

POLICY WATCH

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'Excelling against the odds.' Ofsted identify how successful schools defy the odds

For schools that want to sip from the cup of success this [recent publication](#) from Ofsted is surely a must. It tells the tale of how 12 secondary schools from different parts of the country, but all labouring under similar disadvantage, have managed to turn things round and achieve excellent results. No great whizzy initiatives, no great glittering array of high-tech solutions, rather the theme is heroic endeavour and a commitment to succeed. A useful metaphor in these downbeat times.

According to the latest [Annual Report from Ofsted](#), the proportion of good or outstanding schools 'has risen by 5% since 2005/6.' Yet 2 out of 5 are still judged no better than satisfactory, 9% of secondary schools are inadequate, a "depressing" gap persists between the best and worst performing and as the media highlighted once again last weekend, an underlying fear lingers amongst the chattering classes that all is not well in some schools. Last year's public listing of 600+ National Challenge schools where less than 30% of pupils achieve 5 good GCSEs, and subsequent suggestions that a further 500 schools are 'coasting' have only added to the anxieties. School performance therefore remains high up on the political radar and it's no surprise to find the DCSF Select Committee incorporating it into its current inquiry into school accountability and the [School Report Card](#).

So how have these schools managed to succeed? And to be fair, they weren't the only ones. 18 met the criteria that included having at least two inspection reports out of the last three judged outstanding, but the 12 selected reflect the widest spectrum. The [Report](#) identifies 10 success factors, most of which could be found at the top of any flip chart. These include having "strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed" and having "outstanding and well-distributed leadership." Few would argue with these. What makes this Report special, however, is not the listing of the various success factors but the digging underneath to see how individual schools have gone about applying them. "It is important to stress that the success of these schools is due not simply to what they do but the fact that it is rigorously distilled and applied good practice, cleverly selected and modified to fit the needs of the school." "Distilled," "applied" and "modified;" the formula expressed in three key words.

To help aspiring schools share the DNA, the Report breaks things down into three sections. How did these schools do it? How do they keep it up? Where do they go from here? Eight features are identified for each of the first two, five for the last one, simplified here into bullet point format for ease of reference.

First, how did these schools do it? Eight features.

- First the three 'vs' of leadership: vision, vocation and values; sketching out a tangible vision, bringing a sense of moral duty and purpose and gathering together a like-minded group of people with similar values

- Second, leadership. *"Senior leaders provide role models for the behaviours and values they want to see and have a significant teaching commitment"*
- Third, all these schools tend to have stable staffs. This is actively sought. Interestingly many of these schools are heavily involved in initial teacher training, preferring to train their own staff where possible. One school developed its own training centre
- Fourth, making sure that everyone knows a school is a place for learning and nothing will be tolerated that gets in the way of that. This can be time consuming, exhausting and side tracked by symbolic issues such as dealing with earrings but the case study of Robert Clack School is worth reading here. *"For six months the head teacher did little apart from tour the site, visit classrooms, discipline students and see parents."* It worked!
- Fifth, a constant focus on the quality of teaching and learning, no complaints about *'boring'* lessons here, rather staff and managers working together to ensure *"the pace is brisk and activities varied"*
- Sixth, providing an appropriate curriculum. Each school has approached curriculum balance and timetabling differently but all see it as a vehicle to engage learners and drive up improvement not as a central diktat
- Seventh, setting targets and tracking progress. A key feature in school performance nowadays but which can help inspire. At Middleton School, for instance, every staff member *"has five performance targets"*
- Eighth, making a reality out of personalisation. The Seven Kings High School system of regular interviews with learners a good example here

Second how do they keep it up? Again eight features are identified here.

- First, continuity of leadership; maintaining the culture and momentum even when the leadership changes
- Second, developing leaders of the future. *"We look for people's passions, channel them and align them to where the school needs to go"*
- Third, creating a climate of expectation in which everyone is in it together as in the case study of Lampton School. A case of in it to win it
- Fourth, focusing relentlessly on improving teaching/learning. All the schools *"actively promote and foster discussion about teaching and learning"*
- Fifth, enriching the curriculum to promote learners' motivation and achievement. Some schools organise over a hundred visits a year
- Sixth, raising levels of literacy on the basis that reading and writing skills are central to all learner achievement
- Seventh, building relationships with stakeholders including learners, parents and the wider community often on an extended school model
- Eighth, making sure no learner is left behind, offering *'wall-to-wall'* support where possible

Third where to go from here? Five approaches to sharing excellence.

- Providing system leadership as *'beacons'* of excellence
- Partnering another school facing difficulties
- Developing a school improvement partnership
- Taking a leadership role across the community
- Working as a change agent at a national strategic level

The cup of success can be supped from many angles.

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