

The London Challenge

What is the London Challenge?

The London Challenge was/is a series of initiatives undertaken by the 1997 Labour Government and continued by the coalition government to help raise achievement in London Schools.

During the 1980s and 1990s the performance of London schools was some of the lowest in the country. Pupils from poor and deprived areas performed particularly badly but this culture of low expectation impacted on all pupils at different levels.

The London Challenge was devised to help bring schools together and put Headteachers in charge of driving improvement.

The Challenge had a number of key features:

- Development of a culture of high expectation and challenge
- A focus on partnership working between Headteachers and their schools to share best practice in the interests of all London children
- Informal and formal collaborative arrangements to support better professional development, school leadership and rigorous challenge via peer to peer review i.e. Headteachers reviewing each other's schools and identifying areas for improvement and ways to share best practice in a local area.

The Outcomes

London Schools are now recognised as some of the highest performing schools in the country and also some of the most innovative. The various national reports into the challenge have tried to explain the reasons for this phenomenal improvement but at the heart of intricate web of factors lies the following common themes:

- i) High expectations & challenge around these expectations
- ii) Partnership working with experienced headteachers working together to facilitate change
- iii) Schools and teachers collaborating and exchanging ideas, knowledge, best practice and professional development to help raise standards

The article below outlines more about The London Challenge, its successes and the ways in which collaboration drove improvement.

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WHAT DID THE LONDON CHALLENGE EVER DO FOR US? RSS FEED



Mark Goodchild, Managing Director of Challenge Partners, reflects on the release of CfBT and Centre for London's report on London schools.

Last night I attended the launch of CfBT and Centre for London's report on the "[Lessons from London Schools](#)". The roots of Challenge Partners lie in the work of the London Challenge (a government funded programme which ran from 2002 to 2011 and brought together schools to lead improvements in the capital) so I was interested in what the research had to say about the programme.

The report does an excellent job in providing the most comprehensive study to date on the web of factors that impact on school improvement. It doesn't shy away from acknowledging the complications involved in identifying the causation for London improvement but does conclude that there is undoubtedly evidence for the impact of the London Challenge programme. The welcome debate on the importance of evaluation on the "London effect" was opened up earlier in the week by the [IFS report](#), followed by a [blog by the EEF](#) on their approach to evaluating complex interventions, including our Challenge the Gap programme.

As the London Challenge programme was set out from the start as 'policy in action' rather than a research project it's not surprising that the evaluation data is thin on the ground but as Robert Hill commented at the launch - Facebook didn't start with a randomised-control trial!

However, we must recognise that the London success was no accident. It did have an evidence-informed and strategic approach which was continually evaluating itself, enhancing what worked, shedding what didn't and tailoring the right solutions according to the local need. The interventions were supported by a clear theory of improvement, and one which we are proud to be continuing within Challenge Partners.

The report identifies the considerable impact that headteachers had in developing and leading the London Challenge. Our Chief Executive, Sir George Berwick, describes in the report the shift to a more school-led approach to school improvement happening due to a newly energised sense of moral purpose and an emerging understanding of the mechanics of knowledge mobilisation (which we have captured [here](#)). The idea of school-to-school knowledge transfer, dependent upon building a kind of 'moral capital'

so that successful schools feel they have a duty to assist other schools in difficulty, is a central principle for Challenge Partners (we'll be publishing a short document on the 'capitals' on 2 July).

Another area of focus from the London Challenge was on fostering practitioner-led innovation between schools. The idea, developed from Sir George's old school, of the high-performing school as a teaching school was developed in tandem with the embryonic use of NLEs. [National Leaders of Education are Outstanding Headteachers tasked with providing support to other schools] These school-to-school learning programmes are now embedded models across the system, alongside the ITP and OTP teacher-to-teacher training programmes. These teaching and learning programmes were identified as powerful methods of improvement as they emphasised the importance of 'seeing it happen' and changing teacher expectations as a result of exposure to contrasting practice.

The report concludes with some key lessons that can be derived from the London school improvement story. Whilst the lessons learnt may be universal, the implementations of them will not be. At Challenge Partners, our schools are continuing to develop models of system leadership across the country in their own local partnership of schools and supporting practitioner-led innovation along the way. Schools are working with other schools to understand what they are doing to problem solve the educational challenges their pupils face on a daily basis and we work to embed that knowledge across all our schools. It is this identification of emerging best practice where our work lies.

It's clear that the potential for London's schools over the next decade is massive. A city which can harness the collective capacity and energy of its teachers, leaders, charities, and businesses will deliver huge improvements to the lives of its children. Imagine if we could do that on a national scale.

Mark Goodchild

Managing Director, Challenge Partners