Drawing on the work of more than 1,300 schools, new research into the Pupil Premium has identified the common successful strategies and the key ‘building blocks’ for their implementation. Dorothy Lepkowska reports.

The building blocks of Pupil Premium success

The leader of a more successful school, however, said: “When I am talking about our disadvantaged students I am absolutely determined that I see each of them as an individual rather than generalising and moulding them together.”

The second building block is a clear strategy relating to behaviour and attendance, incorporating strong pastoral care in the form of social and emotional support and a quick response to non-attendance, as well as working closely with families.

The report found that “the features associated with less successful schools offer some potential insight into opportunities to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils: in particular, the finding that higher levels of pupil absence were associated with poorer outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in both primary and secondary schools.”

More successful schools had designated staff to offer pastoral support and had employed strategies to ensure children attended school – such as calling home in the event of an absence, finding or sending out transport, and working with families, often in the home, to address the barriers they face in getting their children to school.

They also understood the link between behaviour and absence and emotional support, and had put extensive social and emotional support strategies in place including strong links with local mental health services.

Another building block is a commitment to high-quality teaching for all alongside consistently high standards and expectations of teachers and pupils, monitoring performance and sharing best practice in the school.

In the more successful schools, staff were able to meet the learning needs of individual pupils, which meant they had to know every child’s challenges and interests, and to look closely at ways of supporting them to achieve their very best.

The report said: “Senior leaders in more successful schools had designated staff to offer pastoral support and had employed strategies to ensure children attended school.”

The NFER research identified seven key building blocks for their implementation of strategies as important in raising standards among disadvantaged pupils.

The seven building blocks

Cruelly, the study identified seven “building blocks” that are common in schools that have achieved more success in raising standards among disadvantaged pupils. They are: embedding a whole-school ethos of aspiration and attainment.

The seven building blocks

• Paired or group teaching.

• One-to-one tutoring.

• Initiative introduced earlier, allowing them to bed in to the ethos of the school.

• Compared with less successful schools, more successful schools had introduced their most effective strategy earlier. More and less successful schools also differed in their implementation of similar strategies.

• For example, when it came to small group teaching, one more successful school took pupils of similar ability out of non-core subjects for additional support.

Furthermore, as part of their feedback to pupils, the more successful schools had implemented detailed corrective schemes to recognise pupils’ achievements and identify the next steps in their learning as well as making clear the specific link between the pupil and the teacher. The researchers found that the more successful schools emphasised teaching and learning for all, and that the pupil’s attitude to learning was a contributing factor. They also had highly effective assessment for learning and feedback, which were straightforward to administer, provided clear feedback for pupils and contributed to each pupil’s tracking and monitoring.

This suggested that successful schools were not simply following the latest ‘hot’ schemes to recognise pupils’ achievements and identify the next steps in their learning as well as making clear the specific link between the pupil and the teacher. The researchers found that the more successful schools emphasised teaching and learning for all, and that the pupil’s attitude to learning was a contributing factor. They also had highly effective assessment for learning and feedback, which were straightforward to administer, provided clear feedback for pupils and contributed to each pupil’s tracking and monitoring.

Increasing the effectiveness of approaches used by different schools was therefore, simply a matter of implementing targeted strategies but relied on them being “embedded in a whole-school ethos of aspiration and attainment.”

The seven building blocks

Crucially, the study identified seven “building blocks” that are common in schools that have achieved more success in raising standards among disadvantaged pupils. They are: embedding a whole-school ethos of aspiration and attainment.

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Conclusions

Overall, the report concludes that schools are able to improve disadvantaged pupils’ performance and make a positive difference to their life chances. There is no single strategy that will make this difference. Schools need to select the strategies that work best for their particular needs, and their school’s circumstances.

In doing so, they need to bear in mind that the quality of their implementation of strategies is as important as their choice of strategies. Even with all of these building blocks, implementing change and reaping the benefits takes time. More successful schools reported that it took “around three to five years for changes to bed in and lead to a sustained change in pupils’ attainment.”

• Dorothy Lepkowska is an education writer.

Further information

To download the full NFER research paper and findings, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/pp
Three new reports offer a range of teaching and learning strategies in maths and science, all based on international evidence. Dorothy Lepkowska takes a look.

International comparisons in performance between countries can tell us many things. Apart from the obvious – how we stand in core subjects in relation to other countries around the world – they may offer some insights into what teachers are doing right in the classroom, and what can be improved.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has recently published a series of three reports, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) offering strategies that teachers might use to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

These were based on analyses of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings for 2012, with input from a range of leading practitioners and experts in classroom practice.

Tackling low performance in maths

From previous PISA reports we know, for example, that achievement in mathematics in English schools is not significantly different from international averages, though the gap between the most and least able is relatively wide.

Among the lowest performers are girls, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are eligible for free school meals, and youngsters with special needs. The report, Tackling Low Performance in Maths, finds that pupils who displayed lower levels of perseverance when faced with challenging maths questions were more likely to be low performers in the subject. So equipping them with strategies to help them tackle difficult tasks and problems can be important in supporting them to achieve.

Leading practitioners recommend that one way of tackling low performance is to link maths to everyday activities, and particularly to make connections to promote engagement. If pupils understand why they are learning in a subject, and see the link to what they are learning, then they are more likely to persevere.

The report notes that “pupils tend to become more involved when they have been supported to guide their own learning, rather than when expectations are determined solely by the teacher”.

It continues: “As a teacher this means continuously looking for specific ways to involve pupils in effective dialogue and to support them in this way in inventing and developing their own learning.”

It is important for teachers to establish what pupils already know, but avoid direct question and answer sessions at the beginning and end of lessons as this can discourage lower achievers and promote disengagement.

Cognitive activation in maths

Some of these strategies are explored further in the report Cognitive Activation in Maths, another of the documents in the series, which presents ideas that encourage pupils to think more deeply about mathematics and how they relate to real-life problems. The aim of this approach is to focus on the workings and method used to achieve the correct answer, rather than focusing on the answer itself.

Cognitive activation requires pupils to link new information to what they already know. By making connections between mathematical facts, ideas and procedures, it is hoped they will achieve enhanced learning and a deeper understanding of the concepts. The method has been found to aid learning and achievement across all abilities and socio-economic groups of pupils.

Deviation from tried and tested teaching methods can feel risky to some teachers, but the report contains some short, medium and long-term strategies aimed at introducing cognitive activation as a tool for teaching and learning.

For example, a maths problem being explored in the classroom can be related to a real-life scenario by asking questions such as “how would a mathematician tile my bathroom?” or “how would you work out if there was enough food for everyone in the world?”.

Lessons could be punctuated with questions like “what if...?” or “does everyone think that...?”, which might prompt pupils to explain how they arrived at a particular method, or to think of an alternative way to solve the problem. By working in small groups, students can also be encouraged to share and develop ideas.

In the medium and long-term, students can be asked for input into what strategies they found most effective, and similarly teachers can gather evidence to show the improvement over time, colleagues working in different subject areas could find links between them. For example, maths and geography departments could instigate a project to plan the layout of a town to minimise travel by residents to key locations.

Science and problem-solving

One area where England’s average performance exceeds the international average is in science and problem-solving assessments. Only 10 countries performed better in the PISA science assessment, and only seven in problem-solving. It was also found that, overall, England had a greater proportion of high achievers compared with the international average.

It is here that important lessons might be learned about how improved performance might be achieved, with the evidence suggesting, once again, that there was a positive relationship between performance and pupil engagement.

The finding from the report, What We Can Learn from England’s High Performance in Science and Problem-Solving, suggests, in general, “good attendance and a positive attitude towards school are strong indicators of the likelihood of a pupil being a high performer” and that the strategies employed by teachers in the classrooms were a significant factor in promoting engagement both with learning and the school.

“It is therefore important to consider the pedagogical approaches that can be adopted by teachers in all subjects to increase the engagement of pupils of all abilities,” says the report state. Experts have found that adapting teaching to real-life situations helps pupils and students to understand that what they were learning is relevant now and in the future. They suggest that teachers consider making learning meaningful by showing pupils how it relates to their own lives. This might involve looking at their future careers and inviting employers in to deliver some of the content.

Enrichment and enhancement activities might also offer opportunities to those pupils who were particularly interested in science and wanted to know more about it.

Teachers should also listen to students, the report states, to find out what they already know and invite them to ask questions that might be addressed in future lessons. Open-ended tasks would allow young people to use their initiative and be creative in their learning – rather than working on activities designed to produce a right answer.

In order to achieve all of this, schools need to support teachers with CPD. The report says that staff who possess expert and up-to-date subject knowledge are “better equipped to support and encourage pupils’ learning”. Similarly, developing links with employers often helps to improve learning outcomes.

Dorothy Lepkowska is a freelance education writer.

Further information

The three reports, published by the NFER in September 2015, are available via http://bit.ly/1LYJd5O

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Alcohol education is a challenging area for schools to tackle effectively. **Dorothy Lepkowska** reports on an evaluation of the Talk About Alcohol intervention programme.

Helping pupils to avoid risky behaviour in adolescence and into adulthood has always proved challenging for schools. Should teachers confront issues such as alcohol, drugs and sex head-on? Or does discussing them too early encourage experimentation and contribute to the risk?

One strategy for helping and supporting young people in making difficult decisions, based on information and knowledge, appears to be effective.

An evaluation of the Alcohol Education Trust’s (AET) Talk About Alcohol intervention programme, carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) over three years (2011-2015), shows that the scheme has had a significant impact on delaying the age at which young people start to drink.

The evidence-based and peer-reviewed programme, aimed at 11 to 18-year-olds, provides teachers with a structured approach to discussing issues relating to alcohol, and uses a comprehensive paper and online teacher workbook of lesson plans, worksheets, information sheets, games and ideas which can be adapted to suit the knowledge and experience of the age group.

Teachers also have access to the 500-page website, with further games and quizzes and dedicated sections for staff, pupils and parents. Schools are encouraged to involve parents and a booklet is available to this end, with opportunities for the AET representatives to address parents in school on how best to support their children.

**By this age, students in both groups were admitting that having a drink was a fun and sociable thing to do, suggesting that getting the right messages across was vital in the years leading to students leaving school.**

The evaluation, which began in 2011 and included a student questionnaire undertaken four times from year 8 to when the pupils were in year 11, examined the behaviour of two groups of pupils – one which had undergone the programme (the intervention group) and a comparison group which had not, but might have acquired information in other ways.

The evaluation found that there was value in the early intervention approach of the programme and in returning to alcohol education at different stages in pupils’ personal development as they become more likely, with age, to experiment with alcohol.

NFER researchers Sarah Lynch, Jack Worth and Dorothy Lepkowska interviewed teachers who had used the Trust’s intervention in secondary schools in 2013. They found that staff who had delivered Talk About Alcohol thought they had a comprehensive, “ready-to-go” package which worked well in series and that the resources offered a good range of materials to work from, and were accessible to students.

They were particularly impressed with the short films, scenarios and role play, which worked well in the classroom. Overall, the programme was found to be “user-friendly”, engaging for students and could be effectively delivered.

Two teachers mentioned that their school had conducted an end-of-unit review of the sessions and they reported one or more of the following among students:

- Greater knowledge about alcohol and its effects on the body.
- Greater understanding of legal issues around alcohol e.g. buying alcohol by proxy.
- Greater awareness of drinking patterns among young people their age (‘that not everyone is drinking’).
- Feeling more prepared to avoid drinking if they want to.

The most recent NFER evaluation concluded: “The impact on delaying the onset of drinking is evidence that the Talk About Alcohol intervention is effective as an early intervention programme.

“The evidence suggests the value in a harm minimisation approach and in revisiting alcohol education at different stages – for example, via early intervention before they begin drinking (the average age of first drink is 13), before young people begin to drink more frequently (around age 15), and as they approach adulthood.”

“Giving young people the facts about alcohol is not the only factor likely to influence behaviour – helping young people to develop resilience, behavioural strategies, and self-management skills to manage risk is also important. Messages about responsible drinking are important at this age.”

**Tips for school leaders and teachers**

- Revisit alcohol education at different key stages – for example, early intervention before they begin drinking (the average age of first drink is 13), before young people began to drink frequently (around age 15), and as they approach adulthood.
- Give young people the facts about alcohol and messages about responsible drinking. It helps to develop resilience, rehearsal strategies, and self-management skills to manage difficult situations.
- Consider how to engage parents in alcohol education programmes, as evidence highlights that family influences drinking behaviour.

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How do parents choose a school?

What do parents look for and prioritise when it comes to choosing a school for their children?

A research project has sought to answer this question. Karen Wespieser reports

As the end of the summer term approaches, schools across the country will begin thinking about the 2016 round of new pupil admissions. In doing so, you might like to consider NFER’s new data on the factors that inform school choice. In particular, NFER has uncovered stark differences in what parents are looking for, dependent on their personal background factors.

Choosing a school is one of the key times when parents reflect on what is important to them in terms of their child’s education. Some commentators hail the freedom to make decisions about taught curriculum – an important right valued by parents, and a way of driving up standards. But to what extent is this view shared by parents – do they feel they have a genuine choice, and if so how do they choose?

At the beginning of the year, NFER commissioned a nationally representative survey of 1,005 parents of children aged five to 18 to find out more.

Parent’s feel they have a genuine choice

One of the first things we wanted to understand was whether parents genuinely felt they had a choice when choosing a school. In 2014, according to Department for Education (DfE) figures, nearly 90 per cent of parents chose the school of their choice for their school. Most respondents to our survey (72 per cent) also felt they had a choice, although slightly fewer got their first choice – highlighting that in some instances there may be a real choice available.

However, it should be noted that while research has shown that although it appears that choice is supported in theory, the reality is more complex. For example, analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that support for choice is counterbalanced by, among other things, opposition to vouchers, school diversity, and by strong support for the idea of sending children to the ‘nearest state school’ (1).

But local factors are the most important

We wanted to know what elements parents considered important when making their decision. In line with existing research we found that local factors are paramount – “school that suits my child” and “location” of the school were each identified by almost half of respondents to our survey (see below, graph 1).

How are parents’ making these decisions?

Most parents undertake a range of activities to help decide which school their child should attend, in particular undertaking their own research and attending open evenings or school trials. Headteachers should be heartened to see the high take-up of the opportunities provided by schools such as open evenings. It is well worth remembering the effectiveness of these activities when putting in the extra hours that many of these tasks require of school staff. Again, there are some differences by household income (see graph 2). Parents’ on a lower income are more likely to let their child decide and select the school already attended by siblings. One of the activities where there is greatest disparity between income levels is the extent to which parents discuss potential schools with other parents. This is likely to be an important way to try to increase the use of this type of activity.

The reality is that making a choice about a school depends on a myriad of local factors as well as a parents’ understanding of their own child. Better understanding these factors could prove helpful to schools targeting limited resources at the best strategies for attracting applications. Our findings also have significant policy implications.

The new government backs changes to the School Admissions Code which will prioritise children eligible for the Pupil Premium. Yet this evidence suggests that parents of these children are least likely to take advantage of any increase in their school choice as they are more concerned with location.

The NFER is not the first organisation to raise these concerns. In 2013, the Sutton Trust reported that “those who adopt the choice behaviours anticipated by government policy ... are disproportionately, though by no means exclusively, middle class” (2). Similarly, a DfE report last year found that “lower socio-economic status groups may look for factors that ... may lead them” to select themselves out of high performing schools” (3). The extent to which this is considered in any changes to the Admissions Code will be an important policy consideration for the new government.

Our research was based on a national sample, and so was not able to explore local variation in any detail. These issues are likely to vary considerably between areas, so why not undertake some local research of your own with existing and/or prospective parents to better understand what factors are most important to them?

Karen Wespieser is a senior research manager with the NFER.

References


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What makes for an effective work experience placement? Dorothy Lepkowska looks at the findings of recent research into overcoming common barriers to placements and innovative approaches.

The implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes two years ago was intended to improve the learning experience and prospects of post-16 students to enable them to progress successfully to employment, Apprenticeships or higher education.

School sixth forms and sixth form colleges and further education colleges were expected to offer coherent programmes that were tailored to individual needs, education and employment goals.

This might include progress towards a GCSE at grade C for young people who had yet to achieve this in English and maths, at least one substantial qualification or a Traineeship or extended work experience for those not ready for more formal study, and non-qualification activity such as tutorial time and work experience.

The provision of work experience by schools and colleges has sometimes been a challenge, with efforts hampered by claims of bureaucracy, a lack of time and resources, and too few suitable placements being offered by local employers.

In her annual lecture in 2014, Lorna Fitzjohn, Ofsted’s director for further education and skills, said many providers “didn’t use work experience effectively”, and added that despite the implementation of 16-19 Study Programmes there was “slower than expected progress at institutional level”.

However, some institutions are creating innovative, purposeful and effective work placement experiences for their students, and have made them a key part of their overall learning provision – while also overcoming many of the challenges of running such a scheme.

The active involvement of employers in preparing young people prior to sending them out on work placements enhances the whole experience for maximum effect.

A recently published report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), entitled Sharing Innovative Approaches and Overcoming Barriers in Delivering 16-19 Study Programmes Principles, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), examines work experience.

Effective and valuable work placement experiences, where these form an integral and formalised part of study programmes, are explored. In every case, the schools and colleges have developed distinctive features that meet the needs of students, as well as employers.

The report found that schools and colleges that offer the best provision for work-related activities are proactive in their response to the needs of local employers and show a willingness to establish relationships with leading firms. They have also developed structured programmes of work experience, enterprise and/or work placement activities.

One institution doing this effectively was Birmingham Metropolitan College, where every student is engaged in a World of Work programme, comprising both work experience and activities to help boost young people’s employability skills.

To meet a local shortage of skilled workers in the professional skills industry, the college set up a Professional Services Academy (PSA), one of the first of its kind in the country, which is open to students studying AS and A levels in areas such as law, accounting, economics, business studies and mathematics and those on Apprenticeships in accounting, business administration and legal studies.

The PSA programme comprises a structured package of work enterprise and work placement activities that have been developed in partnership with local employers. Thanks to this, students are expected to gain “hands-on” experience and develop the skills to meet employers’ needs.

The NFER study also found that the creative development of work experience models, where programmes provide potential mutual benefits for all concerned – providers, young people and partners – are particularly effective.

It said that the active involvement of employers in preparing young people prior to sending them out on work placements enhances the whole experience for maximum effect.

This is particularly true of Oldham Further Education College, which has set up an Employers Advisory Board of 20 local businesses to work alongside its Digital and Creative Centre to strengthen relationships.

Prior to embarking on a work experience placement, students at the college work with employers on workshops, master-classes and other forms of employability-related support and guidance, to prepare them for placements. This includes employers asking students to submit CVs and be interviewed for their placements, to reflect the competitive nature of finding a job.

Effective regulation and monitoring of work experience was also found to be vital, as was the involvement of young people in real pieces of work or projects that were valued and used by employers, and reflected current workplace demands.

One student from St Brendan’s College in Bristol, for example, evaluated the graduate training programme of the insurance firm with which he served a six-week placement during the summer holiday at the end of year 12.

Students from the college who are successful in applying for an internship are matched with a mentor, who acts as a critical friend, and are asked to complete a project that will provide something of value to the employer.

Meanwhile, at Chichester College, all student work experience is monitored, with hourly activity logged and every student having an on-line Enterprise Passport. This allows them to reflect on their achievements and the skills they have learned, and acts as a reference for job or university applications. Additionally at Walker Technology College in Newcastle, sixth form work experience placements are designed to mirror the “real world of work”, as far as possible to achieve maximum benefit for students and employers.

And in the sixth form at Pinluco Academy in London, students are supported by a Raising aspirations Team of staff, who create belief and help young people to develop self-confidence and broaden their horizons. Additionally they monitor and record impact of the work placements. The aim is for no student to rule anything out or to close any doors with the choices they make.

The best work experience, the NFER report said, is tailored to the needs of students and employers, and is backed up with dedicated staff or teams of staff who develop and monitor the programme across the institution to enhance the provision on offer.

Dorothy Lepkowska is a freelance education journalist.

Effective regulation and monitoring of work experience was also found to be vital, as was the involvement of young people in real pieces of work or projects that were valued and used by employers, and reflected current workplace demands.

Further information

• A top-tips document for senior leaders in schools and colleges, How to Provide Meaningful Experience of the World in Work for Young People as Part of 16 to 19 Study Programmes, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA02/DFIA02_home.cfm
• The NFER report, with full details of the case studies, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA01/DFIA01.pdf

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How can schools encourage and support collaboration with SMEs to improve young people’s employability skills and transition into work?

Michelle Judkins shares insights from new research

Schools and colleges have the duty to drive forward independent and impartial careers guidance, yet they cannot achieve this alone. While they have the freedom and scope to personalise it to meet the needs of individual young people, with this freedom comes the responsibility of ensuring that they are well informed about roles and jobs available in today’s business market, and have access to a breadth of opportunities.

In London, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent 99.8 per cent of businesses, while in the South East they represent 99.6 per cent (London Enterprise Panel, 2013). However, often SME partnerships are a missed opportunity when developing careers provision and the opportunities for young people to have a voice and contribute to and benefit from this sector of the economy could be better.

With this in mind, a team at NFER in partnership with the South East Strategic Leaders, London Councils and the London Enterprise Panel, sought to examine how SMEs and micro-businesses work together with secondary schools and colleges in London and the South East to improve young people’s employability skills and successful transition into work.

This is also vital to the continuing economic success of London and the South East – the assumption being that providing suitable learning and training opportunities for young people contributes to economic regeneration and development.

Developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial

‘What’s in it for me?’

So what are the potential benefits for educators of SME engagement? Geographically speaking, what better way for secondary colleges than to tap into the local business market? The research clearly indicates that engagement with SMEs helps foster understanding of local business need, which in turn helps inform a more joined-up approach to skills development (and supports a personalisation of the curriculum for specific business sectors).

For educators, it is another avenue to provide independent, impartial information from individuals not employed by the school. This helps educators deliver a broader offer to young people. Collaboration also helps increase awareness among young people of the role of SMEs in the workplace and provides a more balanced exposure to local corporates. Similarly, a small business inherently lends itself to providing an increased awareness of work tasks through working within a small team.

The pressures and demands of a small business are understandably different. Partnerships (between schools or colleges and small employers) inherently need to be mutually beneficial.

So what about the small business? What’s in it for them? Well, it is a good opportunity to influence the curriculum and familiarise students with what their business needs are, and potentially, to identify potential employers who fit their business needs and support the development of young people in their specific business area (through an Apprenticeship, for example).

Furthermore, there may be an opportunity to promote and advertise businesses, with institutions displaying partners’ logos around their buildings. This in turn gives young people a chance to see which businesses are keen to support their learners.

What will facilitate effective engagement?

There is clearly enthusiasm for such collaborative working, despite some of the challenges involved. NFER identified no shortage of support for strong employee-educator relationships. Why, then, are SMEs not more involved in careers provision and what is holding back this collaborative power?

Unpinning the drivers and inhibitors through the research helped guide practical ways in which to enhance existing partnerships, as well as activate new community ones. Many of the barriers that emerged revolved around a lack of communication – for example, employers were often unaware of named contacts within institutions who they could call to discuss partnerships, or even who to contact once they had recruited an apprentice.

Despite the existence of websites that aim to provide a platform for businesses to engage with schools and colleges (such as inspiringthefuture.org), there was clear evidence that they were generally perceived as being fairly limited in terms of helping initiate and develop relationships.

Rather, the importance of the “sell” to businesses is clear: the more informed and involved employers are, the more they will realise that schools and colleges cannot produce a “work-ready” young person alone, and that their input is crucial to the better preparation of young people to the workplace. A dedicated careers coordinator plays an important role in brokering meaningful long-term connections.

Overall, the main facilitators to effective engagement include:

• A single line of communication (face-to-face where possible) to help SMEs understand the importance of their role, smooth out queries, break-down barriers, and instil confidence in the employer, with the ultimate goal of sustaining relationships.

• In order to assist buy-in from employers, the content of careers information can be discussed together.

• In addition, providing employers with updates on student progress and courses, for example, helped maintain communication channels.

• Ensuring flexibility on both sides is important. Additionally understanding the value of any commitment, however small, is critical. Providing case study examples of how employers can engage with educational institutions may help broaden the offer to allow employers to examine various strategies that can fit into their business calendars.

Case study: K&M McLaughlin Decorating

This family-owned painting and decorating company was set up in 1998, and today employs 120 people. In response to a lack of relevant training provision, the company established its own college. Its Apprenticeship programme retains more than 90 per cent of qualified apprentices.

They also work in partnership with a local college to deliver a five-week Pre-Apprenticeship and Employability Programme to improve employability skills and help foster a genuine interest in the construction industry. The programme takes on around 25 individuals five weeks and gives young people real work experience while instilling a strong work ethic, emphasising punctuality, commitment, teamwork etc.

Case study: UTC Reading

Partnerships with local industry are imperative to helping deliver college courses and SMEs play a key role in course delivery. Some sponsor BTEC units and the college aims to match each unit to a business partner. The partner agrees the unit content in an attempt to match their business needs. The partner launches and delivers the unit, supports assessment and can offer mentoring or work experience opportunities. Elsewhere, tutors can collapse the curriculum for a day in order for partner SMEs to deliver specific activities. Also, whole-school events, where SMEs work with other larger companies, help to deliver aspects of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The research found that effective infrastructure to help facilitate discussions between educators and businesses could help overcome communication barriers which can result in businesses losing interest and enthusiasm. As a result, the evidence informed a Connect Card (see further information), which acts as a starting point to help bridge the gap between educator and employer, providing a platform for meaningful dialogue which could help lead to effective education-business link activities.

If only one important message is taken away from the research, it is that developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial. Increased dialogue and open-mindedness on both sides can help ensure that flexible methods of engagement are understood, providing the structure needed to progress and sustain engagement in a meaningful way for all parties.

• Michelle Judkins is an NFER research associate.

Further information

The Connect Card, the research summary and a case study report outlining examples of good educator-employer activities across London and the South East, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/employability

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