

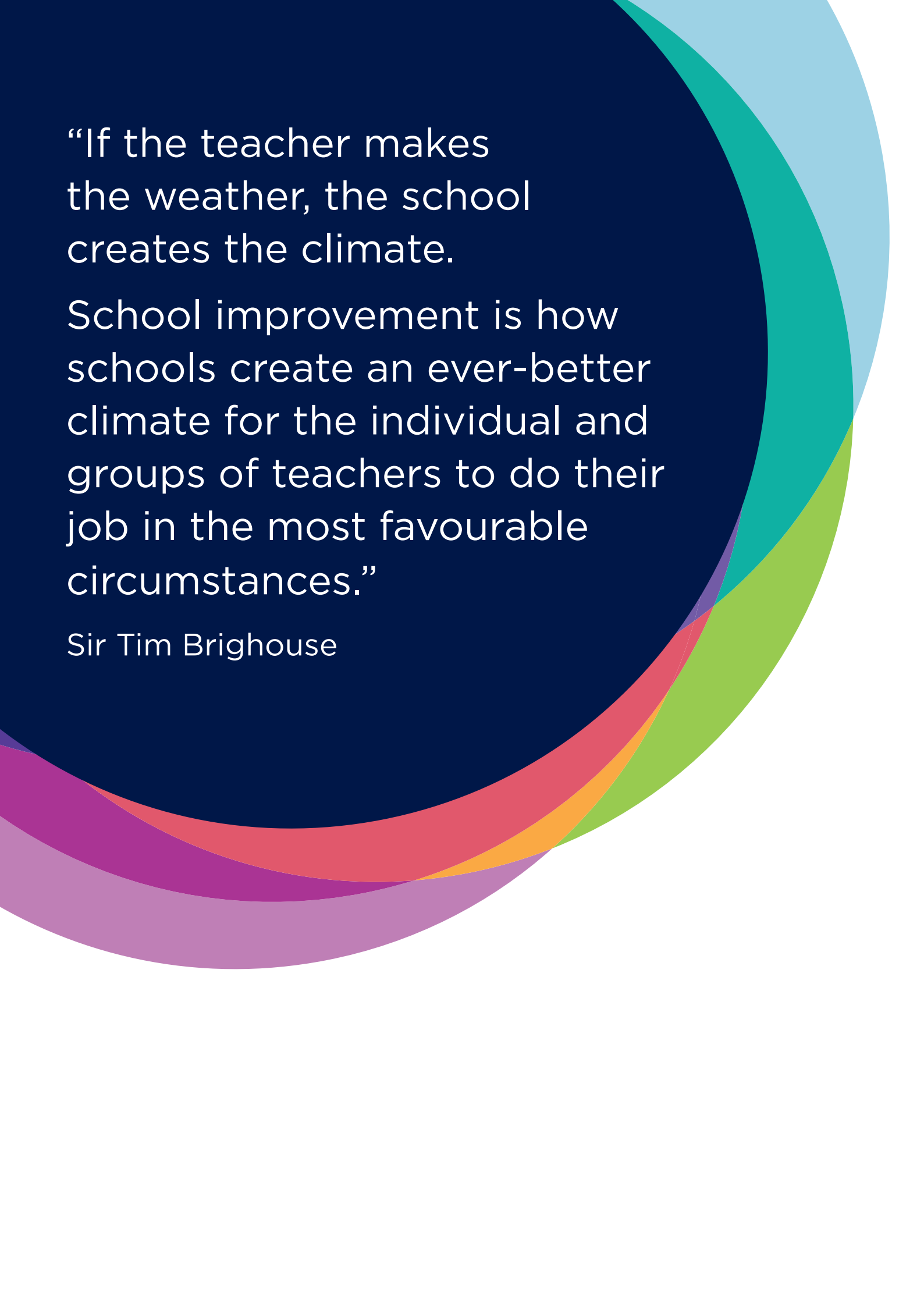
NOVEMBER 2020

# IMPROVING SCHOOLS

A report of the  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION

**#ImprovingSchools**





“If the teacher makes  
the weather, the school  
creates the climate.

School improvement is how  
schools create an ever-better  
climate for the individual and  
groups of teachers to do their  
job in the most favourable  
circumstances.”

Sir Tim Brighouse

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# Executive summary

**Our ambition is to build a school system of high excellence and high equity everywhere.**

**In the last twenty five years, education standards have been transformed in England.** Accountability arrangements have played their part in this transformation but are unlikely to achieve further improvements in the quality of education. High-stakes accountability is a powerful tool for driving compliance to minimum standards but a poor one for creating excellence within a system. To improve standards further, we need to rebalance holding schools to account with enabling them to improve.

**Schools are only as good as the people who work in them.** Ultimately, school improvement takes place on a teacher-by-teacher or classroom-by-classroom basis. Our goal is for every pupil in the country to be taught by an expert teacher, with strong pedagogical content knowledge and understanding of how children learn, who belongs to a profession that continually builds its collective expertise.

**First and foremost, the role of the school leader is to create the conditions in which teachers can flourish and pupils can succeed.** Yet in recent years this simple truth has, at times, become lost as additional responsibilities have become loaded onto the role and accountability pressures

have driven activity that has more to do with being Ofsted-ready than improving teaching and learning. Head teachers need the confidence to reassert their role as leaders of learning, ensuring positive cultures exist within schools and, critically, have the courage of their conviction when confronted with pressures for quick wins or faced with shifting goalposts.

**Sustainable school improvement takes time, delivered more often through small incremental changes at the classroom level** than through 'big-ticket' structural changes. The pressure to demonstrate rapid improvement has led to some schools adopting 'drag and drop' approaches, where they attempt to copy and apply effective practice from other schools. Emulating the observable features of effective practice without developing the underpinning expertise of teachers and leaders to deliver it will rarely achieve the desired impact. School improvement is not about a top-down, one-size-fits-all process. The commission believes that redefining school improvement away from short-term fixes and a search for magic bullets is important. We believe that a greater understanding of the research, combined with teachers' professional knowledge of what works in their particular context, is critical to success.



**School improvement should be seen as a continuous journey, not a destination to be reached.** All too often, school improvement has been defined by the school's journey through the Ofsted grading structure. A school is seen to have improved when it moves from requires improvement to good then finally outstanding. Our ambition is greater than this – that every single school continues to get better. Regardless of their starting point, they improve on previous best. We should redefine and celebrate the most successful schools as those that are the best at getting better.

**School improvement should be a collaborative, collective endeavour,** within and between schools, because collaboration enriches teachers' learning and spreads expertise so that all children can benefit. In some parts of the country, there is a strong sense of place among teachers and leaders, where head teachers believe in and act out their responsibility to the pupils in their schools and every child in their locality. However, the current system encourages and incentivises competition over collaboration and there is too often a sense that school improvement is a 'zero-sum game'. We need to re-examine incentives and structures within the system to redress this imbalance.

**Progress towards a self-improving, school-led system, founded on deep partnerships, co-creation and local solutions has stalled.** During the last decade, higher status schools have benefited from opportunities and resources available only to those with top inspection grades. Despite notable exceptions, too often these initiatives have simply reinforced local hierarchies and furthered the creation of winners and losers. Knowledge and expertise around school improvement have become commodities to be sold rather than insight to be shared.<sup>1</sup> Many exceptional leaders are becoming disillusioned by the increasingly limited, transactional nature of system leadership roles such as National Leaders of Education (NLEs). Yet the opportunity to apply one's professional insight and knowledge to support colleagues should be seen as the pinnacle of a school leader's career. There needs to be a fundamental change to the role of NLEs, with trust in professional judgement central to this change.

**The commission believes that action is urgently required to enhance the quality of life in the most marginalised and deprived areas of our country.**

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the impact of issues beyond the control of schools that affect the life chances of our young people. Schools with the highest expectations also need their young people to benefit from good health, housing and supportive communities. We believe the work of the opportunity areas is beginning to show promise and we are calling for this policy to be extended, with a sustained commitment beyond annual extensions.

**In order to achieve the vision set out above we need a significant shift in culture and policy.** This will require change. Change in valuing sustainable improvement over quick fixes. Change in terms of how we educate, develop and support leaders so they can create conditions in which teachers can thrive. Change in terms of improved access to high-quality CPD for all teachers. Change in terms of how we support schools who find themselves in the most challenging circumstances. We have identified what that change might look like and what needs to happen to move closer to our core vision of a continuously-improving school system.

**We do not need the government to mandate a shift in culture and approach – the power to change the climate resides with school leaders.** But in the face of high-stakes accountability, this can take brave and courageous leadership which should not be the case. The government must make choosing the right path the easiest path to take. They alone have the power and opportunity to remove barriers by aligning accountability measures and incentives. We need schools that are supportive, kind places to work and to thrive. Working together, we stand the best chance of further unleashing the potential residing in England's schools.

# Summary of recommendations

## ENSURING TEACHERS THRIVE

1. Every school should prioritise staff development and designate a senior leader as the professional development lead who is responsible for overseeing, coordinating and championing high-quality teacher professional development.
2. All professional development leads should have access to external support networks, research and case studies, to provide opportunities for them to develop their own understanding of, and expertise in, effective continuing professional development (CPD).
3. The government should extend the commitment to funded support for new and recently qualified teachers to all teachers and leaders by 2025, as part of a new CPD entitlement for all.

## EMPOWERING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

4. In consultation with the profession and key stakeholders, the government should develop a fully-funded support package, to provide structured support for all new head teachers and heads of school.
5. The government should create a new bursary fund to facilitate and incentivise participation in NPQs from a much wider group of middle and senior leaders, nationally.



## **COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

6. All schools should consider the role that school-to-school peer review and family of schools data could take to help provide a regular external view of their strengths and areas for development.
7. The government should invest in place-based collaborative partnerships – bringing together multi-academy trusts (MATs), local authorities (LAs) and maintained schools, to develop more coherent place-based improvement approaches.
8. Further research is conducted to provide insight into the impact of local partnerships on school improvement and the characteristics of effective partnership working.

## **EXTERNAL SUPPORT**

9. The Department for Education (DfE) creates a compelling proposition to encourage the most successful leaders to become NLEs, emphasising the importance of moral purpose and professional agency, so they can use their expertise in a flexible way to provide appropriate support to those schools in need of help.
10. The DfE's proposals for the future of teaching school hubs are developed further to create a national network of high-quality teacher development providers, which are quality assured in a transparent way.

## **EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE**

11. The DfE makes a long-term commitment to the opportunity areas programme, to give the confidence to be bolder and plan beyond the short term, and explores the potential for extending the programme to other areas.
12. The government produces an enhanced package of support and incentives for leaders working in the most deprived communities, to include fully-funded professional development and high-quality coaching and mentoring, and explores further options to provide confidence and security to staff accepting 'higher-risk' posts.
13. The government takes forward the recommendation of the 2018 Accountability Commission and focuses Ofsted on providing stronger diagnostic insight for schools that are struggling.

# The School Improvement Commission

In September 2018, NAHT published the report of the Accountability Commission, Improving School Accountability. The report noted that the quality of education in England had transformed over the last twenty five years and the majority of schools were now good or better. It recognised that accountability arrangements had contributed to this improvement.

However, the commission concluded that arrangements that had lifted the system to good were unlikely to deliver further improvements in the quality of education overall. To improve standards further, and to create a truly world-class system, the commission concluded that we should rebalance holding schools to account with helping them to improve.

The commission identified seven ways in which the current accountability arrangements were doing harm and made a series of recommendations to reduce unintended impacts.<sup>2</sup> A number of these recommendations have since been accepted, including the removal of floor and coasting standards, ending the outstanding exemption and focusing Ofsted's expertise on providing a stronger diagnosis for schools that are struggling.

While there has been clear acceptance of the need for a greater focus on the support schools receive, there has been far less clarity about what that should look like in practice. NAHT therefore agreed to convene a new commission of leading educationalists and academics to

provide greater insight on this critical issue. As a starting point, the commission took the output of a roundtable discussion with the secretary of state for education in September 2019, on barriers to effective school improvement. A summary is provided in **Appendix C**.

The commission was chaired by Nick Brook, deputy general secretary of NAHT, and met on five occasions between October 2019 and February 2020. Membership of the group is listed in **Appendix A**. Commissioners considered research evidence, evaluations and testimony of expert witnesses – a full list of contributors to this work is shown in **Appendix B**. They were supported by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) who provided an overview of existing evidence against key lines of enquiry and new survey evidence (from the Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey), undertaken specifically to inform the commission's findings.

Our ambition is twofold: that schools which face the deepest of challenges in the most deprived communities are better supported to succeed; and schools that are already good are better supported on their journey of continuous improvement.

This report represents the broad collective view of the commission. Individual involvement in the commission, either as a commissioner or expert witness, does not necessarily equate to support for, or endorsement of, all statements and recommendations made.

“To create a truly world-class system, we should rebalance holding schools to account with helping them to improve.”



# Key findings

## INTRODUCTION

**Our ambition is for a school system of high excellence and high equity.** Yet the current approach to school improvement will not deliver on this ambition everywhere. High-stakes accountability is a powerful tool for driving compliance to minimum standards but a poor one for creating excellence within a system; a compliance-focused approach to improvement leads to short-term interventions with short-lived benefit. Sustainable school improvement takes time, and has more to do with people and places than systems and structures, and is delivered through incremental improvements to the quality of teaching and learning in every classroom.

**Schools are only as good as the people who work in them.** We need to create the conditions in every school for teachers to flourish and pupils to succeed. All schools should be learning organisations where professional development and continuous improvement is the norm. This requires a supportive, professional culture; clarity in the expectations of what great looks like; effective support and mentoring; and sustained leadership commitment. While a range of factors contribute to sustained school improvement, none are more important or fundamental than the quality of professional development for teachers. School leaders play a pivotal role in creating this culture.

**School improvement should be seen as a continuous journey, not a destination to be reached.** All too often, school improvement has been defined by the school's journey through the Ofsted grading structure. A school is seen to have improved when it moves from requires improvement to good or outstanding. Our ambition is greater than this – that every single school continues to get better. Regardless of their starting point, they improve on previous best. We should redefine and celebrate the most successful schools as those that are best at getting better.

**School improvement activity should be evidence informed.** For this to occur, schools need to be 'permeable' to evidence, with cultures of learning that promote effective engagement with research in sufficient depth. However, while we have an



increasingly strong evidence base to draw on to determine 'best-bets' for improving standards in schools, there exists a 'knowing-doing gap', with 'what-works' evidence not consistently translating into classroom practice.

**The pressure on schools to demonstrate rapid improvement has led some to adopt 'drag and drop'<sup>3</sup> approaches,** where they attempt to copy and apply effective practice from other schools. Emulating the observable features of effective practice without developing the underpinning expertise of teachers and leaders to deliver it will rarely achieve the desired impact.

# ENSURING TEACHERS THRIVE

**SUMMARY:** Our goal is for every pupil in this country to be taught by an expert teacher. High-quality professional development can significantly improve pupils' learning outcomes and improve teacher and pupil wellbeing. Currently, not all teachers and leaders have access to good continuing professional development (CPD). The commission believes there needs to be a fundamental shift in policy, culture and practice so that high-quality CPD becomes the norm for all teachers, at every stage of their career.

**Our goal is for every pupil in this country to be taught by an expert teacher,** with strong pedagogical content knowledge and understanding of how children learn, who belongs to a profession that continually builds its collective expertise. This requires schools to be effective learning organisations for the people who work in them – nurturing, valuing and rewarding ongoing development of knowledge and pedagogy through regular constructive

feedback, professional discussion of practice, observation of others, and opportunity to engage with research evidence.

**High-quality professional development for teachers can significantly improve pupils' learning outcomes.** There is a growing consensus that high-quality CPD is a prerequisite for sustained school improvement. An overview of evidence produced by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) in 2020 suggests that high-quality CPD has a greater effect on pupil attainment than many other school-based interventions, including performance-related pay and lengthening the school day.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Teacher Development Trust report, *Developing Great Teaching* (2015) noted: 'professional development opportunities that are carefully designed and have a strong focus on pupil outcomes have a significant impact on student achievement'.<sup>5</sup>

**When teachers develop and build their expertise collectively, the wellbeing of teachers and pupils improves.**<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is supported by the EPI (2020) which has suggested that increasing the availability of high-quality CPD may help to address retention problems within the profession.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the impact of high-quality professional development can be seen to contribute to school improvement in its broadest sense, by retaining knowledge and expertise in the system.

**Unfortunately, access to high-quality professional development is variable.** The government's 2019 early career framework is a step in the right direction.<sup>8</sup> It means all new teachers should have an entitlement to evidence-based professional development in the first few years of teaching. However, we need to go further and work towards an entitlement to CPD for all teachers and leaders. The early findings of the Wellcome



CPD Challenge (2020) are providing important evidence about the potential impact of a 35-hour annual entitlement to high-quality professional development, as well as the challenges associated with delivering it.<sup>9</sup>

**The commission supports a national commitment to a minimum CPD entitlement that is properly funded.** We believe the government should build on the roll out of the early career framework and work towards a wider-funded CPD entitlement for all teachers and leaders from 2025. However, pressures on school budgets over recent years have squeezed the amount of investment in teacher CPD.<sup>10 11</sup> NAHT's own recent funding survey found that 66% of school leaders were cutting back on their CPD budgets. This commitment will require a ramping up of investment in teacher CPD from a very low base.

**Creating a culture of professional learning requires whole-school buy-in and sustained commitment from the top.** The commission believes that every school should identify a member of the senior leadership team to provide a strategic lead on teacher development. This professional should be supported to become an expert in teacher learning and development. They should oversee CPD across the school, developing a strong understanding of what constitutes high-quality, evidence-based professional development and facilitate access to it.<sup>12</sup> The Wellcome CPD Challenge is trialling a role similar to this, which they refer to as a CPD champion. Their learning suggests it is critical these professionals can access their own high-quality development and support to become experts in their roles and successfully lead the change required in their schools.<sup>13</sup> Through recognising current workload challenges, additional resources should be

made available in advance of the minimum CPD entitlement to build capability and capacity in the leadership of professional development.

**To maximise impact, schools will need much clearer guidance on what constitutes highly-effective professional development.** There exists a growing body of evidence about effective teacher CPD. Thanks to the work of organisations such as the Teacher Development Trust, CUREE and the Chartered College of Teaching, we now know much more about the characteristics of effective professional development. (See **Box A** below.) While a growing number of teachers and schools are engaged with research regarding effective CPD, this is not yet universal. A key role for the CPD lead in any school is to engage with the evidence and research, and to ensure that professional learning programmes and activities are built around the best available evidence.

**For those looking for external support, access to relevant expertise is a problem for many schools.** High-quality support is not spread evenly across the country and coldspots exist.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, with such a plethora of programmes, schemes and courses available to schools, it is increasingly hard to identify which are likely to have a positive impact. Quite rightly, school leaders are reluctant to spend money when they cannot be certain about the quality of support being offered. To help schools navigate this increasingly complex landscape, the commission recognises the potential usefulness to schools of some form of CPD quality mark. Research is currently underway by the Wellcome Trust to determine the feasibility of such an approach. The commission does not propose to pre-empt this work but suggests the question of a CPD quality mark is revisited in light of their findings.

“When teachers develop and build their expertise collectively, the wellbeing of teachers and pupils improves.”

## Box A: What is effective continuing professional development?

Weston and Hindley have identified features of effective professional development that are consistent across recent evidence reviews. These are:

- Professional learning should be iterative, with opportunities to apply learning in practice, and reflect and improve over time
- Professional learners should see the relevance of the training to their job requirements and their professional goals and aspirations
- Development should be designed with a focus on the impact on students, with formative assessment built in for participants
- Organisational leaders and facilitators need to create and protect the conditions for learning, eg time and space, while identifying and removing barriers such as workload
- Organisational leaders should demonstrate and encourage alignment between CPD and wider goals/approaches and actively encourage and support the buy-in of participants.

They have also identified some additional features that most evidence reviews recognised as effective. These are:

- Professional learners should engage in structured collaborative learning, focused on problem solving and enquiry
- Professional learning is more effective when it has either an explicit focus on a specific subject area, or where there are opportunities to translate generic ideas into a subject-specific context
- Professional learning should be facilitated through coaching and mentoring, with opportunities for explicit modelling of skills (including live, video and written case studies), giving feedback on efforts
- CPD facilitators and coaches should be experts in the content and process of the CPD, challenging internal orthodoxies and providing new perspectives where necessary
- CPD is more effective when teachers are volunteers in the process rather than conscripts.

Taken from 'Teacher CPD - International trends, opportunities and challenges', Chartered College of Teaching, (2019); p60: Professional Development: Evidence of What Works David Weston and Bethan Hindley, Teacher Development Trust.

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### The commission recommends that:

1. Every school should prioritise staff development and designate a senior leader as the professional development lead who is responsible for overseeing, coordinating and championing high-quality teacher professional development.
2. All professional development leads should have access to external support networks, research and case studies, to provide opportunities for them to develop their own understanding of, and expertise in, effective CPD.
3. The government should extend the commitment to funded support for new and recently qualified teachers to all teachers and leaders by 2025, as part of a new CPD entitlement for all.

# EMPOWERING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

**SUMMARY:** School leaders play a critical role when it comes to school improvement. It is leaders, together with their governing boards, who create the conditions in which teachers can develop and thrive. School leaders need to be confident in their leadership of learning, skilled at improving teaching and have a secure understanding of how to lead change. The challenges of school leadership have never been greater and the demands of the role never higher. We need to better prepare teachers for leadership and leaders for headship so they are able to thrive as they move into the role. However, better preparation for leadership is not enough. Just as teachers need a career-long entitlement to ongoing CPD and support, so too do school leaders.<sup>15</sup>

**There is a wealth of evidence that shows school leaders are key when it comes to school improvement.**<sup>16,17,18,19,20,21,22</sup> Without highly-effective leaders, sustained school improvement will not take place. School leaders need to be confident in their leadership of learning, skilled at improving teaching and have a secure understanding of how to lead change at an individual and institutional level.

**A fundamental role of any school leader is to create the conditions in which teachers can thrive.** School leaders play a critical role in creating a culture of professional learning so that every teacher is supported to improve their practice on an incremental and ongoing basis. To fulfil this role effectively, school leaders need to have a strong understanding of how teachers learn and improve. This means they need to know what effective CPD looks like and be prepared to prioritise teacher CPD in the face of competing priorities. Often, this means that school leaders are required to act as a 'buffer' and a 'filter' to protect teachers from the constant onslaught of new initiatives and strategies.

**The challenge of school leadership has never been greater.** Over the last decade, school leaders have found themselves dealing with extraordinary challenges, ranging from the effects of austerity and public sector spending cuts to the unprecedented impact of covid-19. Alongside these challenges, has sat the ever-present spectre of a high-stakes accountability regime. If we want leaders to be able to create the sorts of environments in which teachers can thrive, we

need to support, develop and trust them too. We need to rebalance holding schools to account with helping them to improve.<sup>23</sup> Just as teachers need the right conditions in which to thrive, so too do school leaders.

**At a time when we need head teachers and heads of school to step forward, leadership recruitment and retention are in crisis.** Currently, too few teachers aspire to leadership. Those who do are often poorly supported to succeed and too many leave the profession prematurely. Development programmes for leadership are highly variable in quality and too often there is a sink or swim mentality which results in 30% of head teachers leaving the profession within three years of their first headship.<sup>24</sup> This is not sustainable.

**A national offer is urgently required to support and scaffold those new to headship.**<sup>†</sup> The support new school leaders receive is inconsistent and geographically dependent. In some areas of the country, there are well-established training programmes and mentoring schemes for new school leaders, whereas in others, new leaders are largely left to fend for themselves. Every new leader should have an entitlement to high-quality support and training, regardless of the part of the country or MAT they are working in. The early career framework (ECF) is designed to give all new teachers access to high-quality,

<sup>†</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term 'headship' refers to the most senior role within a school, whether that is head teacher, head of school or principal.



“ Professional support is an essential element of leadership development.”

evidence-based training, as well as a guarantee of professional support from a more experienced colleague. This has been widely welcomed across the sector. There is no reason why a similar approach could not be taken for new school leaders. While there would be the need for a degree of flexibility in terms of delivery, this could include a nationally agreed, evidence-informed framework which forms the basis of a consistent programme for all new heads. Through such a framework and an associated package of support, new leaders could be given the confidence and skill set to thrive in their role as leaders of learning.

**Professional support is an essential element of leadership development.** New head teachers can benefit from the support of an experienced leader in much the same way as a newly qualified teacher can benefit from the support of an experienced teacher. In some parts of the country, and within some MATs, there already exists well-established school leadership mentor programmes, but this should be a universal entitlement for all. Critically, such a leadership mentoring programme should be fully funded and underpinned by a commitment to training for all mentors.

**Better support for new school leaders is not enough.** While it is right to invest in supporting new school leaders, we need to consider the professional learning of more experienced school leaders too. The ambition of a fully-funded entitlement for CPD, outlined in the section above, should extend to leaders as well as teachers. In theory, the suite of national professional

qualifications (NPQs) should act as key CPD milestones during a leaders' career. However, the commission heard that currently this is not the case. There was a sense that the current NPQs lack coherence and, in places, incentivise the wrong leadership behaviours. In addition, access to NPQs remains highly dependent on budgets and geography.

**Governing boards are expected to work closely with senior leaders to set a school's vision, ethos and strategic direction.** As such, they can play an important role in helping to establish a culture where teacher and leader CPD is valued and prioritised. It is important that governing boards buy into the importance of CPD and see it as a core driver for school improvement. Governing bodies can also demonstrate the importance of ongoing CPD through how they hold school leaders to account, for example, through the questions they ask at governing board meetings. Governing bodies also have an important role to play when it comes to ensuring head teachers are accessing their entitlement to mentoring and professional development. In particular, the head teacher's relationship with the chair is central

to tackling any isolation and stress, providing a sounding board and ensuring relevant CPD opportunities are sought and taken.

**School leaders should take an evidence-informed approach to school improvement.** As noted within the introduction, there remains a knowing-doing gap, where knowledge of best-bet evidence is not always translating into changed practice within classrooms. The commission believes further investigation is warranted to better understand the challenges of knowledge mobilisation, in a fragmented school system.

“Governing bodies have an important role to play when it comes to ensuring head teachers are accessing their entitlement to mentoring and professional development.”

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### The commission recommends that:

4. In consultation with the profession and key stakeholders, the government should develop a fully-funded support package, to provide structured support for all new head teachers and heads of school.
5. The government should create a new bursary fund to facilitate and incentivise participation in NPQs from a much wider group of middle and senior leaders, nationally.

# COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

**SUMMARY:** In some parts of the country, there is a strong sense of place among schools, where school leaders believe in and act out their responsibility to the pupils in their schools and every child in their locality. However, in some areas, competition rather than collaboration is furthering the creation of winners and losers among schools.

No school should see itself as an island and by working together in a structured way, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably. Research has highlighted the potential of local strategic partnerships for bringing all providers together across an area to work in partnership towards the success of all schools. Peer review offers one method for school-to-school collaboration, which, done well, can help provide schools with a different perspective and fresh insight on the nature of challenges faced.

## **Progress towards a self-improving, school-led system, founded on deep partnerships, co-creation and local solutions has stalled.**<sup>25</sup>

Knowledge and expertise around school improvement have too often become commodities to be sold rather than insight to be shared.<sup>26</sup>

Competition instead of collaboration has often characterised the relationship between schools and furthered the creation of winners and losers, locally. Consequently, the rising tide of educational performance nationally is failing to lift all boats.<sup>27</sup>

## **When the covid-19 crisis hit, the government turned to local authorities to work with schools to coordinate the community-level response.**

When the chips were down, it mattered not whether a school was local authority maintained or part of a multi-academy trust. What mattered was that schools worked together in the interest of all children and their community, irrespective of governance.

**In some parts of the country, there was already a strong sense of place among schools,** where school leaders took seriously their responsibility to the pupils in their schools and every child in their locality. In other areas, networks of local schools had become fragmented, making working together in the interest of all children more challenging. The government's plans to create a network of teaching school hubs could potentially play a role in connecting schools, but their ability to do so will be constrained by their sheer scale and scope. 'Place' requires collaboration on wider issues and at a more local level than hubs will surely allow<sup>28</sup>.

## **Local partnerships have the potential to reduce the risk of fragmentation and the dangers of isolationism.**<sup>29</sup>

There are around 60 types of local education partnership arrangements across the country, involving all types of schools and governance arrangements. The form and function of local partnerships vary considerably across the country. However, common to all is the belief that locality matters and there is a joint responsibility for children in that locality, not just in a single school. Schools are not compelled to take part in these partnerships but do so through choice because they see the tangible benefits. Many schools describe their commitment to their local partnership as stemming from pride in and a sense of belonging to a place.<sup>30</sup>

## **Advocates of the local partnership approach recognise multiple potential benefits for schools:**

a local focus – to never lose sight of the importance of place and establish effective relationships with the wider specialist services schools rely on; support – such as the ability to attract investment through scale; and challenge – by ensuring approaches do not become too insular and academies continue to 'talk beyond the trust'. However, the evidence base is still somewhat limited regarding the overall impact of local partnerships on the quality of education in member schools. Further work is recommended to evidence the impact of partnerships over the longer term and to communicate evidenced benefits clearly.



**More broadly, research shows that by working together in a structured way, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably.**<sup>31 32</sup>

Excellence is not exclusive or elitist and it is not a zero-sum game.<sup>33</sup> Recent research on sustainable improvement in multi-school groups, commissioned by the DfE, sets out how school-to-school collaboration and support can generate enhanced capacity for school improvement at scale.<sup>34</sup> The research highlighted the potential of local strategic partnerships for bringing together all providers across an area to work in partnership towards the success of all schools.

**Schools benefit from looking beyond local and regional boundaries to ensure they remain outward-looking and open to new ideas.**

There is clear value in finding out more about other schools that serve a similar demographic but who achieve different outcomes. The Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) Families of Schools data appears a useful starting point for schools to identify others that are similar to themselves, nationally.<sup>35</sup> The EEF database tool provides key data on the attainment of a school's disadvantaged pupils; shows a school's position within a 'family' of 50 schools which have pupils with similar characteristics and highlights schools to collaborate with.

**Peer review can provide an objective, external perspective to school leaders and governing boards on strengths and vulnerabilities, to inform improvement planning.**

An increasing number of schools report that they are involved in peer review, in one form or another. However, Greany (2020) notes most schools are adopting DIY approaches, some of which are about 'drag and drop' copying from outstanding schools rather than wider staff learning and improvement.<sup>36</sup> The report, *The principles of effective school-to-school peer review*<sup>37</sup>, provides an evidence summary of the characteristics of effective outside-in review, to help schools determine how to develop these approaches further. The School Improvement Commission reaffirms the belief of the Accountability Commission that our ambition, as a profession, should be to make high-quality peer review<sup>38</sup> the norm, not the exception, in schools.

“By working together in a structured way, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably.”

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### The commission recommends that:

6. All schools should consider the role that school-to-school peer review and Family of Schools data could take to help provide a regular external view of their strengths and areas for development.
7. The government should invest in place-based collaborative partnerships – bringing MATs, LAs and maintained schools together to develop more coherent, place-based improvement approaches.
8. Further research is conducted to provide insight into the impact of local partnerships on school improvement and the characteristics of effective partnership working.

# EXTERNAL SUPPORT

**SUMMARY:** All schools can benefit from external support. Within a school-led system, there should be mechanisms for professionals to reach out, support and work alongside others that are struggling. This support must be tailored to the specific needs of the school; there is no one-size-fits-all model for school improvement. The commission envisages a new role for National Leaders of Education (NLEs), requiring a shift from top-down control to genuine partnership working with schools based on a sophisticated understanding of an individual school's needs.

All school professionals should have access to high-quality training providers, covering the entire country, with no school left out. The government's proposals, to create a network of teaching school hubs, may contribute to meeting this ambition. On their own, however, they are unlikely to provide the necessary capacity or coverage to support all schools.

## **All schools can benefit from external support.**<sup>39</sup>

The nature and level of this support will vary from school to school according to their internal capacity, unique circumstances and the nature of the challenges they are facing. There is no such thing as an off-the-shelf approach to school improvement. We should not assume that schools can improve by simply replicating the work of other successful schools in completely different circumstances. Imposing solutions without a deep understanding of the particular circumstances on the ground is unlikely to prove successful. While school improvement strategies should be based on the best available evidence of what works, we should also be asking 'what will work here?', and 'how can we ensure it will work in this particular context?' The expertise of the head teacher and governing board is crucial.

**Within a school-led system, there should be mechanisms for professionals to reach out, support and work alongside others who are struggling.** The commission believes there can be few more important roles for experienced leaders in education than this. To do it well requires the credibility of having done the job in similar circumstances yourself, combined with the self-awareness that you do not possess all the answers, and critically, to be trusted by the government to make independent professional judgements that go beyond signposting to approved provision. School improvement should not be a top-down, one-size-fits-all process; schools need to own their improvement and not have it dictated to them. However, it is critical that offers of support should

be precisely that: offers. Forced intervention can put a brake on improvement and undermine progress. It is therefore vitally important that access to additional support is on the school's terms – done with, not to, the school, and engages teachers as well as leaders.

## **The support offer for schools who are not yet rated good has become increasingly centralised.**

The support these schools receive has become limited to a small group of government-approved initiatives. The NLEs assigned to work with these schools have become little more than 'brokers' who help signpost schools to choose solutions from a pre-approved list. This is a waste of the expertise that resides within the system.

## **The role of National Leaders of Education (NLEs)**

### **A new vision and role for NLEs is required.**

The commission noted and welcomed the DfE's review of system leadership. It agreed with the advisory group's<sup>40</sup> core finding that 'the NLE programme in its current form does not fully address the demands of the system' and that 'the support offered by these system leaders varies in its quality and impact'. The review was released during the commission's work and many of the recommendations echoed the commission's emerging findings. These included improved selection processes for NLEs, enhanced training with a strong focus on the skills required to effectively support other schools, a revised set of NLE standards and clearer accountability focused on the impact of NLEs.

**The role of NLEs needs to be completely redefined.** While the commission broadly supports most of the recommendations from the DfE system leader review, we believe there is a need to go further. The current approach fails to make the most of the skills and experience of the NLEs themselves. For the NLE programme to succeed, NLEs need the freedom to go beyond recommending a relatively narrow set of DfE-approved programmes. They should be expected to establish a genuine professional partnership with the school leaders they are working with and to help those leaders identify strengths that can be built on, issues that need resolving and bespoke solutions. For these solutions to be effective, they need to be tailored to the specific needs of the school and 'owned' by the professionals tasked with implementing them. This would represent a fundamental shift in the role of NLEs, from the external expert imposing pre-approved solutions, to a professional partner who is prepared to 'roll up their sleeves' and engage in the detail of school improvement.

**We need a far more sophisticated approach to brokering support.** The commission heard that NLEs can sometimes struggle to have an impact in schools serving deeply deprived communities, as relatively few of them have experience relevant to the challenges in hand. School leaders serving highly deprived communities are understandably sceptical of NLEs who have worked in very different circumstances. To tackle this, we need a far more sophisticated approach to NLE brokerage. While no two schools are the same, greater care should be taken when pairing NLEs with schools so that those NLEs have experience of broadly similar contexts. Families of Schools data has the potential to form a part of this pairing process by identifying schools and schools leaders working in not too dissimilar circumstances. The new eligibility criteria proposed through the DfE's review could help to provide a wider pool of NLEs to draw from.

**There must be a compelling proposition to encourage successful leaders to become NLEs.** Many exceptional leaders are becoming disillusioned by the increasingly limited, transactional nature of system leadership roles, such as NLEs. Yet the opportunity to apply one's professional insight and knowledge to support

colleagues should be seen as the pinnacle of a school leader's career. Those with appropriate track records of leading improvement in schools should be offered the very best training and support to be successful in this role. It should involve support to develop coaching expertise and a good understanding of evidence-informed practice. However, of critical importance, once they are trained and deployed, they must be trusted by the government to make on-the-ground professional judgements and not be tied to broker particular approved programmes.

### **A network of high-quality professional development providers**

**Currently, access to high-quality, external training and development support for teachers and leaders varies considerably across the country.**

Numerous coldspots exist, where schools have little choice of who to turn to for development support and where staff need to travel extremely long distances to access essential training. To deliver on the ambition and expectation of a CPD entitlement for all, schools will need access to local, high-quality provision.

**The commission believes that all school professionals should have access to a network of high-quality training providers,** covering the entire country, with no school left out. These training providers should be able to provide, or direct to, end-to-end training – from initial teacher education through to training for executive

“ School improvement should not be a top-down, one-size-fits-all process; schools need to own their improvement and not have it dictated to them. ”

leadership, linked to revised national professional qualifications (NPQs) or alternative high-quality programmes and qualifications.

**The government’s proposals to create a network of teaching school hubs may contribute to meeting this ambition.** On their own, however, they are unlikely to provide sufficient coverage across the country, with potential to create new coldspots. And as demand grows (to provide CPD support for all professionals within school) these hubs could rapidly become overloaded. It is therefore likely that this provision will need to be supplemented by other providers of training. The number of these required should be determined by the number of schools that fall within a journey time considered reasonable to expect teachers to travel.

**We do not believe that the DfE should specify the type of provider required to fill this gap.** For example, a previously designated teaching school might meet the new specification, so might an academy trust, local partnership, university, institute of education, charity or private provider. The Teaching Schools Council (TSC) can potentially play an enhanced role here – supporting the development of a national infrastructure of training providers and ensuring sufficient capacity exists to deliver a CPD entitlement for all.



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### The commission recommends that:

9. The DfE creates a compelling proposition to encourage the most successful leaders to become NLEs, emphasising the importance of moral purpose and professional agency, so they can use their expertise in a flexible way to provide appropriate support to those schools in need of help.
10. The DfE’s proposals for the future of teaching schools hubs are developed further to create a national network of high-quality teacher development providers, which are quality assured in a transparent way

# EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

**SUMMARY:** There are some parts of the country where achieving high outcomes for pupils is simply a harder task. Typically, these are communities where external factors, including family poverty, have combined to create difficult conditions in which to flourish. The government and Ofsted need to be prepared to look beyond the school gate when determining the actions required to improve outcomes for young people. Unless there is an accurate assessment of root causes, we are unlikely to target actions precisely enough.

Currently, many good professionals are put off working in schools serving the communities that need them the most. We need to flip the incentives, so good professionals are encouraged and rewarded for working in higher-need communities.

**There are some parts of the country where disproportionately high numbers of young people do not fulfil their potential at school.**

These are typically communities where external factors (over which schools have little control) have combined to create difficult conditions in which to flourish. These are communities where factors such as sustained poverty, substance abuse and chaotic family lives have a daily impact on the work of teachers and school leaders who are striving to improve standards. In such communities, school improvement is simply a harder task and school-based strategies alone will not provide the necessary solutions.

**From birth to the age of 16, children are in school for around 15% of their lives and in the home and community for 85%.**

To make a difference to the life chances of young people in the most chaotic of circumstances, we must undoubtedly provide better support to schools to ensure the 15% is the best it can be – a place of safety, support, hope and above all else great teaching and learning. But if we want to transform lives, there is also a pressing need to address what is going wrong in the 85% – dramatically improving responsiveness and effectiveness of local services; prevention and early intervention when needed; reducing underlying issues of unemployment, poverty, crime and anti-social behaviour; and improving quality of life in these communities. Schools cannot do it alone. The government needs to be prepared to look beyond the school gate when determining actions required to improve outcomes for young people. Unless there is an accurate assessment of the root causes of these issues, we are unlikely to target actions precisely enough.

**The commission believes that action is urgently required to enhance the quality of life in the most marginalised and deprived areas of the country.**

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the impact of issues beyond the control of schools that affect the life chances of our young people.<sup>41,42,43,44</sup> Schools with the highest expectations also need their young people to benefit from good health, housing and supportive communities.

**Opportunity areas have taken time to find their feet but are beginning to have a positive impact.**

Emerging evidence from EEF<sup>45</sup> and NFER<sup>46</sup> has helped identify common characteristics of those areas that have achieved some progress. These include establishing an agreed focus; prompting a sense of collective responsibility and joining-up of effort; creating delivery capability and an infrastructure capable of delivering change; capitalising opportunities to secure further resources for specific purposes; and making the most of the involvement of the local authority to coordinate the delivery of services outside of school. Creating the capacity and capability to successfully support improvement takes time, but there are enough signs of early promise to suggest that it would be premature to withdraw the government's commitment and investment anytime soon. The government needs to hold its nerve and think beyond timeframes dictated by the Treasury's spending plans.

**The current approach to inspection can inadvertently work against improvement in schools serving highly-deprived communities in multiple ways.** It can disincentivise teachers and leaders from choosing to work in those schools for fear of being judged more harshly by the inspectorate for doing so and by encouraging short-term actions that show short-lived impact, rather than incentivising deeper reforms to provide for longer-term sustained improvement. Some schools, serving the most deprived communities in England, have been found ‘not good enough’ in successive Ofsted inspections. And yet, in these schools, the process of being found ‘not good enough’ has had little or no discernible positive impact. Sustainable school improvement is that much harder when staff teams move on every three years as a consequence of a poor inspection judgement. If anything, labels such as ‘failing’ or ‘stuck’ have made the job of these schools even more challenging as it becomes harder to recruit the experienced and effective teachers and leaders these schools desperately need.

**We need a better understanding of the causes of educational underperformance at an individual school level.** If it is the result of poor practice in school, then it is right the inspectorate should identify this so that appropriate steps can be taken. Likewise, if it is the result of factors beyond the school gate and beyond the control of the school, then it is right a light is shone there so that corrective action can be taken by local or national government. We need a better mechanism for properly identifying the reasons why underperformance occurs to address the root causes of the issues faced.

**Currently, many good professionals are put off working in the schools that need them most.**

We need to flip the incentives so that skilled professionals are rewarded, not penalised, for working in schools serving the most challenging communities. We need to ensure those leaders know that someone ‘has their back’ – that they will not be allowed to fail; that choosing a difficult assignment will not be career suicide if it goes wrong; that by not taking the easy road they will be supported to become the best they can be, with access to world-class training, development and coaching.

**In doing so, we can change the narrative that assumes the best staff work in outstanding schools and the worst staff work in inadequate schools.** Time and again, a lazy association is made about the capability and expertise of professionals according to the Ofsted judgement of the school within which they work. The commission has noted this happening at a system level, for example, in designating system leadership roles; and at a local level, for example, through assumptions regarding the type of support head teachers leading requires improvement schools need. The best schools are the best at getting better. We need an improved way of recognising and rewarding the teachers and leaders who are moving their schools forward, and that others can learn from, in every type of community.

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We need an improved way of recognising and rewarding the teachers and leaders who are moving their schools forward.”

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## The commission recommends that:

11. The DfE makes a long-term commitment to the opportunity areas programme, to give the confidence to be bolder and plan beyond the short-term, and explore the potential for extending the programme to other areas.
12. The government produces an enhanced package of support and incentives for leaders working in the most deprived communities, to include fully-funded professional development and high-quality coaching and mentoring, and explore further options to provide confidence and security to staff accepting ‘higher-risk’ posts.
13. The government takes forward the recommendation of the 2018 Accountability Commission and focuses Ofsted on providing stronger diagnostic insight for schools that are struggling.



# Afterword

Nick Brook, chair of the School Improvement Commission



*“If the teacher makes the weather, the school creates the climate. School improvement is how schools create an ever-better climate for the individual and groups of teachers to do their job in the most favourable circumstances.<sup>47</sup>”*

The above words, by Sir Tim Brighouse, capture perfectly both the importance of our profession and the simple truth behind improving schools. It is often said, but no less true because of it, that schools are only as good as the people within them. Exceptional teachers are made, not born that way. The responsibility on the shoulders of school leaders is great – to help every professional become the very best they can be, and then some. And, at risk of stretching Sir Tim’s analogy too far, shielding teachers from the gathering storm clouds, so they can maintain focus on what is truly important.

This can take brave and courageous leadership, but it shouldn’t have to be that way. The school system should be set up so that choosing the right path is the easiest path to take. Doing the right thing shouldn’t take heroics – if it does, it suggests there is a fundamental problem with the incentives and penalties in play.

The 2018 Accountability Commission made a series of recommendations to create a more proportionate system of school oversight. The findings of this report underline the importance of pressing ahead with reform to the accountability system so that the way we hold schools to account is fully aligned with the behaviours we want to encourage in schools. Taken together, our two reports pose a series of rather fundamental questions:

- **Do we have the right incentives in the system to drive school improvement?** While schools strive to improve, the high-stakes nature of the current system can encourage them to look for short-term solutions, rather than long-term, sustained change. The phrase ‘what gets measured gets done’ has been said to me repeatedly through the course of this review. Yet, not everything we value is measured and nor should it be.
- **Do we judge schools ‘fairly’?** As set out in the Accountability Commission report, Ofsted judgements and ‘raw’ performance data don’t always reflect the context of the school. Comparative performance – using Family of Schools data – could prove infinitely more useful as an indicator of success, relative to other schools in similar circumstances, and critically, be used to share relevant effective practice.
- **Do the incentives encourage collaboration and local area improvements?** How can Ofsted or others mitigate the downsides of Progress 8 (a relative measure) which encourages schools to compete to attract the students with the greatest potential, rather than working to raise standards everywhere?



- **Does a simple overall Ofsted judgement capture everything** that parents need to know about schools' strengths and weaknesses, or provide anything useful to schools to enable their improvement efforts? The commission discussed the potential merits of the introduction of a school information card – a 'dashboard' summary that includes key outcome data, comparative performance information, most recent Ofsted judgements, and information related to aspects of provision valued by the school and community. The commission has stopped short of making a recommendation here. Our experience to date has shown that it is wise to be wary of unintended consequences from introducing new requirements on which schools may be held to account. This is certainly an area that warrants more investigation.

“To compete with the very best in the world... talent within the profession must be nurtured and unleashed.”

The intent of the commission was to identify a new vision for improving schools and produce a series of pragmatic proposals for change. Much of what we have said is simple common sense, but it is no less challenging for it. The commission has described a significant culture change that needs to take place across many schools. For years, schools and school leaders have been pushed in the opposite direction, resulting in the erosion of teacher agency, prioritisation of management of data over leadership of learning, and competition over collaboration between schools. For some, it will be a difficult journey to take, requiring support of others. No school is an island and no leader should ever stand alone.

Many of the recommendations made in this report are for the government. However, our biggest 'ask', is the simple recognition that you cannot mandate or inspect your way to greatness. And if the government has the highest ambition to compete with the very best in the world then talent within the profession must be nurtured and unleashed. The power is in fact in the hands of school leaders and teachers to deliver on this vision, with or without government support. Working together, however, the impact could be truly transformational.



# Appendix A – Membership of the commission

- Chair: **Nick Brook** (NAHT deputy general secretary)
- Members: **Dame Alison Peacock** (Chartered College of Teaching)  
**Carole Willis** (NFER)  
**Chris Kirkham-Knowles** (Scalby Learning Trust)  
**Emma Knights OBE** (National Governance Association)  
**Gary Wilkie** (Learning in Harmony Trust)  
**James Bowen** (NAHT)  
**Judy Shaw** (NAHT immediate past president)  
**Julie McCulloch** (ASCL)  
**Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE** (Challenge Partners)  
**Matt Davis** (Education Development Trust)  
**Melanie Renowden** (Ambition Institute)  
**Natalie Perera** (Education Policy Institute)  
**Richard Gill** (Teaching Schools Council)  
**Rob Williams** (NAHT)  
**Stephen Fraser** (Education Endowment Foundation)  
**Stephen Tierney** (Headteachers' Roundtable)  
**Steve Munby CBE** (Munby Education)  
**Professor Toby Greany** (University of Nottingham)  
**Tom Rees** (Ambition Institute)  
**Tom Richmond** (EDSK)

# Appendix B – Acknowledgements

The commission would like to thank the following individuals for their valuable contribution to this review:

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**Sir Kevan Collins**

**Leora Cruddas** (CST)

**Maria Cunningham** (Teacher Development Trust)

**Nan Davies** (Wellcome Trust)

**Dr Lesley Duff** (NFER)

**Tom Errington** (DfE)

**Andrew Ettinger** (Education Development Trust)

**Christine Gilbert CBE**

**Dominic Herrington** (DfE National Schools Commissioner)

**Rita Hindocha** (Mead Education Trust)

**Matt Hood OBE**

**Melanie Hooson** (Ambition Institute)

**Sarah Lewis** (DfE)

**Baroness Morris of Yardley**

**Dr Julie Nelson** (NFER)

**Ciaran O'Connor** (DfE)

**Liz Robinson** (Big Education)

**David Weston** (Teacher Development Trust)

**Hannah Woodhouse** (DfE SW Regional Schools Commissioner)

# Appendix C – Barriers to school improvement

The commission has identified nine factors that can act as a brake to school improvement:

## Internal barriers

1. **Weak diagnosis of need** and a lack of focus and coherence to school improvement activity.
2. **Absence of expert support and guidance** to help schools implement proven approaches effectively.
3. **Lack of awareness of proven effective practice** (and knowledge gaps around unproven, yet effective, practice).
4. **Frequent changes to structures, systems and organisation**, distracting attention, resource and focus at a school level.
5. **Limited scope to innovate** under a high-stakes inspection regime that rewards conformity to a norm.

## External barriers

6. **High deprivation, low opportunity and the unmet needs of young people** in the community served.
7. **Lack of suitably skilled teachers and leaders** and the inability to attract sufficient high-calibre qualified staff.
8. **Insufficient funding allocated to the professional development and support of staff**, which limits investment in new programmes.
9. **Lack of collaboration at a local level**, where high-stakes accountability has pitched schools against each other, rather than working together for a common good.

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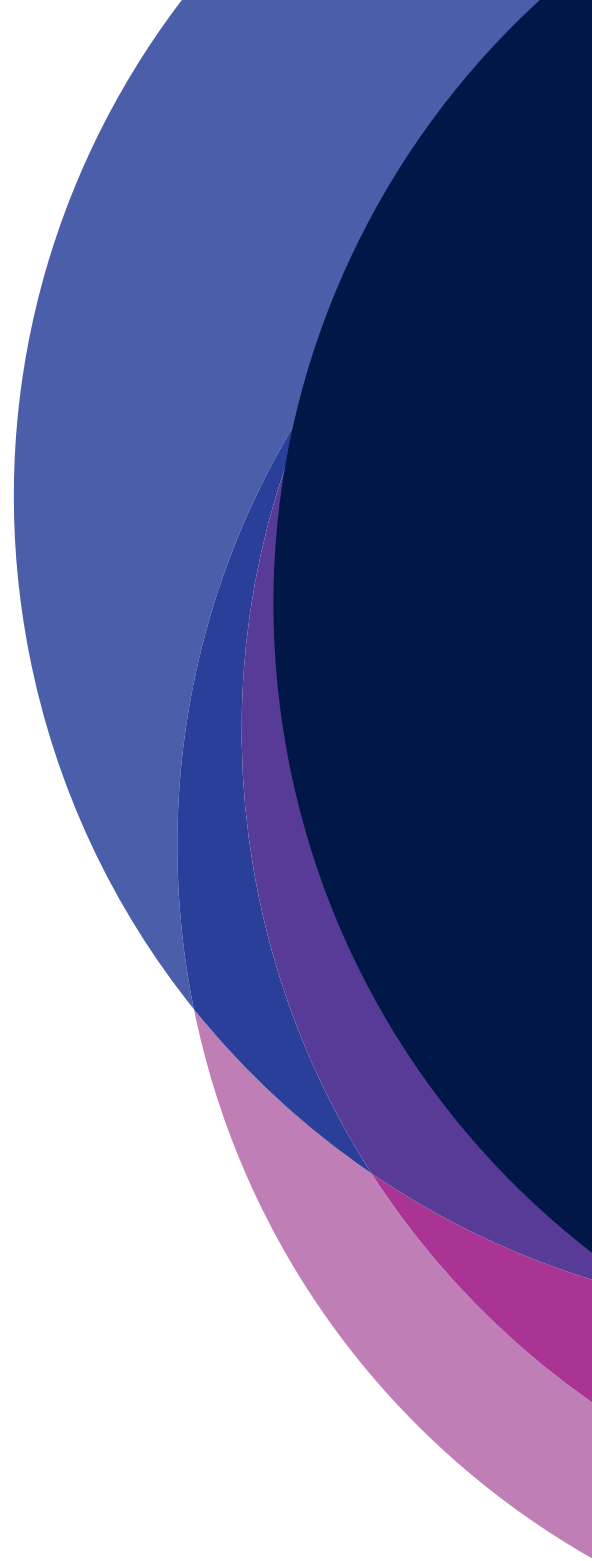
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