

Lessons from London

Successful Education Practices for High-Poverty Schools

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Overview

In 2009, Michigan State University’s Office of K–12 Outreach established a partnership with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT)—the United Kingdom’s leading organization for advancing school excellence in high-poverty, diverse schools. Since then, SSAT has provided ongoing opportunities for the K-12 Outreach staff to study outstanding practices in England, particularly in secondary schools, that have resulted in improved and sustained student achievement. In addition, we worked with SSAT to bring a delegation of school leaders to the U.S. to learn about innovative approaches to educating urban youth being implemented in Boston and New York City.

For each study tour, our team worked with SSAT to identify successful school turnaround efforts in London’s most distressed urban neighborhoods—unstable, high-poverty, high-minority, high-immigrant, and high-crime areas in this capitol city of 8.2 million people. Pre-turnaround, these schools were troubled places with poor educational outcomes. Post-turnaround, they are healthy learning communities with robust student academic and social growth. We were determined to find out what factors influenced these changes, so we could support similar change in the U.S.



A teacher at a school in one of London’s poorest neighborhoods focuses on learning that engages students at every level.

In preparation for the visits, our delegates received numerous readings to provide context on the English education system. During the visits, we reviewed the educational practices in action and interviewed school and other education leaders, teachers and students. We spent many additional hours writing and debriefing to better understand and apply our learning here at home.

As a result of our initial visits to the U.K., we distilled five core principles that represent the most salient aspects of their reform efforts, ones that could be incorporated into our education efforts in Michigan. These principles, outlined below, continued to inform our trips, as we strived to learn more about specific strategies for implementation.

In 2014, the Office of K-12 Outreach facilitated two trips to the U.K.—the first with members of the Education Alliance of Michigan and the second with representatives from the W.K. Kellogg and C.S. Mott Foundations. These trips were intensely focused on student learning and well-being. The schools we

visited had incorporated these two elements into their “school’s DNA,” a phrase coined by noted education researcher Joseph Murphy. And as schools implemented strategies around student learning and well-being, we observed that a shared mission and moral purpose was palpable in virtually every school we visited and every presentation we attended.

This summary of our continued learning from London begins by describing how this moral purpose was manifested throughout these remarkable schools. Then we discuss the two core principles in depth, and provide context and examples of what they looked like in action. We end with some final thoughts on how some of these practices could be incorporated into our work here in Michigan.

5 Principles of Successful Practice in Educating High-Poverty Students

- 1. Student learning comes first.** Everything in the school is aimed at building the knowledge, growth, and development of students—no exceptions, no excuses. Students have agency and autonomy when it comes to their own learning, and are accountable for their work.
- 2. Schools nurture student well-being.** Academic growth occurs in a setting where students’ physical, mental, emotional, and social needs are well understood, respected, and met by attentive adults. Successful schools provide high-quality personal experiences for the citizens of tomorrow.
- 3. Effective teachers ensure student learning through a coherent, rigorous curriculum.** Clear academic standards in the hands of talented, caring staff are critical drivers of student success.
- 4. Shared accountability matters.** In the schools we visited, everyone accepted responsibility and accountability for student learning—teachers, administrators, parents and even the students themselves. Accountability was supported by norms of ongoing support and teamwork, and a positive attitude toward the work that stressed problem solving, not punishment.
- 5. Effective leaders create a positive, results-oriented and caring culture that facilitates student learning.** Renowned researcher Joseph Murphy calls this a culture of “academic press and student support.”¹ Leaders in these schools set clear and high expectations, then consistently provide supports to achieve those expectations. They inspire and support a positive, caring climate that addresses the complex needs of students in poverty and creates a safe, joyful place in which students are free to learn.

¹ Murphy, Joseph and Daniela Torre (2014). *Creating Productive Cultures in Schools for Students, Teachers, and Parents*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Collective Moral Purpose

There is a collective moral purpose driving educators to work with students in poverty and provide a high-quality education for all students, to enhance the teaching profession for all staff, and to improve the education system as a whole. Schools are organized in such a way that the moral purpose becomes a reality.

Moral purpose is a term that we heard repeatedly throughout each visit to England, from classroom educators and head teachers² to policymakers and community leaders. That is, they held these common values: that providing a quality education and teaching life skills to high-need students is a moral imperative, is the best route to improving communities, and the only way to stop the cycle of poverty. It is underpinned by the shared belief that students can learn, will learn and that adults must support students in meeting and exceeding their aspirations. This is in keeping with the work of Michael Fullan³, an international expert on education, who describes moral purpose as the foundation of a systems approach to turnaround having three components:

1. Focuses on raising achievement and closing achievement gaps;
2. Specifies key standards (e.g. literacy, numeracy, etc.), not programs;
3. Espouses high expectations for all and the belief that all children can learn.

Structures to Realize Moral Purpose

English schools are structured in such a way as to make the ethos of moral purpose a reality. Traditional department or positional silos are removed, and distributed leadership teams truly work together to manage a school. These teams tend to be large, and are organized to give staff opportunities to lead. Lead teachers have lightened teaching loads, so that they can work on improving the instructional capacity of other teachers, while continuing to use and improve their own teaching skills. Head teachers and all school administrators regularly teach classes to ensure that they remain connected to their students and core instruction.

² Head teachers are the equivalent of principals in the U.S., yet they teach one or two classes.

³ Fullan, Michael. (2010) *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Members of school leadership teams shift roles every few years. One person may be the lead data manager for a year or two, but then become the dean of a grade level. This frequent shifting of roles allows for every team member to build capacity in all areas of school management, increases the chance for sustainability as staff leave, and encourages new ideas and perspectives. Leadership teams meet with the entire staff frequently as well, sometimes up to three times a week, to ensure all staff are on the same page and understand any coming initiatives, and to address any urgent issues.

Effective teaching is a crucial to the learning of high-need students. To develop new teachers with a strong knowledge base and the desire to teach high-need populations, many of the schools we visited are “teaching schools.” Over the past few years, teacher education in England has shifted from traditional university programs to schools. This shift allows for teacher candidates to receive embedded training while schools are able to grow teachers who have the content knowledge, classroom management skills and, most importantly, the desire to work with high-need students.

Effective teaching is also supported through a teacher induction process where novice teachers work an abbreviated schedule so that they are able to visit classrooms of more seasoned teachers. This allows them to observe effective practice and also receive support from lead practitioners and school leaders about their own instruction.



Everywhere, in every school, posters and signs offer positive reminders to students about learning and behavior. This poster highlights the concept of “learning to learn.”

Collaboration Between Schools

Schools regularly collaborate with each other to increase their efficiency and to improve their outcomes. Many schools in England are independent of local education authorities (LEAs), but are instead members of networks or chains of schools. Network members often train together, provide professional development to each other's schools, share staff, or purchase supplies or services together. Organizations like the SSAT also provide and organize opportunities to collaborate and share across schools.

Chronically low-performing schools sometimes partner with a higher-performing school to help them improve. Essentially, the higher-performing school takes over the low performer, and the head teacher of the higher performer manages both schools. In addition, schools in England have school-based budgeting and the autonomy to contract with a variety of external partners for services, as opposed to being required to use a traditional LEA for services. Schools may work together to contract for services and to increase the economies of scale.

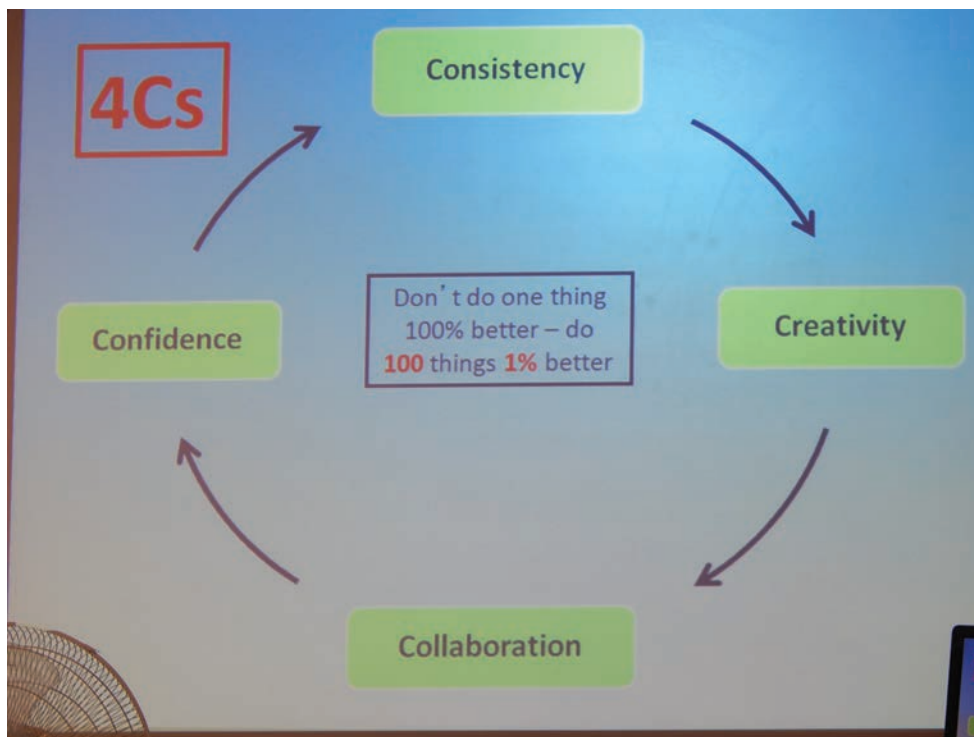
In this model, collaboration and competition are not mutually exclusive, and this belief is prevalent among staff, students, and the education system as whole.

Students, teachers, and head teachers repeatedly articulated that helping each other improve is beneficial for the greater good. Students, teachers, and school leaders strive to improve themselves, but not at the cost of the system. Collaboration and competition complement each other in England.

Collaboration Among Staff Members

The schools we visited share a philosophy of “we’re all in it together,” and “we must work together to help our students succeed.” Similar to the collaboration seen between schools, individuals collaborate on a regular basis as well. This is evidenced by how schools provide professional development, which generally occurs within the school and is provided between colleagues.

Schools have lead practitioners, who are essentially master teachers who work with other teachers to improve their practice. They identify strong lessons and the teachers who created and taught them, and make those lessons available to all staff. When other teachers need additional support, they can choose from among the “recommended lessons” and observe the lesson being taught by the creator of the lesson or another colleague who has experience with the lesson.



Teachers collaborate across schools and within schools to improve teaching and learning. This poster highlights one school's emphasis on collaboration and on providing consistency for students.

Student Learning Comes First

Everything in the school is aimed at building the knowledge, growth, and development of students—no exceptions, no excuses. Students have agency and autonomy when it comes to their own learning and are accountable for their work.

Students as the Priority

Personalized learning is a widespread concept in England. Personalized learning goes beyond differentiation of instruction, and tailors teaching and learning to the needs of individual students, while encouraging students to become active partners in their own learning.⁴ All the schools we visited view personalized learning as the core of their work. The needs of each student are assessed in relation to learning the core curriculum and then the staff develop plans to meet each student's needs and interests. One head teacher reflected, "Every child has something to offer. It's our job to find that. Once you find that talent, you can use it as a hook to do everything else."

Students and staff work hard and rules are strict, but accomplishments are celebrated, and the schools we visited were joyful, uplifting and supportive places. Students often articulated the idea that education is their opportunity for growth and success and that they are integral members of their school communities. They could also speak the "language" of learning and were able to examine and discuss their where they were in relation to their learning goals. They understood that they must work hard, but that staff would support their achievements.

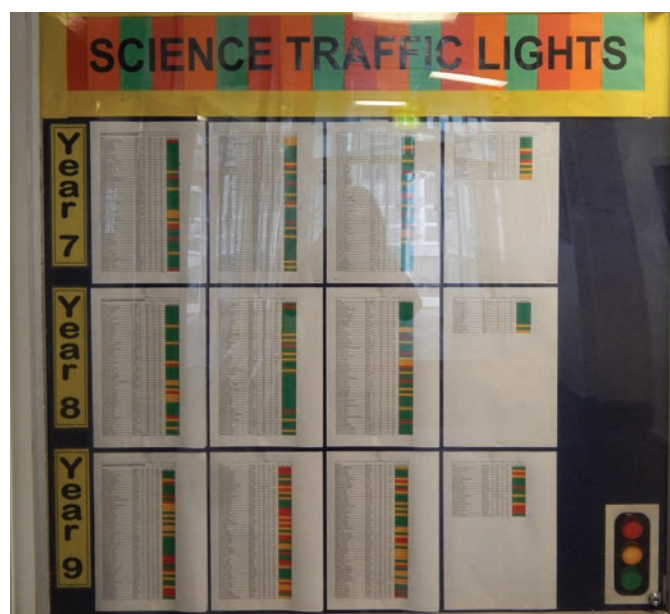
If students are not learning or demonstrating growth, the adults actively seek the root cause(s) of issues and then make decisions and plans that best serve those students, as opposed to the easiest solution or least controversial option for the adults. Adult expectations are clear, and there are consequences for not meeting those expectations.

Student Use of Data

Students know their own data and they understand the learning process. They are given, or jointly determine with their teacher, learning targets, and then discuss ways to achieve those targets. Students believe that testing helps them to know where they are. Periodic assessments are used to track progress over the course

of the year. These assessments are used to help students answer basic questions about their progress: *Where are you now? Where are you going to be in X amount of time? What supports will you need to get from point A to point B?* Many schools also require regular "Learning Conversations" between teachers and students to check in on their progress. One school requires one-on-one dialogues to be held every six weeks during the school year. Another school expects students to meet with each content teacher on a regular basis. While these conversations focus on the student's performance, they also provide an opportunity for students and teachers to discuss any issues or problems with which a student may need support— in school or external to traditional school needs.

Student data is everywhere and is shared throughout the building. Hallways, doors, and classroom walls are filled with student assessment scores and samples of student work. Some classrooms at the lower grades have little note cards taped to each child's desk that shows that student's baseline assessment scores and their goal scores. There is a constant reminder that student work is evaluated and growth is expected. The display of student work, with names visible, also allows students the opportunity to see which of their peers can provide them with learning support. Students commented that there is some competition for performing well, but reflected that the level of competition is healthy and useful.



Students know their data - this poster lists their names and where they are in science. Green means the student is on target, yellow means they need to work a little harder, and red signifies that the student may need additional help or resources.

In nearly every school...I was quite stunned to see student names attached to the data right in the hallway for all to see. On every visit I would ask students how they felt about having scores like that on display in the hallway. Without fail, students appeared surprised by my question and they each responded similarly, "We just see it as a way to track our progress and we know the teachers are here to help us get better."

–A recent U.K. study tour participant

Another example of student ownership is the opportunity for students to respond to feedback from teachers. The teachers mark their feedback in green and the students respond to that feedback in red. This creates an ongoing conversation about how to improve, and encourages a cycle of continuous improvement.

Staff Use of Data

All staff members use data consistently and regularly. The schools employ performance management systems that assess a variety of types of data. These data include

student achievement progress (by student), attendance, behavior and safety, teaching and learning, and leadership and management. Once issues are identified, staff perform a root cause analysis to determine barriers and develop solutions to remedy the situation. More specifically, staff use data to identify: 1) the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and cohorts; 2) how teachers should adapt instruction to remediate students or to move on to the next components of the curriculum; 3) staff who either need assistance or who could act as exemplars for other staff members.

Use of Technology

In the U.S., personalized learning is often equated with the use of technology to differentiate instruction and activities for students. In England, the schools we visited are technology capable, but technology is used sparingly. While schools in the U.S. are starting to identify ways to incorporate cell phones into learning, cell phones were strictly prohibited in the schools we visited in London. It was evident that the English educators believe that technology can be a useful tool to enhance student learning, but it does not and should not take the place of a strong curriculum or sound instruction.



Teachers in London schools know where their students are succeeding and where they need help. This chart depicts where each student is in relation to specific learning targets.

⁴ Hargreaves, David. (2004). *Personalising Learning – Next Steps in Working Laterally*. London: Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and Association of School and College Leaders.

Schools Nurture Student Well-being

Academic growth occurs in a setting where students' physical, mental, emotional, and social needs are understood, respected, and met by attentive adults. Successful schools provide high-quality personal experiences for the citizens of tomorrow.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is a core component of education in all of the schools we visited and centers on the need to create a safe and nurturing environment for students. Several schools described pastoral care as their approach to looking at the limiting factors that impact each student's learning. School staff must first identify the barriers to learning and then develop an individualized plan to support each student. Pastoral care shares equal importance to academics in the schools we observed.

Pastoral care may take a variety of forms and the services offered reflects the needs of the local community. Some examples of pastoral care include: the use of tutor groups (which essentially act as homerooms and provide regular check-ins for teachers and students), exposure to career and job opportunities, access to behavioral or health specialists, strategies to increase student aspirations for the future, and classes and programs to develop life skills.

Many of the schools we visited recognize that certain students are not able to learn many important life

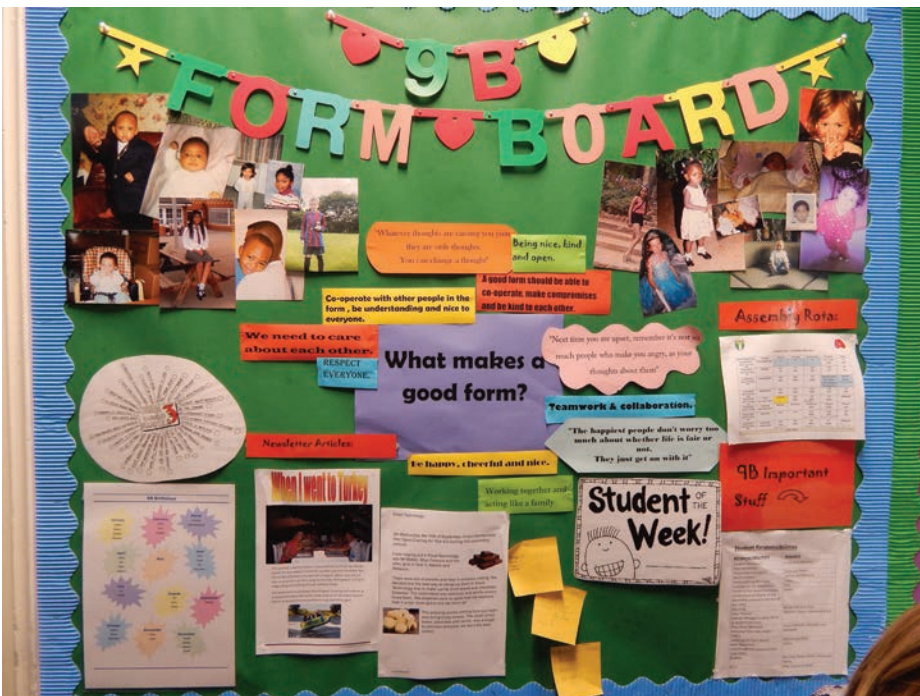
skills at home, so the teachers and staff incorporate that learning into daily activities. One school created a "passport" program where students carry a small booklet that is stamped each time they can demonstrate one of the desired qualities. Students are taught what each quality means and strive to internalize them.

High-need students are often lost during the transition from one school or grade level to another. The schools we visited pay close attention to students during these times, supporting transitions by completing baseline assessments and holding individual meetings with parents and guardians, among other strategies. In addition, students are often mentored by older students who help them learn how to be successful in their new school. The transition to higher education is also carefully supported. Many schools have a sixth form for students, which is essentially a preparatory year. The fact that many of these schools now have sixth form programs is an indication of how much the schools have improved: students now aspire to enroll in universities; student achievement has increased enough that higher education is attainable; and students want to continue attending their current schools for another year.

To maintain the focus on student learning and to prevent situations from escalating, even minor disturbances are addressed. If a student is frequently disruptive, staff will work with that student to determine a cause for their behavior, e.g.: *Does the student have a learning disability? Did something bad happen at home the night before? Is there a mental health issue that should be addressed?* Once the cause is identified, staff provide the appropriate supports and interventions.

"Our schools focus on personal qualities that lead to success such as resilience, responsibility, integrity, curiosity, confidence, and eloquence."

—A London school administrator



Every school celebrates its students in many ways. This board highlights the student of the week, offers positive messages about behavior, and celebrates the school as a community.

Pupil Premium

The pupil premium⁵ is similar to U.S. Title I funding in that it is a set amount of additional funds provided by the federal government in England directly to schools to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Students are identified for the pupil premium due to being eligible for free school meals, part of the foster system, wards of the state, or adopted. Funds are provided directly to the school and the school staff has total autonomy on how those funds should be used. Funds could be used to cover one-on-one tutoring, hiring teaching assistants, funding attendance or truancy programs, bringing in additional social-emotional learning programs, etc. Funds must be used to target individual student needs, and close records must be kept to monitor student growth and the interventions they receive. Teachers also focus additional academic and pastoral support and effort on the students who receive the pupil premium.

One head teacher notes that the pupil premium presents a huge source of additional funds for him to target student needs, but he notes that with increased funding comes increased accountability. Another head teacher commented, “Every single pound is accounted for.” All schools complete a rigorous analysis of how the pupil premium funds are used and if they have resulted in improved student performance.⁶ Staff evaluation of the impact includes:

- Raised aspirations of students
- A review of last year’s report for individual pupil premium students
- A discussion of student need trends
- A discussion of where spending is focused (by student)
- Clarification of the expected impact by student
- Analysis of data to assess if the expected impact was achieved for each student who receives premium

Sixth form roughly equates to twelfth grade or a senior year of high school. The work focuses on preparation for university life, selection of a career/academic path, and intensive academic preparation for a series of exams required for admission to a university. Sixth form students have their own area in the school and dress in business clothes rather than the school uniform. Only some secondary schools offer sixth form and students may choose what sixth form they attend, if they decide to further their education.

Community Connections

All of the schools we visited have strong connections to their communities and local neighborhoods. Students are expected to contribute to their communities through responsible behavior and volunteering. One school’s student code of conduct includes provision about how the students are expected to act within the local neighborhood as well. Many schools also actively support volunteer work, which empowers students to support their communities while simultaneously learning life and job skills.

Schools often reach out to local businesses to form partnerships to provide additional student supports, including mentors, classes teaching specific job skills, gift certificates from local stores and restaurants as rewards or incentives, and student internships or apprenticeships. One community hosts a tutoring center for students referred from local schools, focused on supporting the traditionally quiet students who are reading just below grade level. Volunteer mentors help students improve their reading skills, while giving extra attention to those who might be missed in a busy classroom.

Parent and family engagement in high-poverty schools means more than parent-teacher meetings. Since many parents and guardians did not receive a high-quality education in London or in their home country, parent and family engagement must be more broadly defined and extensively supported. Parents often require support in learning how the education system works and how they can take advantage of it. Schools actively work to communicate with families in their primary languages and develop an understanding of the community surrounding their buildings. Some schools also provide supports for students in helping their parents learn English. Despite many language and cultural barriers, schools strive to regularly share student data with parents, and discuss student progress.

⁵ A useful publication on the pupil premium was written by England’s accountability office. *The Pupil Premium: How schools are spending the funding successfully to maximize achievement*. OFSTED. (2012). Retrieved from <<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>>.

⁶ Ibid.

Implications for Michigan Students

In England, turning historically low-performing schools into consistently high-performing schools is an ongoing process. While practices and policies change regularly, changes are based on data and reflect the evolving needs of students. Seeing these schools in action prompted us to think about how to incorporate some of these strategies in Michigan schools. A few thoughts about how some of the lessons learned could be useful here at home follow.

Collective Moral Purpose

- **Michigan students deserve the best possible K-12 learning experiences.** Moral purpose is the driving, relentless force behind the reforms in England. It is the power and passion of educators to provide high-quality, rigorous learning experiences so that high-need students have the knowledge and skills to maximize their potential. Every individual in the schools we visited truly believe that all students can and will learn, and that the staff must create the systems and structures to support each individual's students strengths and weaknesses.
- **Increased collaboration among staff members and the entire education system is key.** If we collectively improve the quality of low-performing teachers or low-performing schools, it benefits us all. Across the state, we can create stronger networks that encourage collaboration and learning among schools. We can break down traditional silos and remove positional or territorial barriers to focus on the collective goal of strengthening our schools and communities.
- **Michigan adults need to become learners.** Continuous learning for educators is vital for increasing student achievement. Outcomes for students improve when outcomes for teachers improve. If we can be willing to try new things, to change the status quo, and to work together to improve the quality of education and our communities, Michigan students—particularly those in peril—will finally have the opportunity to attain the knowledge and skills necessary for the 21st century.

Student Learning Comes First

- **Make decisions in the best interest of the students, not the adults in the system.** Too often, we make decisions for the benefit of the adults in the education system. The students are our real stakeholders and we must put their needs above all others. This may result in some tough and controversial decisions, but student learning and success must be at the forefront of every decision.
- **Change the conversation from using assessments purely for accountability purposes to using the tests to inform teaching and learning.** Assessment can and should be used to inform teachers about how they are doing as instructors. Using strong formative assessments allows teachers to see where both they and their students need additional support. Having conversations with students help them focus on where they are, where they are headed, and what supports will be provided to help them achieve those expectations. Students in England use assessments to support their learning by enabling them to assess their own knowledge and to understand what they know and in what areas they require additional supports.
- **Give students more ownership of their own learning.** Allow them to see, understand, and use their own data. Involve students in the learning process by providing opportunities to analyze their own learning so that they develop metacognitive skills and become engaged and active learners. Provide opportunities for students to discuss their learning with adults and other students.
- **Focus on behavior for learning rather than on student behavior as isolated incidents.** Change the conversation around behavior disruptions from shaming and punitive to the impact of these behaviors on learning. This involves asking such questions as: *How does this behavior support or detract from learning? What is the cause of this behavior?*

Schools Nurture Student Well-Being

- **Look at each student’s strengths, weaknesses, and barriers to create an individualized learning plan that addresses academic, social, emotional, health and behavioral needs with structured and unique supports.**
- **Perform regular analyses to assess the effectiveness of interventions and funds.** We must objectively examine the results of the supports and programs we provide to students. If they aren’t producing the desired results, we should end those practices and try something new. As a system, millions of dollars are spent annually trying to fix chronically low-performing schools. We must do a better job in assessing whether the strategies we’re implementing work, and if they fail, why they failed.
- **Look at alternative ways to engage parents and families.** Parent engagement will look different in turnaround schools as compared to a traditionally higher-performing school in a middle- or higher-income community.
- **Enhance partnerships with community and business organizations to build shared ownership of student success, while also providing opportunities for students to learn life and career skills.**
- **Hold high expectations for adults and students in schools.** Use data and metrics to determine goals and monitor progress. When progress is made, celebrate achievement to create a joyful supportive environment.



London schools strike a balance between academic press—expecting students to reach and attain ever higher learning—and pastoral care—treating each student as an individual with specific academic and social needs.

Final Thoughts

Over the last few years, educators across the United States began talking about some of these strategies and concepts, such as assessment for learning, personalized learning, collaboration for shared adult learning, providing services and supports to meet student needs, and developing a shared belief that all students can learn. Yet, too often, our supports and interventions lack the fundamentals that underpin success: implementation with fidelity, adequate monitoring and accountability systems, and student engagement in their own learning. While not perfect, there is a lot we can learn from England's education system. Some of the strategies described in this summary demonstrate that they are sustainable, cost effective, and most importantly, that they work. London's chronically low-performing

schools are turning around and these schools show that the strategies work. Michigan has an opportunity to embed some of these learnings in practice and change the future prospects for millions of students, while improving the education system as a whole. We know what works in Michigan and across the world, now we need to rally around the moral purpose and do the work.

Thank you,

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Secondary school Friern Barnet proudly displays their academic accomplishments, having risen from a chronically failing school to a consistently high-performing one.