we keep all the information we need to share, we share meetings and have had meetings with the Aspire South lead.*

However, in some areas these relationships have been strained. It may be that some local authorities see NAHT Aspire as either an unwelcome intruder or as an opportunity to refocus their attention on the schools in their area which are not participating in NAHT Aspire.

There is a question about whether all schools that 'require improvement' are suitable for engaging with the programme. This was a question posed to the local authority school improvement partners who were divided on this point.

*I would say that the majority that Require Improvement would be fine. But, it is catching them at the right time. If a school is on its upward trajectory and is aiming for Good I think it works. If the school is going in the other direction it is more difficult*

By the end of the fourth of the nine terms of engagement three schools had been judged as 'Inadequate' despite being part of the programme. Leadership capacity was identified as a concern by Ofsted in each of the schools. Termly reviews of the schools within EdisonLearning's ISO 9001 process indicated that this issue was reflected in assessments of the schools' lesser success in implementing NAHT Aspire prior to the inspection. This raises an interesting question for NAHT in

terms of school selection. Can these schools be identified early? Should they be supported at all through this model? Should a different engagement model be developed? Furthermore, where issues with leadership are identified how can NAHT both support both its members and the school improvement process?

The NAHT may want to consider the following issues.

- How to assess a school's suitability for inclusion in NAHT Aspire.
- Whether there is the need to develop a preliminary programme for schools that are not currently suitable for NAHT Aspire.
- How to develop effective working relationships with local authorities, even when the programme experiences initial resistance. These activities may include actively promoting examples of effective partnership working.

### Implementation of the programme within schools

A range of evidence shows that schools have been actively participating in the programme and implementing its requirements throughout the period. Participants were very positive about the programme and were enjoying the opportunities that were available particularly the cluster groups, the Development Days and support of the Achievement Advisers. Schools were able to identify specific practices that have been adopted and that have led to changed and improved practice. Furthermore the data points to wide engagement in the pilot from a range of staff members and governors in most of the schools.

Participants in the evaluation were provided examples of the impacts of different components of the programme. For example, the survey evidence demonstrated understanding of the five strand design within the model and the case studies revealed that this was being implemented. All case study schools talked about the impact of Achievement Teams and the way in which the school had improved its use of data as a part of the school improvement process. The Achievement Teams were warmly welcomed and were felt to provide a powerful tool which benefited staff and pupils. One teacher commented that the Achievement Team had helped them as,

*"Instead of having 32 pupils buzzing around my head I can focus on 1 or 2 and think about what they really need".*

The survey evidence revealed a number of elements that different strand leads were working on, including the application of core values, and running meetings to the 2-6-2 design. Pupil led reviews and implementation of the coaching model were being planned as the next phase of activity.

Case study schools were able to demonstrate that leadership roles had been delegated across staff members, and in most cases those staff members were confident that they knew what their role was and what their priorities were. A head teacher commented,

*I've had to learn to work in a different way...it's a different style of leadership having trusting and empowering in your school but my goodness it is powerful*

In most of the case study schools it was reported that the head teacher was actively delegating responsibility and decision making indicating that the model was taking effect. One impact of this was that some teachers in some schools reported that they felt that they were being re-professionalised through the process. A teacher reported that,

*Everyone's opinion is valued as a professional.*

Survey evidence suggested that school leaders and teachers have a lot of confidence now that their school will change for the better (97% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement). Furthermore they reported that they have the right strategy and short term priorities to effect change that will impact upon teaching and pupil attainment. There was overall a high level of confidence (99%) that teaching and pupils' learning would improve as a result of involvement in the programme.

*We have struggled for a long time with people waiting to be told to do stuff rather than people thinking 'I need to do this'...people are starting to take it forward themselves.*

Staff retention was a significant issue for many schools and this impacted through a number of changes in responsibilities. Some schools have shared the strand lead responsibilities which help to address retention as well as supporting workload management. Small schools identified difficulties in finding sufficient and suitable staff to lead on the various strands. This often results in a small number of individuals having multiple responsibilities within the programme.

The NAHT may want to consider the following:

- How to tailor the programme for small schools and schools experiencing staff retention issues.

### Networking opportunities and impact

A central component of the NAHT Aspire programme is the role of peer support. All the schools in the pilot have access to and are part of a cluster in order to provide opportunities for sharing and learning. Many schools already have groups of schools that they work with but the NAHT Aspire networking opportunities extend these by focusing specifically on the programme and the issues of the schools involved. Case study schools reported that it was useful to work with other schools experiencing similar issues: *"It is reassuring to talk to others that are in the same boat"* and that *"it's always reassuring to speak with other professionals and see that they also have problems."*

However, as schools have progressed at different stages, pace has become an issue. Schools that are progressing well are often frustrated as they are not learning from others. There are also challenges for those schools which see other schools in the cluster progressing more quickly than them. Rate of pace was also an issue identified by one of the local authorities who thought schools were not progressing quickly enough. Some participants believed more could be done with the Network Days to dovetail them to increase their rate of progress to a similar pace as other schools. Although this was not a wide spread issue the nature of the pilot programme may act as a constraint for certain schools. That said, the Development Days and the regular meetings with the NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers ensure that schools are progressing at a speed that is appropriate for them.

Although the Network Days were generally enjoyed by those who attended there were some concerns around repetition, relevance and integrating learning into practice.

*The network days are often repetitive and quite slow paced. As a school we have more control over development days and the impact is greater.*

However, examples were also provided where Network Days were tailored to meet specific local needs of the participants.

Survey evidence provided further feedback on schools satisfaction with the programme. For example, the second survey found that 100% of respondents thought that the Network Days were professionally run; 86% said they had enough information before the event, and 85% that it was attended by all relevant group members. 97% said that they felt they could share learning with colleagues at these events and 96% that they could apply the knowledge they had gained. These represent a strong and positive endorsement of the approach and its implementation.

Although peer support is a key component of the programme there is limited evidence of wider networking occurring outside of the formally organised activities. There were some examples of visits to schools and sharing of materials and resources, however there is little evidence to date of schools creating opportunities or extending the networks to develop school improvement activities.

*I have found the in-school Development Days more relevant for my role. Many of the aspects covered in networking days are things that I have previously covered in SL training - it also isn't always relevant to the position that our school is currently in.*

*This has the capacity to grow, it's a three year project, it does then mean that you are working at a pace, but a pace that is relevant to the school.*

One of the greatest challenges to school engagement in the programme was time; often participants had a number of roles in school and could not attend all events, having enough time between Network Days and Development Days to implement and reflect on activities and time spent away from the classroom all detracted from the progress.

The NAHT may want to consider the following issues.

- How to provide more information to participants before the Network Days to help schools to prioritise which ones to attend.
- Whether the overall number of Network Days should be reduced or the pattern should be changed (perhaps by frontloading them towards the start of the programme).
- Whether the timing and content of Network Days should be reviewed to increase their relevance.
- How to make the clusters more organic and sustainable and less dependent on the NAHT Aspire programme.

### Impact of delivery partners

A strong and consistent message from the case study schools is how much they respect and value the support they get from the NAHT Aspire team. The commitment shown by the team, their credibility and their professionalism was reported by all the case study schools. The NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers therefore play a key role in success of the programme.

*They show complete and utter commitment to you*

Their role is sophisticated as they help to build relationships between the schools and their wider stakeholders, and also within the clusters. They are training providers and advisers to each school guiding them in the implementation of the training in ways that are appropriate to the school. They help to set strategic direction through the CQA, and to monitor its achievement and in doing so they both support the school but also challenge it. The extent of their engagement with the school is a unique feature of the NAHT Aspire programme and what distinguishes it from other models where

training may be provided but without support for implementation or a model where there may be a focus on leadership but not on teaching. The NAHT Aspire programme combines all of these elements.

The role of the NAHT Cluster Representatives within the programme is still evolving. As the pilot evolves these individuals will be the local monitors for NAHT and also, as it develops, they could become champions for Aspire within local stakeholder structures. The early stages of recruitment to the role and their engagement with it had some teething issues but a number of activities have been introduced to support them including regular briefings, change to reporting structures and recruitment of additional resource to cover wider geographical areas. This role is still therefore evolving and needs further scrutiny.

NAHT may want to consider the following:

- How to ensure that the quality and professionalism of interventions remains high.
- Opportunities to extend the number of Development Days available as these support schools in adopting a whole school approach to improvement.
- How to ensure that the role of the NAHT Cluster Representative is clear and understood by all partners in the process.

### Quantifying the impact

To December 2013, four terms through the nine term programme, 26 schools that engaged with NAHT Aspire have been inspected with the following outcomes.

- 14 have been rated Good.
- 9 have been rated as Requiring Improvement.
- 3 have been rated as Inadequate (one with Serious Weaknesses and two requiring Special Measures). Ofsted judged Leadership to be a cause for concern in each case.

EdisonLearning collect data on each school in the programme and provide the schools with a dashboard for of this data. An analysis of this data provides an overview of how the advisers would assess the schools against the Ofsted inspection criteria, discussing their views with the schools. From March 2014 (23%) to December 2014 (71%) there is a very large increase (+48%) in the percentage of NAHT Aspire schools estimated to be at grade 2 (Good) rating. Correspondingly the percentage with an estimated grade 3 has decreased. This suggests that the majority of schools are making a clear improvement through their engagement in NAHT Aspire, which will be tested against actual inspection judgments in due course.

### Value for money

Participation in the NAHT Aspire programme costs each school just over £15,000 per year (for schools with more than 180 pupils). For the pilot, DfE has provided a subsidy for each school, requiring schools to individually fund £10,389. Some schools pay some or all of this from their pupil premium, while others have been supported in whole or part by their local authority. DfE have agreed that while the schools are participating in NAHT Aspire and making progress, they will be exempted from enforced academisation.

Fundamentally schools felt that the value of the programme was linked to the eventual outcome of a 'Good' or higher Ofsted rating. One teacher aspired

*To move school to securely 'Good' with a view to moving to outstanding*

The current evidence suggests that the programme has been effective in delivering school improvement and supporting schools in achieving this goal.

Three criteria are traditionally used to assess value for money, economy, efficiency and effectiveness. These demonstrate that the optimum use of resources have delivered the intended outcomes. All schools agreed that the programme was good value for money providing economy, efficiency and effectiveness especially when compared with other school improvement and staff development opportunities. Access to funding for the project was a motivator for many schools to get involved especially as there was concern as to the level of support that was being made available by many of the local authority school improvement teams. However, there were some concerns for small schools and their flexibility with budgets which would allow them to pay for the programme.

Some schools also linked the costs with the value they were receiving from the NAHT Aspire Achievement Advisers. This was seen to be high and that the Achievement Advisers were of a high calibre and that money was well spent for the support that was provided. As such the cost associated with the programme, £15,389 per school per year for most of the pilot schools, was felt to be good value to all those interviewed especially when compared with other school improvement and staff development opportunities.

*I don't think we could have spent it in any better way to be honest.*

A wider view of value for money can be taken by considering the financial impact on the public purse as a whole rather than only within individual school budgets. It is worth considering costs related to academisation. As a minimum all schools that become academies receive a £25,000 flat rate grant. In addition to this, funding is available for improvement grants up to £40,000 for primary schools (£100,000 for a secondary school). Further, academy sponsors would top slice 3% to 5% of schools' annual budgets, typically £30,000 to £50,000 for primary schools, on an ongoing basis. An alternative to academisation that produced equal or greater benefits at a cost of £15,000 per year for three years would mean substantial central government savings and more money remaining directly in the control of local schools.

NAHT may want to consider the following:

- Building on the existing practice of encouraging local authorities to contribute to the programme costs.