



Lessons from London

What we know about radical school improvement.

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY
Office of K-12 Outreach

Michigan State University's Office of K-12 Outreach has been in active partnership with the United Kingdom's leading organization for advancing school excellence and diversity since 2004. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), now known as the Schools Network, has provided ongoing opportunities for us to study outstanding practices that result in lasting student results.

This is important work. The faculty, staff and partners of the MSU K-12 Outreach Office are actively engaged in efforts to boost the achievement of schools across Michigan, and particularly in Detroit. Because we are so tightly connected to our state and its urban communities, we believed it was important to change our entire paradigm and develop a more global perspective on educational change.

Beginning in 2009, our team worked with SSAT to identify successful school turnaround efforts in London's most troubled urban neighborhoods. The schools that were selected for review generally were located in unstable, high-poverty, high-crime areas of the city. Pre-turnaround, these schools were troubled places with poor educational outcomes. Post-turnaround, the schools are now healthy learning communities with robust student growth. We were determined to find out why, so we could support similar change in the US.



London's Millbank Tower, home of the Schools Network, stands tall against the city skyline.

Our K-12 Outreach staff began working with top MSU College of Education faculty members, funders, and strategic partners to study and visit these schools. We have reviewed their practices in action and interviewed school leaders and students alike. We have spent many additional hours writing and debriefing as we seek to understand and apply our learning here at home.

As a result of these efforts, we've distilled our learning into a series of five core principles that are relevant for all schools. We explore each of these principles in greater depth on the following pages. We also provide some case studies from effective schools in London and offer strategies for boosting student learning among American students.

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253 Erickson Hall • 620 Farm Lane • East Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 353-8950 • <http://education.msu.edu/k12>

The 5 Core Principles for Learning Schools

- 1. Student learning comes first.** Everything in the school is aimed at building the knowledge, growth and development of students. No exceptions; no excuses. Students have agency and autonomy when it comes to their own learning and are accountable for their work.
- 2. Schools nurture student well-being.** Academic growth occurs in a setting where students' physical, mental, emotional, and social needs are well understood, respected, and met by attentive adults. Successful schools provide high-quality personal experiences for the citizens of tomorrow.
- 3. Effective teachers ensure student learning through a coherent, rigorous curriculum.** Clear academic standards in the hands of talented, caring staff are critical drivers of student success.
- 4. Shared accountability matters.** Communication and transparency are necessary elements in school success. Teachers can no longer afford to keep their doors closed—we are all learners who must share and observe effective practices.
- 5. Results-oriented leadership creates effective administration of the learning experience.** Successful leaders set clear, high expectations, then consistently follow through with actions that match their assertions. They foster a community of success that values learning above all else.

Digging Deeper: The Evidence from London

The Importance of Student Voice

Successful academies in the UK sustain academic improvement by focusing intensely on student learning. This learning is synonymous with “deep experience,” which Hargreaves (2006) defines as “learning that occurs when schooling is restructured to ensure that all students are fully engaged.”

Teachers in the UK define student engagement differently than we do here in the United States. For them, it's not simply a matter of differentiating instruction, ensuring classroom participation, or having a student council. In the UK, students are responsible for *co-constructing* what they learn. As one academy leader stated, schools should be a place “where the old people go to watch the young people work” and not places “where young people go to watch old people work”.

We visited UK schools where students have significant levels of independence. They are able to choose their own learning activities during the school day, and they take responsibility for their own

actions. Students do more talking in classrooms than teachers do, and they even provide input to teachers on the quality and content of their lessons. In some schools, students actually bear partial responsibility for teacher evaluations. Government inspectors address their school evaluation reports to students directly, rather than parents or school officials.

Despite the possibility of disorder in a student-led environment, classroom management appears smooth and friendly. This is because UK teachers use pedagogical approaches that are geared toward accommodating student voice. Learners are responsible for themselves, and teachers act as learning facilitators and resources.

Fielding (2002) writes that one of the primary inhibitors of a student-led approach to learning can be the perceived distribution of power in the classroom. Here in the United States, our educational culture to date has required passive behavior on the part of students. Teachers speak

of “having control” of their classrooms as a positive outcome. However, educators across the United States are beginning to have conversations about “flipped instruction,” in which students review subject content at home, before class. Class then becomes the place to work through problems, advance concepts, and engage in collaborative learning (Tucker, 2011). We have seen these types of classrooms in action in UK academies, and we believe the approach has merit.

One amazing aspect of this work is that the students we observed in UK classrooms—the young learners who were actively engaged and involved in their



The glass-walled classrooms at Chelsea Academy support a culture of openness and transparency.

learning—were students that many US teachers would consider at risk for academic failure. Low-income, often minority pupils whose achievement US schools often struggle to improve are making real performance gains through a student-centered approach that allows them to add their own voices to the learning process. We believe there is a possible solution to achievement gap issues to be found here, one that stems from allowing learners to exercise their agency and autonomy. We can produce active, responsible, well-educated citizens if we make students the center of our work and give them more active ownership of their own learning.

A Word About Ethos

During our visits, UK school leaders spoke often about the ethos they've created in their schools. The idea of ethos goes beyond superficial atmospheric and cultural issues and reaches into the deeply held beliefs that shape an entire system. In fact, Williams (2000) argues that school ethos is the most important aspect of a student's educational experience.

The school leaders we met have been deliberate and focused in shaping the values, culture, and ideas that underpin the character of their schools. Students and teachers alike are heavily influenced by the environment in which they carry out their activities.

Moreover, the ethos of each school we saw was readily apparent to anyone who entered. Everything—from the construction of the school building (glass-walled classrooms, open and green outdoor spaces, dedicated rooms for teacher teams to meet and share ideas) to staff and student conduct and even the nature of the extra-curricular activities—was carefully designed to reflect and facilitate the continuation of the school's character.

Ethos also provides a framework for staffing decisions. For instance, it's one thing to repeat the maxim that “all students can learn,” but it's another to really believe it and behave in ways that show it all day long. A healthy, deliberate school ethos allows teachers who don't fit the character of the school to self-select out of it, making room for teachers who share the school's beliefs and attitudes.

Nurturing Students' Well-Being

Part of the reason the UK schools we visited have had such success is that they pay specific attention to the non-academic needs of learners. We believe this engenders a high degree of trust, which helps support student growth.

The school leaders we met thoroughly understand and identify with their students. This level of understanding goes beyond knowing names and associating a few relevant facts; these leaders can tell you about the life challenges individual pupils face, how they are coping, and what strategies are being used by teachers to provide support. One school leader we met was even able to offer

perceptions of a student's developing musical ability and how it was helping her grow as a confident learner.

It was also clear that school activities were carefully selected to address learner needs. Several of the school leaders we met expressed concern that many London children whose families struggle with generations of unemployment rarely leave their neighborhoods. These leaders carefully planned field trips and camp activities in rural areas of the UK, so these children could experience nature and see other ways of life.

At St. Matthew Academy, the leader also worked to provide outdoor activities for many of her students, ensuring fresh air and fresh learning opportunities.

We also saw profound examples of leaders engaging parents in meaningful ways. The principal at Burlington Danes Academy, for instance, gave letters to ninety of the most disruptive students on the first day of school, letting them know they could not return to campus until after she had a conference with their parents. She met with the parents of each of these students in the following two weeks. The principal at Walworth Academy made it mandatory for parents to meet with him to



Students at Walworth Academy receive their national examination results in August 2011.

pick up their children's uniforms. It gave him an opportunity to meet parents, talk about the needs of their children, and solicit their support.

We even spoke with one administrator who requires children who receive school detention to bring a parent with them on Saturday morning.

The most important thing about each of these actions is that school leaders followed through consistently on each of them—no exceptions. This type of consistency and follow-through matters, because it shows students, staff, and parents that the adults in the school can be trusted to keep their word. This is the first step in building strong connections with learners, as well as understanding and addressing their non-academic needs.

Building a Strong Teaching Staff

The UK principals we met were very clear about the characteristics of an effective teacher and articulated how they developed a high-quality team. They were also direct about the need to release poorly performing teachers, recruit and hire effective ones, and provide continuous professional development and support.



St. Matthew Academy offers outdoor activities to accommodate the physical growth and energy of young learners.

Similar to charter schools in the United States, the academies in the UK are autonomous and enjoy many freedoms (e.g. they hire, fire, and set the pay scale for teachers, determine the curriculum, etc.). However, along with greater autonomy comes more responsibility for improving student academic performance. All of the principals we spoke with talked about arriving at the schools and being stuck with poorly performing teachers who were either terminated or "counseled out."

The principal from Walworth Academy was very clear and forceful in communicating to teachers what he expected from them and that he refused to let them shortchange the students. He expected teachers to teach, and if they did not fulfill their obligation, he released them.

Upon being named head teacher, the principal at St. Matthew Academy turned her attention toward teachers who were barely satisfactory. The principal from Burlington Danes Academy, who inherited a school fraught with violence, had the most discretion in terminating teachers because the school was on the brink of being closed. She successfully counseled out a significant number of teachers, which allowed her to hire skilled teachers who believed in the vision she had for the school.

All the principals talked about hiring teachers who believed in the capabilities of the students they served. The principal from Chelsea Academy spoke of the rigorous recruitment and interview processes he implemented to attract candidates who have empathy for children, experience working in urban areas, and an understanding of Christian ethos. The interview process he described is divided into three stages. First, candidates teach lessons to students. The candidates then tour the school, during which time the principal informally interviews them. Finally, he invites both teachers and students to interview candidates who have successfully completed the first two stages. The principal from St. Matthew Academy recruited heavily during her initial takeover, but she warned about bringing in too many new people at one time because she

believes it disturbs the ethos of the school. She also models leadership practices for her senior leadership staff. When she spots talented leaders, she promotes them, so members on her leadership team who emulate her behavior also develop others who do the same.

Coherent, Rigorous Curricula

The UK has a national curriculum that is used by all schools. However, we saw variation among schools based on student learning needs. We saw enhanced course offerings in the performing arts, enterprise, vocational training, and outdoor education. School leaders told us these subjects were chosen with the needs and input of students in mind.



The academic performance of students at Burlington Danes Academy is ranked and posted on campus, offering them an additional incentive to do well.

At Bethnal Green Academy, for instance, we were told by school leaders that they view the nation's content standards through the lens of each individual learner. While they track the achievement of national standards, they favor personalization of curriculum over "the ticking of boxes."

Curriculum personalization and choice are among the five key components of personalization identified by the UK Department for Education and Skills (2004):

...It is teachers and schools who have the capacity to harness the enquiry and enthusiasm of students. In primary schools this means teachers using the flexibilities that already exist to ally high standards in the basics with opportunities for enrichment and creativity....In the early secondary years it means students are actively engaged by exciting curricula and specialist subject enquiry. At 14-19 it means schools working together to extend curriculum choice—like at the Central Gateshead 6th Form Consortium, which offers a common prospectus, a wide range of academic and vocational courses and a choice of movement for students across participating institutions.

Hargreaves (2005) makes a compelling case for project-based learning as a means of personalizing content. He writes that through such learning, "Students naturally draw on some of the disciplines and thereby learn to master them; but they also quite naturally look beyond the disciplines and thus begin to recognise that disciplines have limits in tackling real world problems. It is here that learners can begin to be genuinely creative, and the need for creative problem-solving is at the heart of engaging young people in their formal education."

We observed this type of engagement at each of the UK schools we visited. Core academic standards were being delivered through projects and activities that were student-led and self-directed. At Chelsea Academy, for instance, we saw learners working independently and in small groups to solve problems, conduct experiments, and complete vocational projects. These students were able to articulate the standards they were being taught; at the same time, they were clearly applying them to the tasks at hand.

Shared Accountability and Professional Development

Just as the glass walls in classrooms suggest, we found a strong atmosphere of transparency and accountability in the UK schools we visited.



UK inspectors cite "inspirational and dynamic" leadership as a primary factor in the turnaround of London's Bethnal Green Academy.

Not only were students accountable for their learning, self-discipline, and growth, but teachers and staff also made a point of being accountable to themselves and one another. Teacher grade-level and subject-matter meetings appeared to be the norm, and instruction here is something that is student-led, staff-supported, and intentional. Collaboration is key, along with careful monitoring of student results.

Many of the principals we met shared ideas about training teachers, and they all used the acronym CPD—continuous professional development—in their conversations.

The principal from Bethnal Green Academy stated the importance of investing in people, but noted that it's the small things that transform the school. Some of Bethnal Green's habits include ensuring that staff meeting time is primarily about learning, surveying teachers to determine their wants and needs (e.g., teachers record three things they are good at and three things they want to improve upon), and providing teachers with workshops that encourage them to adopt the school's ethos.

The principal from Walworth Academy believes that it is important to train teachers on lesson planning, so at that school, they use a lesson plan template

to show teachers how to develop key questions and support student learning. Additionally at Walworth Academy, they use mock inspections to train teacher leaders how to discern and assess good teaching.

The principal at St. Matthew Academy asserted that her leadership team has a relentless focus on high quality instruction, and she challenges teachers all the time to be able to identify good teaching. At Burlington Danes, the principal provides incentives (i.e., pays a small fee) to outstanding teachers for coaching their peers, while the principal from Chelsea Academy encourages teachers to look outside of their school for good teaching to observe. The principal from the City of London Academy talked at great length about training teachers to be able to review their data, identify underperforming subgroups, and implement strategies to improve the learning of the subgroups.

Leadership for Results

The successful leaders we met in the UK are, in a word, relentless. They have clear visions for their schools and the children they serve. They make—and follow through on—decisions that are right for kids, even if those decisions are politically or legally challenging.

Numerous examples of relentless leadership are scattered throughout this publication. We have seen principals who would not allow incoming students on campus until they had met with their parents, and leaders who "counseled out" or fired ineffective staff. We even met with one leader who established ambitious two-year goals for himself and said he would leave the school if the goals were not met. They were.

We also saw other examples of determined, creative leadership in action. Burlington Danes and Chelsea Academy post student progress reports in hallways and around campus, so all learners are aware of their results and position relative to their peers. Far from being a worry or threat to students, this action serves as a powerful motivational force that is generating results. At Burlington Danes we heard descriptions of students

running and jostling to see the posted results, then talking them over carefully with each other and their teachers.

The leaders we met are focused on detail, consistency, and—above all—results. They introduced and clearly communicated performance targets, established norms and methods for reaching those targets, and then worked to support students and staff in achieving each one.

Applying the UK Strategies at Home

Ways to improve American teaching and learning based on observations of the UK academies include:

- *Building capacity in teachers.* Release poorly performing teachers and develop existing staff. This is often times done through building internal capacity (by observing and sharing instructional practice, engaging in teaching conversations, etc.) to improve the teaching and learning process.
- *Focusing on continuous professional development.* Customize training to meet the needs of the organization and staff, but remain focused on student achievement.



City of London Academy made headlines when former Prime Minister Tony Blair refused to enroll his children. The school used the opportunity as an impetus for change.

- *Creating an environment that fosters personalization.* Deeply engage students in the learning process. Teachers and students should be co-constructors in teaching and learning activities, and teachers should solicit input about the quality of their teaching from students.
- *Building a culture of learning inside and outside of the school.* The principal of Walworth Academy exposes his students to areas in London they normally don't see as a way to broaden their experiences. The principal at St. Matthew Academy created an outdoor classroom for energetic boys who learn kinesthetically.
- *Developing and cultivating trust.* Trust is not only the linchpin for personalization, but it is also critical in developing a school culture (or ethos) that supports student achievement.
- *Focusing on achievement.* The principal at Burlington Danes Academy made achievement important by assessing students every 12 weeks and posting their grades (with names) around the campus; one student said it motivates students to work harder.
- *Continuously improving the quality of teaching and learning.* All principals talked about doing walkthroughs to observe teachers, creating structures that allow for teachers to discuss teaching with their colleagues, and seeing their primary responsibility in the school as being the "head teacher." The principal at Bethnal Green Academy informally speaks with teachers about their teaching as he walks through the hallways; the principal at Burlington Danes talks to students about their individual classroom performance.

The Way Forward

The five core principles we introduced at the outset of this document were illustrated in myriad ways during our London site visits. These principles are also borne out repeatedly in research about what works in schools, regardless of location, governance structure, or statutorily-imposed policy and curriculum standards.

Here at home, we see ample opportunity for educators to employ the principles and practices we observed in the UK. We will continue to engage and study with SSAT and other international organizations to ensure a robust body of knowledge about what works in schools, and look forward to sharing future results.

Stay tuned, and look for more UK findings and results at our fall 2012 iNet conference!

Endnotes

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