Lessons from the London Challenge

THE CHALLENGE

The London Challenge serves as a model for school reform that is not only applicable to the London region, but also to the many communities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere that seek significant change in education. The Challenge provides several useful lessons on school transformation. It strongly emphasizes the importance of community support from business and non-profit organizations and promotes networking and partnerships between many schools and teachers. The Challenge focuses on both large, regional initiatives, and highly tailored, detailed programs within specific schools. It also recognizes the need for system wide change; addressing teacher, student, leadership and school improvement at the same time.

In 2003, the Blair government created the London Challenge as a five-year initiative to improve underachieving secondary schools in the London region. The Challenge was implemented to speed up the improvement of these schools as a complement to a nationwide drive for better education. This approach stems from research studies such as those completed by David Hargreaves and Michael Fullan. The Challenge follows Hargreaves’ assertion that one of the keys to success in school improvement is the development of a network between teachers to share and build on their innovations and knowledge. It also considers Fullan’s emphasis on the importance of transformation across the entire education system.

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The Challenge aims to transform secondary schools across London and break the link between social and economic deprivation and low educational outcomes. Individual schools in London and elsewhere have done this, but the Challenge is an attempt to transform schools on a systemic basis. Another goal is to improve the perception of London’s schools, in part by rapidly improving some of the public schools that are struggling the most.

THE CITY

London faces the challenges of many urban areas: high concentrations of low-income households, vast cultural and ethnic diversity, and high mobility. But London also demonstrates great polarity, combining all the problems of being a large urban center and the pressures of being located in the heart of the economically prosperous southeast England. While English educational achievement has traditionally varied greatly by social class, gender and ethnicity, the Challenge stems from an understanding that every child has the potential to achieve, and more schools are beginning to help less advantaged pupils to do so.

London faces growing disparities between its wealthy and disadvantaged populations. There are more people in the highest and lowest income brackets than the national average\(^3\). Additionally, there is a high annual mobility rate of 14.2% among students, which means there is almost constant pupil turnover within some schools. Inner London primary schools have a teacher turnover rate of 23.4\(^4\). London’s students are highly diverse, coming from all over the world. Compared to less than 10% nationwide, nearly 50% of London’s primary and secondary students are of ethnic backgrounds such as Black Caribbean, Black African, Indian, and Pakistani\(^5\). In the greater London region,


32.1% of secondary school students and 37.4% of primary school students have English as an additional language.6

THE STRUCTURE

These characteristics create the need for an improvement plan that is both flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of the student population and strong enough to be sustained after the Challenge ends. The Challenge attempts to overcome London’s urban obstacles by using the city’s assets with programming divided into three levels that create both strong, overall support and flexible, tailored models for change. The first level is a pan-London approach that provides programs and resources to all schools within London. For example, it coordinates the Chartered London Teacher scheme, which works to reward the skills of teaching in multicultural urban schools and helps challenging schools recruit teachers. The Challenge also works alongside the Building Schools for the Future program, which provides funding and resources to improve school infrastructure.

The second level is the ‘Keys to Success’ program, which is composed of about 70 of the most underachieving secondary schools.7 These schools receive individualized consulting plans from London Challenge advisors, which tailor support and solutions to each school’s specific needs. At the third level, the Challenge targets five London boroughs that house the most extreme neighborhoods where major change is needed and that have a high proportion of challenging schools. The overall goal bridging the three levels is to bring national standardized test scores up to, or above national average standards using the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).8

The Challenge is also organized by certain fields (teachers, students, leaders and schools) in education to make sure that improvement occurs across the entire school system. Programs have been created to address each of these fields with the understanding that each school has different needs and priorities. For teachers, the Challenge supports

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7 Discussion with London Challenge staff
Chartered London Teacher status and professional development programs to improve teacher quality and satisfaction. For students, the Challenge provides funding and encouragement for extra curricular opportunities through programs such as the London Summer University, which helps students achieve year round success. For leaders, the London Leadership Strategy focuses on the development needs of school leaders and on improving all aspects of leadership capacity in London secondary schools. In addition, the data provided in the Families of School publications enable heads of schools and teachers to learn from the successes of other schools with similar pupil characteristics. Finally, for schools, the Challenge employs the Building Schools for the Future program to improve school infrastructure. It also helps more schools become specialist schools that teach the full national curriculum but give particular attention to their specialist subject.

To achieve change, the Challenge incorporates multiple community partners in the funding, design and execution of its programs. Financial support, allocated in part by the local authorities, is partially provided by the government as a lever to encourage support from other funders. Additional funds are secured from other funding streams, such as budgets to reduce youth crimes, and contributions are made from the business community and non-profit organizations. The business community and charitable foundations have played a large role in several Challenge projects including the London Student Pledge; an initiative to connect London students to activities and opportunities provided within the city. Many consulting and education-oriented firms assist the Challenge in creating improvement programs, especially for the ‘Keys to Success’ schools.

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9 Discussion with London Challenge staff  
11 Discussion with London Challenge staff
Example 1. Lilian Baylis Secondary School

The Lilian Baylis secondary school provides an interesting model of a struggling inner city school using Challenge resources and programs to transform. Like many of the most disadvantaged schools in London, Lilian Baylis has the highest percentage of students receiving free school lunches (74%). Half of the entering student body has a reading ability below age nine, and 95% are from minority backgrounds.

Beginning with the recruitment of the new headteacher Gary Phillips, in 2002, Lilian Baylis has seen major internal restructuring. In 2003, the London Challenge came on board, providing about £25,000 per year in funding and connected the school with a Challenge advisor to provide additional guidance and support. This funding has helped the school hire an advanced skills teacher to assist with literacy and offer field trips outside of London to students. Lilian Baylis has taken advantage of the London Gifted and Talented program to improve teaching of advanced students. Additionally, the Challenge advisor is helping the school develop a business study program involving community businesses. More recently, the school has moved locations and now occupies a new building.

These changes have brought concrete success to the school. In 2005, 36% of students received five A*-C GCSEs (passing standardized exams), up from 6% in 2002. Additionally, staff turnover has dropped form 20% to 5% in the last five years. There is still great work to be done, yet it is clear that Lilian Baylis is now on the right track to success.12

HIGHLIGHTED PROGRAMS

While the Challenge boasts dozens of programs and initiatives in all aspects of the school environment, several programs should be highlighted as promising mechanisms for affecting change. These programs are funded through a variety of sources; affect many schools throughout London; and work to improve various educational components.

Teach First is a model of community partnerships and business involvement. Based on the Teach for America program, it recruits high achieving university students to teach in London schools. The program targets graduates who might not normally pursue a career in teaching and encourages them to teach for several years before furthering a career in business. Training and preparation for graduates is provided in collaboration with the Training and Development Agency for Schools. The business community financially

supports the program and promises to recruit participants after they complete a two-year commitment as teachers. In its first year alone, 1,300 graduates applied for the 200 available spaces. Since the program’s inception, more than 500 graduates have been placed in the London schools\textsuperscript{13}. The experience of teaching in London has motivated some graduates to continue a career in teaching: 50\% of the first cohort decided to stay on beyond their two-year commitment, which ended in July 2005\textsuperscript{14}.

Many London teachers cannot afford to live within their districts because of the high cost of living. This factor is a disincentive to teachers considering a career in an urban school, especially those who might go on to lead London schools. The attrition rate in London peaks around five to six years into the profession. This is the point when teachers customarily would be moving into middle leadership roles, and therefore such attrition reduces the pool of potential future senior leaders\textsuperscript{15}. The \textbf{Key Worker Living Scheme} provides loans and subsidies to school employees to help defray the cost of city housing. The program began with a £690 million budget and aids not only school staff, but also other public employees, such as healthcare workers and policemen. The purpose of the program is to create an incentive for public employees to continue careers in London\textsuperscript{16}. From April 2004 to March 2006, 1,800 teachers (from a London workforce of 62,000) received help to buy homes. More than half of these were teachers identified as having leadership potential\textsuperscript{17}.

The \textbf{Families of Schools} publication facilitates information sharing and networking between schools with similar profiles in the London region. It addresses the problem of schools with similar contexts (student body composition, standardized test results, and academic improvement) reach different education outcomes. This publication helps

\textsuperscript{13} Teach First. Retrieved August 1, 2006 from \url{http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/what_is_teachfirst/Background}
\textsuperscript{14} Discussion with London Challenge Staff.
\textsuperscript{15} Discussion with London Challenge Staff.
\textsuperscript{16} Department for Communities and Local Government. \textit{Key Worker Living}. Retrieved August 1, 2006 from \url{http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1151223}
\textsuperscript{17} Discussion with London Challenge Staff.
schools team up to share ideas about education improvements and helps pair weak schools with strong ones to see system-wide improvements18.

The Consultant Leaders Programme has achieved measurable success in the London schools through the mentoring, support and skill building it provides to rising school leadership. Success is achieved through a series of seminars and training sessions that teach guidance and communication skills to participants. The program exists under the umbrella initiative, the London Leadership Strategy, and is supported in large part by the National College for School Leadership. This program has been shown to increase positive and beneficial relations between leaders in different schools and has had a positive impact on teaching and learning19.

The Challenge began as a secondary school initiative but in 2006 extended its programming through the London Primary Challenge, which is operating in 60 schools in eight boroughs. The Primary Challenge includes secondary strategies, such as the Chartered London Teacher status, which encourages teachers with strong teaching commitment and skills to work in an urban, multicultural environment. Additionally, it works through the Primary National Strategy Consultants and in partnership with local authorities to pinpoint the unique problems faced by community schools and create tailored solutions. The Primary Challenge also focuses on the important transition between primary and secondary education and has created programs to assist families in the school selection process. It also implements the new Every Child a Reader program that works to improve literacy in the primary schools20.

The Challenge has conducted a publicity campaign to improve the perception of schools. It has hosted several publicized awards events and is in the middle of a media campaign

using posters, TV and newspapers to celebrate high achieving London students and their schools. Media tool kits are available to each school, to help them market their strengths and work with the media to provide a positive perception.

Example 2. Outer London Primary Schools

The outer London primary schools demonstrate the diversity of programs and innovations in the London Challenge. One school, Barn Croft, has recently begun to receive support from the London Challenge. Many pan-London programs will be employed in Barn Croft to assist teacher recruitment and retention and to improve academic success for students. Teachers will now be able to apply for the Key Workers Living scheme, and receive housing loans of up to £100,000. Additionally, some teachers will obtain Chartered London Teachers status to improve teaching morale. Barn Croft has plans to create partnerships with schools in neighboring boroughs, as they often face similar challenges.

Close by, the Tottenham schools are using London Challenge funding to support an intensive teacher recruitment program connected with Middlesex University. Funding has also helped the schools begin a mentoring program to improve quality training for new and experienced teachers. Additional new initiatives such as a peer mediation program, are attempting to curb student violence.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Evaluation of specific programs and the Challenge’s overall effects is still underway, so a complete analysis is not yet available. However, the existing evaluation results demonstrate the Challenge’s success in improving student test scores, teacher recruitment and community perceptions.

The success of these programs and the Challenge as a whole is measured in several ways. The primary tools to gauge improvement are the results from the GCSE standardized exams and student improvements in Key Stage 3 (age 14). The GCSE measure has

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21 Discussion with London Challenge staff
indicated significant success in school improvement with London’s schools meeting national averages and surpassing the national average rate of improvement. For example, between 2001 and 2005, the number of secondary schools in which over 55% of their students achieved five or more A*-C at GCSE, increased from 142 to 195 (see table 1). Success is also demonstrated as many of the London schools and local authorities are among the most improved in the nation based on increases in GCSE results. Additional measures track the success of teacher recruitment and retention, currently showing a decrease in teacher vacancy rates (see table 2). Surveys are also being conducted to track pupil, teacher and parental satisfaction with the London schools\textsuperscript{25, 26}.

Over the last few years London has seen a significant change in the recruitment and retention of its teachers. More teachers are coming to live and work in London, and more teachers are staying on for extended careers. It seems that this improvement can be attributed to the Challenge, because many teachers have shown enthusiastic support for Challenge programs and resources. For example, currently two-thirds of London teachers have chosen to register for the Chartered London Teacher scheme, and 1,800 loans have been made through the Key Workers Living Scheme\textsuperscript{27}.

Student test scores have improved, but this change cannot be directly attributed to the Challenge’s efforts, as a full evaluation has not yet been completed. Nonetheless, research is underway to study the Challenge and its programs that may provide a direct correlation between student achievement and the Challenge’s efforts. The Institute of Education is producing a booklet inspecting specific aspects of the Challenge, and further study subsequently will be conducted.

THE CONCLUSION

\textsuperscript{26} London Challenge: From Good to Outstanding, 2006.
\textsuperscript{27} Discussion with London Challenge staff.
Many schools around the world have characteristics similar to schools in the London region. London is rich in diversity and possesses many assets as one of the leading capitals in the world. But, its schools also face many challenges, such as high rates of poverty, significant achievement gaps between minority and majority students, and high numbers of student whose first language is not English. The Challenge could serve as a model for other communities looking to improve their schools in a systematic and detailed manner. Its programs are geared towards the urban school’s struggles, and its solutions employ urban resources.

The Challenge and its initiatives provide a diverse approach to education reform. They:

1. Involve multiple community partners (from businesses to non-profit organizations) in the planning, funding and administration of programs.
2. Work on both macro and micro levels to ensure that each school’s individual needs are fulfilled.
3. Create programs that address all education stakeholders: teachers, students, leaders and schools.

The London Challenge is an innovative program with great potential as a model to effect change in urban communities. Its approach to reform, involving multiple partners in a broad initiative over a determined period of time, is paying off. Current results show improvement within the schools, and, it is likely that these schools will continue to improve within the program’s framework.

References


7. Discussion with London Challenge staff

8. Teach First. Retrieved August 1, 2006 from [http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/what_is_teachfirst/Background](http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/what_is_teachfirst/Background)


Table 1

Numbers of London Secondary Schools by percentage 5+ A*-C band (2001, 15 year old pupils)

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Numbers of London Secondary Schools by percentage 5+ A*-C band (2005 amended, 15 year old pupils)

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Table 2

Teacher Vacancy Rates

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<td>1.5</td>
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Tables retrieved from:
Websites

LONDON CHALLENGE
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonchallenge/

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http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/

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http://www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/programmes-london.cfm

CHARTERED LONDON TEACHER STATUS
http://www.clt.ac.uk/

KEY WORKER LIVING SCHEME
http://www.housingoptions.co.uk/ho2/

LONDON STUDENT PLEDGE
https://www.pledge.lgfl.org.uk/