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NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE PRIMARY LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

This research brief presents the key findings from a national evaluation of the Primary Leadership Programme (PLP) carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NEFER) between 2004 and 2006. The evaluation was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and included the use of case-study interviews with key personnel, surveys of school leaders and analysis of pupil examination results.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Pupil achievement** - With regard to pupil attainment in Key Stage 2, statistical analysis showed that in both 2004 and 2005 PLP schools demonstrated greater progress in both English and mathematics than the comparison group of all primary schools not in the PLP.
- **Teaching and learning** - Case-study respondents were able to describe numerous changes and improvements in teaching and learning processes. These included improvements in data analysis, changes to teaching styles and the adoption of identified good practice.
- **Distributed leadership** - There was a widening of responsibility for leadership within PLP schools, especially to subject coordinators. The reported average size of leadership teams in the survey schools increased from 3.6 to four.
- **Improved leadership** - Staff in PLP schools identified a number of positive impacts on leadership. These included: the development of a clearer and more widely-shared vision for the school, improved leadership skills for the school's senior managers and increased sharing of responsibility with middle management.
- **Team work, collaboration and networking** - Many survey and interview respondents noted a stronger sense of team work within the school management team, as well as increased opportunities for collaborating with other schools. Collaborative leadership, to a large extent, has become embedded in PLP schools.
- **The role of the PSCL** - The inputs of Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders (PSCLs) were viewed very positively. For example, 82 per cent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the PSCL had a positive relationship with members of the school leadership team.
- **Monitoring and evaluation** - Between 2005 and 2006 many schools had sharpened their monitoring and evaluation processes.
- **Sustainability** - It was evident that schools were doing their best to embed good practice and to ensure that improvements arising from PLP were sustainable, though schools did encounter some difficulties in doing this.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Background and objectives

The Primary Leadership Programme formed part of the five-year Primary National Strategy which was launched in 2003 with the publication of the *Excellence and Enjoyment* document. The aim of the National Strategy is to establish high standards across a *broad, creative and distinctive* curriculum in every primary school. Within the PLP, the subjects of English and mathematics have been identified as having central importance, re-emphasising the focus on literacy and numeracy that had been in place since the late 1990s.

The PLP was developed collaboratively by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Primary Strategy and the DfES, as a key element of the National Primary Strategy. The PLP, along with the Intensifying Support Programme (ISP), has been the main National Strategy for improving standards in primary schools.

The development of the Primary Strategy Manager (PSM) and Primary Strategy Consultant Leader (PSCL) roles has been central to the implementation of the PLP. Since May 2003 around 1,900 PSCLs have been trained and deployed to work with nearly 10,000 primary schools across England.

The central objective of the research study was to evaluate the extent to which the Primary Leadership Programme had met its stated aims. These aims were as follows:

- to strengthen collaborative leadership and responsibility for teaching and learning in primary schools
- to equip leadership teams with a greater understanding of expectations in English and mathematics and the expertise needed both to identify where improvements should be made and to take appropriate steps towards bringing about these improvements
- to develop and extend the use of management tools to inform effective leadership and to contribute towards improvements in the teaching and learning of English and mathematics

- for participating schools to make significant improvements in Key Stage 2 results in English and mathematics over the period 2004 to 2006.

Methodology

The evaluation made use of a number of research methods, partly in order to ensure validity through cross referencing and the triangulation of data, but also to obtain findings from situations whereby the PLP should, potentially at least, have influence in a school (and across schools) at a number of different levels. The data sources included the following:

- Interview findings from two rounds of fieldwork visits to ten case-study schools and five local authorities. In general, each school case study consisted of detailed interviews with the Primary Strategy Manager (at the local authority), the PSCL, the headteacher, one or two other senior staff, one or two classroom teachers and, in some instances, a group of pupils.
- A large-scale questionnaire survey sent to 1000 randomly-selected school leaders involved in the programme, completed in two sweeps in autumn 2004 and spring 2006. Good response rates were achieved, with 560 questionnaires returned in sweep 1 and 458 in sweep 2.
- Statistical evidence derived from three rounds of multilevel analyses of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 results. The aim of these analyses was to examine how pupil performance in PLP schools compared with pupil performance in all other primary schools, controlling for known background characteristics at local authority, school and pupil level.
- Local authority- and school-level monitoring and evaluation information.

The research was completed between May 2004 and September 2006.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

- **Pupil achievement** - The main finding was that the key aims of the PLP had been achieved. With regard to pupil attainment in Key Stage 2, multilevel modelling showed that in both 2004 and 2005 PLP schools demonstrated greater progress in both English and mathematics than

the comparison group of all primary schools not in the PLP. This effect was small, but significant, especially given the difficulties PLP schools had experienced in improving attainment in the previous three years. The qualitative data supported this finding: many of the interviewees reported a perception that standards of attainment were improving, and some gave specific examples in terms of pupil outcome data.

- **Teaching and learning** - Case-study respondents were able to describe numerous changes and improvements in teaching and learning processes. These impacts had occurred across a number of different levels, including:

school-level processes, for example data analysis

classroom-level changes, for example using the outcomes of data analysis and monitoring, improved approaches to speaking and listening

subject-level changes, for example specific changes to teaching styles and adopting identified good practice.

- **Distributed leadership** - there was a widening of responsibility for leadership within PLP schools, especially to subject coordinators. The reported average size of school leadership teams in the survey increased from 3.6 to four in the period 2004 to 2006.

- **Improved leadership** - Responses to a survey question on the perceived benefits of the PLP included a number of points about positive impacts on leadership. These benefits included:

A clearer and more widely-shared vision for the school (70 per cent)

Increased contribution of the literacy and mathematics coordinators towards strategic planning (68 per cent)

Improved leadership skills for the school's senior managers (69 per cent)

Increased sharing of responsibility with middle management/class teachers (64 per cent).

- **Team work, collaboration and networking** - many survey and interview respondents noted a stronger sense of team work within the school management team, as well as increased

opportunities for collaborating and networking with other schools. It seems that collaborative leadership, to a large extent, has become embedded in PLP schools.

- **The role of the PSCL** - the inputs of PSCLs were viewed very positively, especially by survey respondents in PLP schools. For example:

82 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the PSCL had a positive relationship with members of the school leadership team

80 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the PSCL helped the leadership team to maintain a focus on what mattered most for the school

75 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the PSCL helped to foster teamwork and shared leadership in the school.

- **Monitoring and evaluation** - Between 2005 and 2006 many schools had sharpened their monitoring and evaluation processes. Inputs from the PSCL and from training sessions had led in particular to increased use of lesson observations and pupil tracking by school managers and other teachers. Some respondents also reported the use of pupil voice as an element of self-evaluation. By the time of the 2006 survey, three quarters of respondents said that they had implemented a monitoring and evaluation strategy aimed at assessing the impact of the PLP.

- **Sustainability** - It was evident that schools were doing their best to embed good practice and to ensure that improvements arising from PLP were sustainable, but there were some difficulties in doing this. These difficulties included time constraints, staff turnover, changing priorities and the importance of funding, especially to enable meetings between the relevant staff to take place. The 2006 survey evidence also indicated that, on the whole, exit strategies had not been widely thought out. Only one in five schools had an exit plan and fewer had a written plan with strategies outlining methods to sustain the developments resulting from the PLP.

- **Issues arising from participation in the programme** - The main issues raised by interviewees after the PLP had been in existence for just over a year came under the following five headings:

selection of schools

difficulties in the early stages of involvement

training

encouraging collaboration

embedding practice.

With the possible exception of school selection, none of these issues were raised in any significant way in the second year of the evaluation. This suggests that many of the first-year issues had been addressed and the concerns of the schools had been taken seriously.

- **Policy implications** - In the second wave of case-study interviews school and local authority staff were asked to draw upon their experiences of the Primary Leadership Programme in order to make recommendations regarding the future implementation of this or similar programmes. Careful analysis of the responses to this question revealed that two broad types of recommendation were made and that both of these have a relevance and an applicability that goes beyond the PLP to leadership and management more generally.
- The first recommendation was to do with **sustainability** and keeping certain PLP mechanisms in place. These could include some form of ongoing communication channel with the PSCL or someone in a similar role, or the school networking arrangements that had been developed in some areas. The PLP had brought numerous benefits to participating schools and these benefits (and the structures that made them possible) needed to be maintained. Perhaps what schools need is some continued impetus from the local authority to further support and encourage this process? It may be that a School Improvement Partner or some other LA officer could provide this encouragement.
- The second major recommendation made by respondents was that, whatever the form of future leadership initiatives, there is a need to keep a focus on the notion of **distributed leadership**. The sharing of responsibilities and a common vision across a number of staff was something that worked well in the great majority of PLP schools, and respondents wished these developments to continue.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from the surveys and from the case-study interviews suggests that there were many benefits arising from involvement in the programme. Some of these were specific and relatively short-term, but others were more general and longer term, and were to do with changing the culture of leadership in schools.

The identification of the latter types of benefit, along with confirmation that there had been improvements in pupil attainment at Key Stage 2, indicate that the PLP was largely meeting the key aim of improving the capacity of school leaders to lead school improvement beyond the timetable of the programme. The enhanced and sharpened focus on monitoring and evaluation, the use of the PSCL as a independent but supportive colleague, and the advantages of distributing responsibility across a larger number of school staff, were all highlighted as being important benefits that need to be maintained and developed in any future programmes addressing the needs of primary school leadership teams.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR820) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB820) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Winter Rogers, 4E, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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