Success Against the Odds – Five Years on

Revisiting effective schools in disadvantaged areas

Edited by
Margaret Maden

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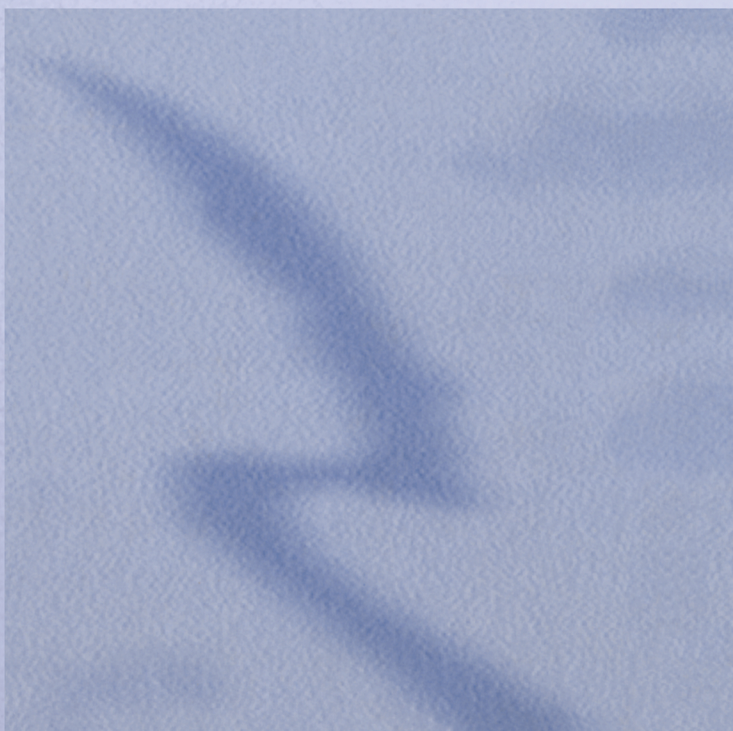

Success Against the Odds – Five Years On

In 1995 the National Commission on Education carried out a study of effective schools in disadvantaged areas. The findings were published in the highly influential *Success Against the Odds* (Routledge, 1996). Five years on, this book revisits the eleven schools in the original study to assess their fortunes over time.

Success Against the Odds: Five Years On is a unique study of school effectiveness and improvement. Leading educationalists revisit the eleven schools and analyse how they are succeeding in the current educational and political climate. This is a unique opportunity to consider how success can be sustained in the long-term and will be of interest to all those concerned about school effectiveness and improvement.

Reviews of *Success Against the Odds* (Routledge, 1996)

'The schools in this book are an inspiration to all pupils, parents and teachers . . . We must learn what they teach us.'

David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education

'This book may prove to be the most valuable of all (the National Commission on Education's) influential reports.'

Times Educational Supplement

Professor Margaret Maden is Director of the Centre for Successful Schools at Keele University. She co-edited *Success Against the Odds* (1996) as a member of the National Commission on Education.

SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS – FIVE YEARS ON

Revisiting effective schools in disadvantaged areas

Edited by
MARGARET MADEN

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survey of good practice in the provision of education for deaf children conducted by the Universities of Manchester and Birmingham.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1995, the eleven schools featured here agreed to be visited and included in a collection of case studies of effective schools in disdvantaged areas. On that occasion, the National Commission on Education was the main sponsor and the resultant book, *Success Against the Odds* (1996), was the Commission's second main report, following *Learning to Succeed* (1993).

The schools have again agreed to be the subject of follow-up studies, which are now centred on how schools maintain and sustain momentum and success over the longer term. It is unusual for schools to be re-visited and re-examined in this way and I am grateful to the headteachers, in particular, for agreeing to this request.

The nature of both the 'odds' and the 'successes' has changed over time, as has the balance between the two and the wider political environment in which schools now work.

All of the original lead authors have also returned, with the exception of Michael Barber and Peter Mortimore. I was very pleased that Valerie Hannon and Kathryn Riley agreed to replace them. John Gray is a further newcomer to the project and his Introduction provides an excellent start to the case studies which follow.

On this occasion, the Nuffield Foundation has provided a research grant for the basic expenses involved and for the highly valued services of our research assistant, Dr Dorothy Harris, who compiled the school statistical profiles.

Thanks are also due to Mr Ian Wilkie, education finance officer at Staffordshire County Council, who advised on changes in school budgets and pursued LEAs for additional financial information. LEA officers in all eleven areas have also been very helpful to authors and editor alike. Again, school staff, governors and pupils have been informative and welcoming. Lastly, Mrs Gladys Pye, Education Research secretary at Keele University, has worked very hard and

meticulously on the final text, as well as on maintaining contact with the many participants in this project.

I hope all of those headteachers, LEA advisers and School Improvement consultants who expressed real interest in the original case studies in 1995–6 will feel the same about these. Indeed, there have been many questions about these schools and whether they have managed to maintain their 'success against the odds' in the years since the 1995 study.

Here is the answer, with all the variations and 'ups and downs' one would expect amongst any group of schools. Additionally, however, there are valuable lessons and ideas for others to consider adopting, and many of these are summarised in the final chapter.

The Routledge website (www.tandf.co.uk) is a further development for readers. On this, the fuller School Statistical Profiles are available.

Professor Margaret Maden, Editor
Keele University
October 2000

The locations of the case study schools

INTRODUCTION

Building for improvement and sustaining change in schools serving disadvantaged communities

John Gray

Five years have passed since the members of the *Success Against the Odds* team first visited the eleven schools which took part in the original study. Whether five years is a lifetime or a brief moment in a school's natural history is a matter for debate. Time enough, the optimist might argue, for a new head to have arrived, galvanised the staff, performed various 'miracles' and departed. Barely time, a sceptic might think, for a single cohort of students to have passed through their primary or secondary school.

The election of a New Labour government in 1997, clearly committed to raising standards in socially disadvantaged areas, has brought with it the promise of change. Nonetheless, the 'odds still [seem to be] stacked against schools in poorer areas' (NCE, 1996: 5). It would be encouraging to think that policy-makers had somehow succeeded during the last three years in beginning to weaken 'the link between disadvantage and educational performance'. The history of educational reform efforts in this area, however, underlines the extent of the challenges and counsels a degree of caution.

Politicians, meanwhile, have learnt to drive harder bargains. There has been a perceptible shift – change is not merely expected but demanded. In theory, schools which have been 'succeeding against the odds' should be safe from criticism. In practice, memories can be rather short and former laurels may count for little when a fresh inspection is looming. '*Improving* against the odds' is now the name of the game.

The characteristics of 'good' or so-called 'effective' schools have been extensively researched over the last decade and there is consequently much greater understanding and (some would say) agreement about their most salient characteristics. Research on school improvement is, by contrast, still developing. As Barber and Dann has observed: 'being able to describe an effective school does not necessarily indicate what is needed to help an unsuccessful school become successful. The steps required to help a school turn itself around are . . . significantly less researched' (Barber and Dann, 1996: 10).

Some of the reasons for this state of affairs are not difficult to comprehend. As OfSTED has noted: 'Every school's problems are slightly different. No single solution will serve as a panacea to remedy all the ills that befall schools' (OfSTED, 1999: 2). Equally importantly, even the most promising stories will include some false starts, blind alleys and misplaced hopes. Research on school improvement at present amounts to not much more than a sketch map – good enough to note some of the peaks but not particularly clear about the location of rivers and marshes. Only by taking a backward glance can one really discern the path and its general direction.

REVISITING SUCCESS

The original study of 'success against the odds' provided a snapshot of 'successful' schools at a particular point in time (NCE, 1996). Some of them had clearly enjoyed 'success' for a number of years.

Others were more recent arrivals – indeed, their inclusion in the study may have been the first public recognition that they had something to celebrate; their inheritance may consequently have felt less secure. Revisiting the past, moreover, can be difficult. Memories fade, key participants depart, institutions move on and researchers are usually wiser – what looked promising the first time round may require reappraisal.

So what might one expect to find on a return visit? If these schools were already doing well, then simply holding on to their original positions would surely be a significant achievement. We need to remember, however, that generally speaking the odds 'have, indeed, been stacked against' these schools and the communities they have been trying to serve. They owed their positions to mixtures of strength and good fortune. Given what we now know about the ups and downs of school improvement, it would be extraordinary if all (or even most) of them had more or less maintained their original positions. As the Financial Services Authority warns when advising novice investors, 'past performance is not necessarily a guide to future trends'.

For most of these schools, then, the mid-1990s are likely to have represented some kind of peak. Only a handful are likely to have replicated their earlier success. The rest will have been concerned to hold on or to consolidate, depending on how they got to their positions in the first place. Expecting them to embark on new phases of *intensive* development in the intervening years may be neither realistic nor reasonable. Continuing to live with the fractures and stresses of social deprivation may be challenge enough. Indeed, several are likely to have had quite a bumpy ride in the meantime. Much of this, however, is merely informed speculation. The honest answer to questions about what I anticipate may have happened in these schools is that I simply don't know. Too few researchers go back and, despite the obvious advantages of doing so, hardly any school improvement studies have been designed to revisit the same schools a number of years later.[1]

NATIONAL TRENDS

The headline statistics relating to schools' performance show a fairly continuous pattern of gains over time. In 1992 some 35 per cent of pupils were obtaining 5 or more A*–C grades at GCSE; by 1999 this figure had risen to around 47 per cent (see Figure 0.1). Give or take a few minor fluctuations, the performances of boys and girls rose in equal measure with the achievement gap between them remaining fairly constant for most of the decade.

Performance in primary schools on Key Stage 2 literacy tests also rose quite dramatically from just under 50 per cent getting over the level 4 hurdle in 1995 to somewhere around 70 per cent in 1999 (see Figure 0.2). A similar pattern emerged with respect to the numeracy tests although there was a slight fall in the results between 1997 and 1998 before the marked recovery in 1999. Owing to some early boycotting of the tests and changes to their construction, however, strict comparisons over time are difficult for both literacy and numeracy.

Whilst Figures 0.1 and 0.2 provide some indication of upward trends in performance in both primary and secondary schools, they do not give much sense of the extent to which the changes varied from one year to the next. Figure 0.3, therefore, recasts the data in Figure 0.1 to show the rate of change. It suggests that in the period

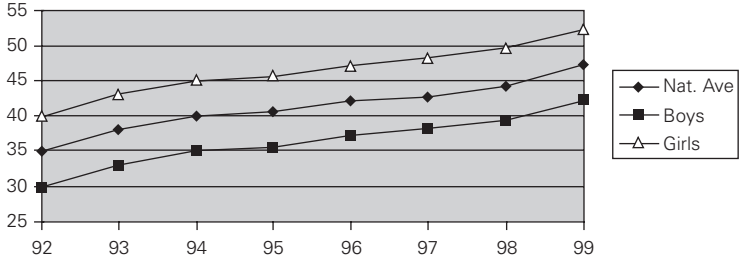

Figure 0.1 Changes in performance over time (% scoring 5+ A*–C grades), 1992–9

Source: DfEE statistics

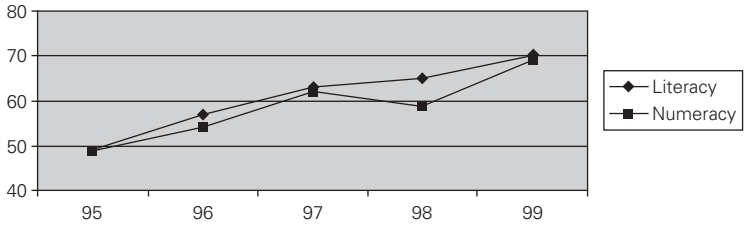

Figure 0.2 Progress in primary schools on literacy and numeracy tests (% reaching level 4 or above), 1995–9

Source: DfEE statistics

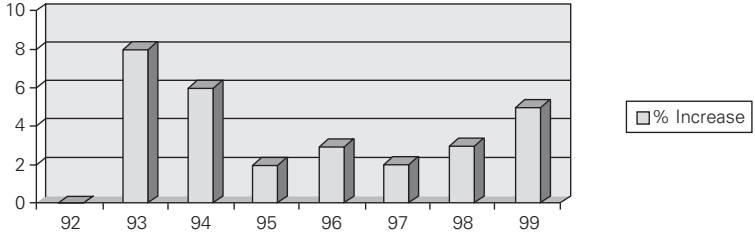

Figure 0.3 Annual year-on-year rates of change in percentage scoring 5+ A*–C grades

Source: Reworking of DfEE statistics; all percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number
Note: The base year for this run of figures is 1992, so no rate-of-change calculation is appropriate

immediately after the introduction of so-called 'league tables' in 1992 the rate was almost double that which prevailed during the second half of the decade. Whereas at the beginning the figures were running at between 6 to 8 per cent, by the end they had dropped to between 2 and 5 per cent.

Figure 0.4 shows the same information relating to rates of change in primary schools where year-on-year changes were running at much higher levels than in secondaries. Primary schools experienced a much bumpier ride, especially in relation to numeracy. The annual

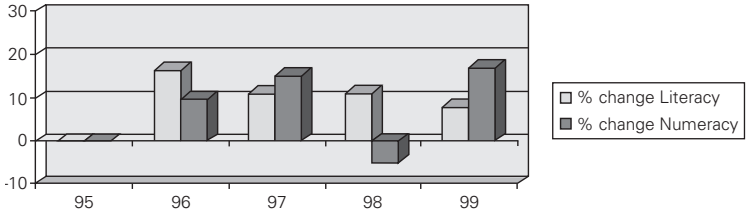

Figure 0.4 Annual year-on-year rates of change in percentage scoring level 4 or above

Note: The base year was 1995, so no rate-of-change calculation is appropriate

rates of change in literacy averaged out at some 10 per cent a year over the period but varied from as little as 3 per cent to as much as 16 per cent. Changes on numeracy tests also averaged out at broadly similar levels but ranged from a 5 per cent drop to a 17 per cent increase. Changes of this order suggest that the steady state that seemed to have emerged within the secondary sector by the end of the decade had yet to be experienced in primary schools.

National statistics on other outcome measures are in short supply but Figure 0.5 shows the proportions of lessons which OfSTED inspectors rated as 'satisfactory' or better during the middle years of the decade. These rose from just over 80 per cent to around 95 per cent over the period in question.

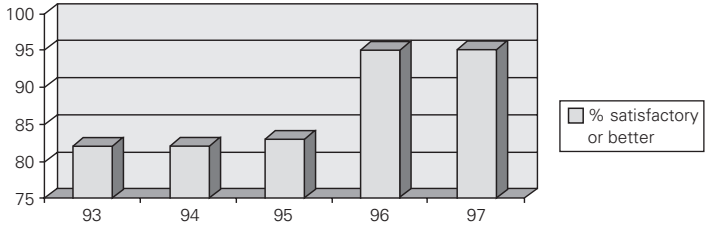

Figure 0.5 Trends in teaching as judged by OfSTED inspectors, 1993–7

Source: Annual reports from OfSTED

The figures might, at first glance, suggest a possible causal reason for some of the changes in performance outlined above. However, their stepped nature (with a sharp rise between 1995 and 1996) rules this out. The most likely explanation for the recorded improvements in classroom teaching over this time scale is simply OfSTED's decision to alter the scale employed to judge it, which was implemented around this time.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL FACTORS DRIVING CHANGE

Trends in national statistics suggest the entire educational system is on the move. A variety of factors are likely to be driving these changes although some may be more influential than others (see Table 0.1).

First, and possibly most importantly, there are the various effects of national initiatives. So-called 'league tables', the introduction of target-setting and the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies are examples of this kind – almost all schools respond to them and almost all 'improve' their performance as a result, albeit to a greater or lesser extent. Within a year or two of the introduction of league tables, for example, large numbers of schools had decided to enter their pupils for at least one more GCSE examination – higher

Table 0.1 Types of influence on improvement

Major influences?	*Modest influences?*
National initiatives, developments and changes of framework	'Catching up' with the pack; schools' belated implementation of strategies other schools have already put into practice
LEAs and schools paying (more) attention to particular indicators of 'performance' (possibly at the expense of others)	Schools' and teachers' own efforts to find innovative routes to improvement

performance seems to have resulted (see Gray *et al.*, 1996). Schools vary in their understanding of the national changes and the speed with which they explore and exploit their implications but, within a relatively short period of time, most seem to have caught on and caught up.

Second, there has been a trend in recent years for most schools to pay greater attention to certain measures of their outcomes and spend (a good deal) more time preparing their pupils for them, either because they have been motivated to do so or, in many cases, because they have felt obliged to. However, if other outcome measures are either not measured or seen as less important, rises in one area might be at the expense of performance in others.

Third, there seems to have been a good deal of 'catching up' going on. Such 'opportunities' are, of course, only available to relatively ineffective schools which have fallen behind others similarly placed. There is some fairly straightforward scope for improvement in these instances. The widespread introduction of mentoring arrangements for individual pupils and the revamping of behaviour policies provide examples of these kind of initiatives.

Finally, there are the specific innovations a school may adopt as a result of their own analysis and evaluation of their situation. Some of these are likely to be quite adventurous and may put a school out on a limb for a while. A decision to encourage teachers to explore and implement changes to the ways in which they teach might fall into this category; encouraging pupils to take greater responsibility for aspects of their own learning might be another. Of necessity, such developments are likely to be more tentative and exploratory but their long-term pay-off may be greater.

All the activities listed in Table 0.1 could be counted as forms of 'improvement' and all are likely to be experienced by schools as things they have themselves initiated. National initiatives and a narrowing of focus appear to have been the more influential drivers in terms of the headline statistics (see Gray *et al.*, 1999 for a fuller discussion). In due course, however, schools' own initiatives may

begin to have greater force. A school which wants to continue 'improving' will probably need to spread its efforts and take some risks.

IN SEARCH OF DEFINITIONS

What, then, is an 'improving' school? There is a semblance of agreement amongst researchers and practitioners as to what constitutes 'school improvement' but still some fuzziness about when a school may legitimately be referred to as an 'improving' one.

As part of an international project van Velzen and colleagues (1985: 34), for example, defined school improvement as: 'a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related conditions in one or more schools with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively'. Following in this tradition, Hopkins and colleagues have argued that it is 'a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change' (1994: 3). Both definitions, in their different ways, attempt to link processes to outcomes.

One might expect it to follow from these definitions that schools which are engaged in such *acts* of school improvement are somehow 'improving', but clearly there are some potential flaws in the logic here. First, one must assume that they have actually implemented the desirable activities rather than merely begun to do so. And, second, that the specific activities the schools are engaged in have well-established records for delivering 'improvement'; in default of such evidence their status is more debatable. Such evidence, it turns out, is quite difficult to come by – much of what is launched in the name of improvement is initially (and necessarily) based on intuitions and hunches about what *might* work rather than what will.

These definitions place the emphasis on the taking of *deliberate* steps to secure change – schools can't, they appear to be saying, simply fall into the habit of school improvement. Both definitions,

however, fit the project contexts within which they were constructed rather better than the more general improvement scene. Recently, in an attempt to embrace a broader definition, Mortimore (2000: 1) has defined 'school improvement as the process of "improving" the way the school organises, promotes and supports learning . . . It includes changing aims, expectations, organisations (sometimes people), ways of learning, methods of teaching and organisational culture.' There are echoes here of an earlier era of research in which aims, expectations, teaching methods and so on contributed to the 'effective' school. If low expectations are part of the problems facing a less 'effective' school, then it makes sense to change them; if a school is poorly led then it may require new leadership and so on. Probably but not necessarily – the emphasis again seems to be on the activities a school undertakes rather than what emerges as a result.

In recent years OfSTED has also entered the fray. In his 1998 Annual Report the Chief Inspector identified some 70 schools which had been identified as 'good and improving' (OfSTED, 1999). A wide range were included. No precise criteria for judging a school to be 'good and improving' are specified, and there seem to be several anomalies, but a close reading of a dozen or so reports suggests that two dimensions were central to the judgements: first, that there had been an improvement in the schools' exam results which ran ahead of national trends; and second, that there had been a marked increase in the lessons rated as 'satisfactory' or better.

Other factors which may have contributed to the overall picture formed by inspectors included whether (most of) the school's action plan from the previous inspection had been implemented and whether there had been a change of head. The schools' 'commitment to improvement' may also have been important. One report, for example, commented that there was 'an ethos of school improvement', another that 'there were frequent testimonies to a school which [was] undergoing a transformation in ethos and culture'.

Harris has recently suggested that 'what distinguishes the school

improvement movement from other school reform efforts is the understanding that it is necessary to focus upon student outcomes in academic performance as the key success criteria, rather than teacher perceptions of the innovation' (2000: 6). As a description of an orientation amongst influential contributors this is probably increasingly true. However, it does not, as yet, accurately reflect the criteria employed in most school improvement studies.

In recent years the concern to find ways of linking research on school effectiveness and school improvement has undoubtedly contributed to the development of more rigorous definitions. Building upon and extending the approaches adopted in earlier studies of school effectiveness, Gray and colleagues (1999: 48) have argued that an 'improving' school is one 'which secures year-on-year improvements in the outcomes of successive cohorts of "similar" pupils . . . in other words, it increases in its effectiveness over time'. On this definition both 'effective' and 'ineffective' schools which are 'improving' are of equal interest; what matters is how much progress they make from their respective starting-points.

Whilst the shift towards 'changes in effectiveness' as the defining dimension of the 'improving' school provides a more rigorous definition, it does so at some cost. In theory 'effectiveness' may be broadly construed. It *could* connote changes in students' attitudes and motivations towards learning as well as trends in their academic performance. In practice, empirical realisations of 'effectiveness' tend to be more bounded. Few educational systems to date have collected data over time on anything more extensive than academic performance and, sometimes, attendance.

Difficulties of definition are familiar territory, already extensively trawled in the course of debates about what constitute 'good' or 'effective' schools. As historian Harold Silver (1994: 102) remarks: 'The effective schools movement did not replace the ways in which previous judgements about schools had been made; it added another ingredient to them'. To express an interest in 'improvement' may simply be to add a further one.

THE DIMENSIONS OF 'IMPROVEMENT'

What do schools achieve when they embark on school improvement? Unlike the now relatively well-established field of school effectiveness there is little agreement as yet as to what matters, nor does most of what there is lend itself to easy summary. Furthermore, given the range of views about what should count, reports of what has happened vary widely. Sometimes the variations can be explained by reference to the range of strategies tried out; on other occasions it is more difficult to grasp why they have occurred. Nonetheless, there are some recurring themes. The studies discussed here took account of periods ranging from two to five years.

Louis and Miles (1992) researched developments in urban high schools during the 1980s. They contacted the principals of institutions which had attempted to implement so-called 'effective school' programmes and asked them what improvements had resulted. The principals judged that a good deal of 'improvement' had, indeed, taken place, most notably with respect to students' attitudes and behaviours (see Table 0.2). Around a quarter (24 per cent) also reported changes in the area of 'student achievement'.

Sammons and colleagues (1997) asked London headteachers similar questions during the early 1990s. The heads mentioned

Table 0.2 Reported outcomes/effects of 'effective schools' programmes on participating students in North America

Area of outcomes	*% of principals reporting 'greatly improved'*
Employment of graduates	12
Student dropout rate	15
Student achievement	24
Student attendance	38
Student attitudes	43
Student behaviour	49

Source: Louis and Miles (1992), Table C6.

some twenty areas of activity where they had had success or achievements. Reflecting their main areas of responsibility, nine out of ten (89 per cent) mentioned their school's 'improved organisation' whilst over eight out of ten reported improved record-keeping and student monitoring (see Table 0.3).

Around seven out of ten heads also mentioned improved exam results and better student attendance. The study accepted the heads' evaluations at face value and did not seek to probe the extent of the changes. What is perhaps most interesting about their replies, however, was the extent to which they were likely to cite changes in management practices (see column 1 of Table 0.3) as often as (if not more often than) changes to students' performance and experiences (see column 2).

Management-led reforms also dominated perceptions in the schools studied by Gray and colleagues (1999). They asked teachers about the extent of changes in their own institutions over the previous five years since the early 1990s (see Table 0.4). The proportions of teachers reporting 'substantial' change varied considerably from school to school and from area to area. What is clear, however, is that teachers themselves noted considerably greater changes in areas to do with their schools' management and organisation than in ethos, culture or teaching. Indeed, whilst almost two thirds reported changes in the former area, only 17 per cent said there had been 'substantial' changes in the quality of teaching and learning. As reported by their own colleagues, classroom-level 'changes' were far less frequent than school-wide initiatives.

Earl and Lee (1998, 2000) evaluated the changes in 15 Canadian senior high schools in the state of Manitoba.[2] Using a wide range of sources of data, they attempted to reach summary judgements about the extent of improvement across several dimensions. They then grouped together the items on their list into a notional School Improvement Index. However, as this index summed very different kinds of outcomes, they have been kept separate in Table 0.5.

Table 0.3 Heads' descriptions of major successes/achievements of their school over the last five years

Area	*% of heads*	*Area*	*% of heads*
Improved organisation	89	Higher expectations for student performance	77
Improved record-keeping/student profiles	83	Improved exam results	75
Improved monitoring of student performance	83	Improved student behaviour	68
More effective and cohesive senior management team	72	Better student attendance	66
More effective leadership by most heads of department	66	General improvement in quality of teaching in most cases	62
		Better relationships between staff and students	62
Improved homework policy and practice	57	Greater student motivation	55
Reduction in staff shortages	57	Focus on equal opportunities	55
		Improved staff morale	51
Helpful OfSTED inspection	36	Greater opportunities for student responsibilities in school	45
		Greater parental and community involvement	40

Source: Sammons *et al.* (1997), Table 6.5; evidence from the original table has been reorganised into columns 1 and 2.

Table 0.4 Teachers' reports of the extent of 'substantial' change in their school over the last five years

Area of change	*% teachers reporting change was 'substantial'*
Ways school is run and organised	62
Ethos, culture or climate of school	31
School's attitude and approach to planning	50
School's curriculum organisation and delivery	44
Quality of teaching and learning in the school	17

Source: Gray *et al.* (1999), Table 9.3.

Table 0.5 Areas where there was judged to be 'improvement' in the senior schools in the Manitoba School Improvement Project

Area in which evidence collected	*% of schools in which there was 'evidence of improvement'*
Student learning	33
Progress towards project goals	47
Increased student engagement	47
Process factors	
Focus on student learning (progress towards)	36
Engagement of school community (progress towards)	50
Connection to the world outside school (progress towards)	40
Ongoing inquiry and reflection (progress towards)	50
Coherence and integration (progress towards)	43
Internal capacity for change (progress towards)	40

Source: Earl and Lee (1998), Tables 6, 9, 11 and 13a–f. The percentages combine the schools where Earl and Lee felt there was 'evidence of improvement' with those where they judged there to be 'solid evidence'.

On none of the nine dimensions they explored did Earl and Lee judge more than half the schools in the Manitoba project to have shown 'solid evidence' or 'evidence of improvement'. Around half their schools showed signs of change in relation to two process factors: progress towards the 'engagement of the school community' and progress towards 'ongoing inquiry and reflection'. However, only 33 per cent showed 'evidence of improvement' in the outcome area of student learning; furthermore, in only 13 per cent (2 out of 15 schools) was the evidence judged to be 'solid' (table not shown).

Earl and Lee felt that there was some consistency across the three outcome areas they considered. They claim that 'schools seemed to progress on all dimensions simultaneously' (1998: 47). However, closer inspection of the relationships between their outcome measures (student learning, progress towards project goals and increased student engagement) suggests a rather different and more complex position. Improvements in student learning and the school's progress towards its project goals were highly and positively correlated. This correlation is broadly in line with the 'movement on all fronts' position. However, improvement in terms of student learning was only weakly related to improvements in student engagement: schools which progressed in one of these two areas were only slightly more likely to progress in the other. Furthermore, schools' success in securing their own goals and improving student engagement were fairly strongly but *inversely* related. In other words, the more successful a school was in securing its goals, the *less* likely it was to have enhanced student engagement. The Canadian evidence, in short, suggests that developments with respect to some outcomes may be at the expense of others.

School improvement takes time and it can be difficult for governments to mandate change. The case of so-called 'failing' schools in England, however, presents a situation where questions about the speed and extent of improvement have become crucial to schools' survival. These schools have typically been given only a two-year window to secure a turnaround. In fact, evidence from