

## Educational success in two Inner London boroughs: Lessons for the U.S.

By Helen F. Ladd and Edward B. Fiske

### INTRODUCTION



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The issue of how to promote educational excellence in urban areas with large concentrations of low-income pupils is a vexing one that has proved to be a challenge in all developed countries.

One bright spot is London, where in recent years the academic performance of primary and secondary school pupils has improved dramatically since the late 1990s and now exceeds national averages. Strikingly, the improvement is largely attributable to the rapid achievement gains of low income students in the 13 boroughs of Inner London, the part of the city that features the greatest concentrations of low-income and ethnic minority students. This remarkably strong performance of London students was first highlighted in an article in the *Financial Times* (Cook, 2013) and has been dubbed the “London Effect.”

Various research groups have confirmed the existence of the London Effect, primarily on the basis of data on the performance of secondary students on the Graduate Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), a set of tests typically taken by 16 year olds.<sup>1</sup> The findings are generally the same regardless of which specific GCSE-based measure the researchers use—e.g. the proportion of students who receive grades of A\* to C on, five or possibly seven, national subject tests or, alternatively, the average points earned, where points correspond to the letter grades. In all cases the most striking element is the rapid recent improvement of London students, particularly disadvantaged low-income students in Inner London (Greaves et al 2014, Blanden et al 2015, and Burgess, 2014).

Researchers disagree about the explanations for this London Effect. Some attribute the gains of London students to various London-specific policy interventions at the secondary level between 2002 and 2010 (e.g. CfBT 2014). Others attribute them to factors such as London’s ethnic mix (Burgess, 2014) or its strong economy. We will say more about these potential explanations below, but one

<sup>1</sup> Five GCSE passes at grade C or higher are the rough equivalent of a U.S. high school diploma. The grade A\* is equivalent to an A+. Age 16 represents the end of compulsory schooling in England, but about 80 percent of all students continue in school for another two years, at which time they take A-level tests required for entrance to a university.

empirical finding is particularly relevant for this paper: the importance of improved performance at the primary level for the subsequent success of students at the secondary level (Greaves et al. 2014; Blanden et al., 2015). This finding leads to the main question for this paper: What is behind the London Effect at the primary level, that is, for children completing grade six typically at age 11?

To shed light on this question we spent a month in London gathering data, reading reports, interviewing policy makers and educators and visiting primary schools. We focused on primary schools as engines of school improvement that in turn drove gains at the secondary level. And we concentrated on the two Inner London boroughs, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, that in the late 1990s were the most economically deprived among the London boroughs and had the lowest achievement levels. The academic performance of students at both the primary and secondary levels in both boroughs has improved significantly over time and now, like that of pupils in other Inner London boroughs, exceeds the national average test performance of 11-year olds throughout the country. We use these two boroughs to flesh out the types of policy changes at the local level that played a role both in their success, and, by extension, the success of many of the other Inner London boroughs. Our ultimate goal is to tease out potential lessons for U.S. policy makers.

## RISING PUPIL ACHIEVEMENT IN HACKNEY AND TOWER HAMLETS

The main local governing authorities in London are elected borough councils that have responsibility for a range of municipal services, including education, that are funded primarily by grants from the national government.<sup>2</sup> Inner London is comprised of 13 boroughs (14 if one includes the City of London), all of which house large concentrations of economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority students.<sup>3</sup> Currently, the populations of both Hackney and Tower Hamlets are about 250,000. In 2014, Hackney had 52 primary schools and Tower Hamlets had 65, most of which serve children from age four to 11.

Among the Inner London boroughs in the mid-1990s, Hackney and Tower Hamlets were the most economically deprived. In 1996, for example, the average percentage of primary school students eligible for free school meals was 58.5 percent in Hackney and even higher at 66.4 percent, in Tower Hamlets, which suffered from high unemployment. Both percentages were far above the 48.3 proportion across all the Inner London boroughs.

Both boroughs also have large numbers of ethnic minority students. In the late 1990s, about 80 percent of the pupils in Hackney were from minority ethnic groups. The largest groups at that time were pupils of African and Caribbean heritage, but many other groups, including pupils of Turkish and Kurdish background, were also represented. For about half the pupils English was an additional language (Ofsted, 2003). The population of Tower Hamlets underwent significant change prior to the mid-1990s. The borough was initially largely white working class, with many of the adults working at the docks before they shut down in the 1980s. By the mid-1990s less than 40 percent of the population was white English and an increasingly large proportion was of Bangladeshi heritage. Many Bangladeshis had come to London as refuge from natural disasters in their country in the late 1980s and settled in Tower Hamlets where they found ample low-priced housing. As of 1998 Tower Hamlets had the highest proportion of pupils for whom English was an additional language in the country (Ofsted, Tower Hamlets, 1998).

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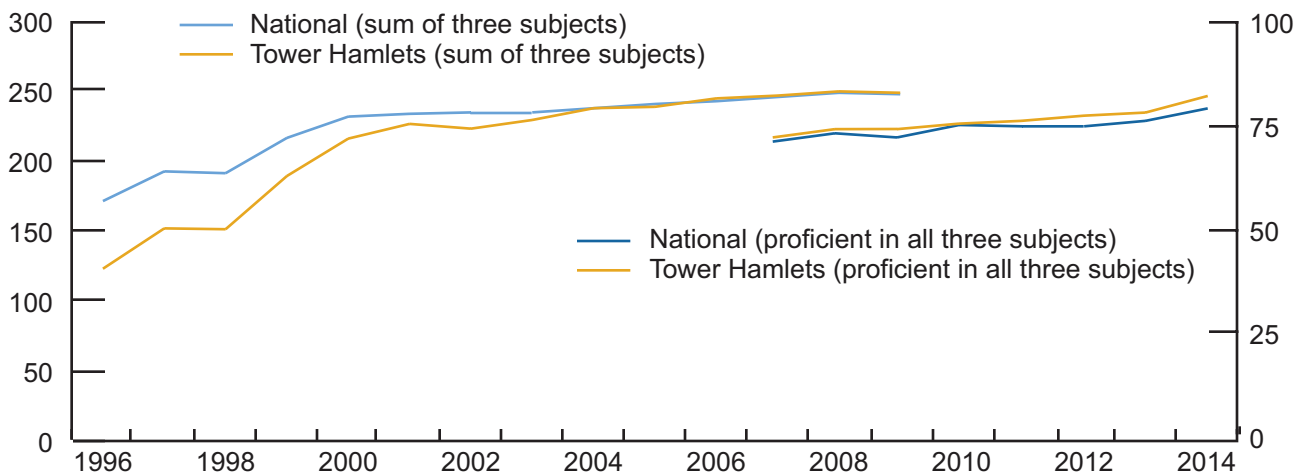
<sup>2</sup> They have had responsibility for local education services only since 1990 when the Inner London Education Authority was abolished.

<sup>3</sup> The Inner London boroughs are Camden, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth, and Westminster, plus the special area of the City of London. Any references we make to Inner London exclude the City of London.

In the late 1990s, both boroughs suffered from weak education systems. That is clear from reports published by the national school inspection agency: Her Majesty’s Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted).<sup>4</sup> Although Ofsted’s primary responsibility is to inspect and report periodically on the quality of each state-funded school, it also issues reports on broader cross cutting themes and, until 2008, also published performance assessments of the education services provided by boroughs. In three reports between 1997 and 2000, Ofsted concluded that the Hackney council was providing “unsatisfactory or worse” support to its schools (Ofsted 2003). Similarly a 1998 Ofsted report on Tower Hamlets was highly critical of its education provision, concluding that the council was wasting funds, failing to meet the needs of all its students, and not working effectively with the schools (Ofsted, 1998). Further, Ofsted noted that pupils in both boroughs were performing far below national averages.

Over the last two decades both boroughs have recorded significant increases in student performance at the primary level relative to national averages, although the timing of the increases differs in the two boroughs. Figure 1a for Tower Hamlets and 1b for Hackney show the trends. We use two axes for each graph because of changes over time in the commonly reported summary measures of achievement. In all cases, the reported measures refer to the percentages of students performing at a level of 4 or above on the national Key Stage 2 (KS2) tests given to 11 year olds at the end of primary school. These tests are based on the national curriculum and are graded externally, with standard 4 interpreted as grade-level performance. The scale of the left axis in both figures (relevant for the years 1996-2009) is the sum of the percentages of students scoring 4 or above in each of the three main subjects: reading, mathematics, and science. Hence the maximum is 300 (3 X 100). The scale on the right of both figures (relevant for the years 2007-2014) is the percentage of students scoring 4 or above in both math and reading. Hence the maximum is 100. The availability of data for both measures in 2007-2009 serves to provide some comparability over the period.<sup>5</sup>

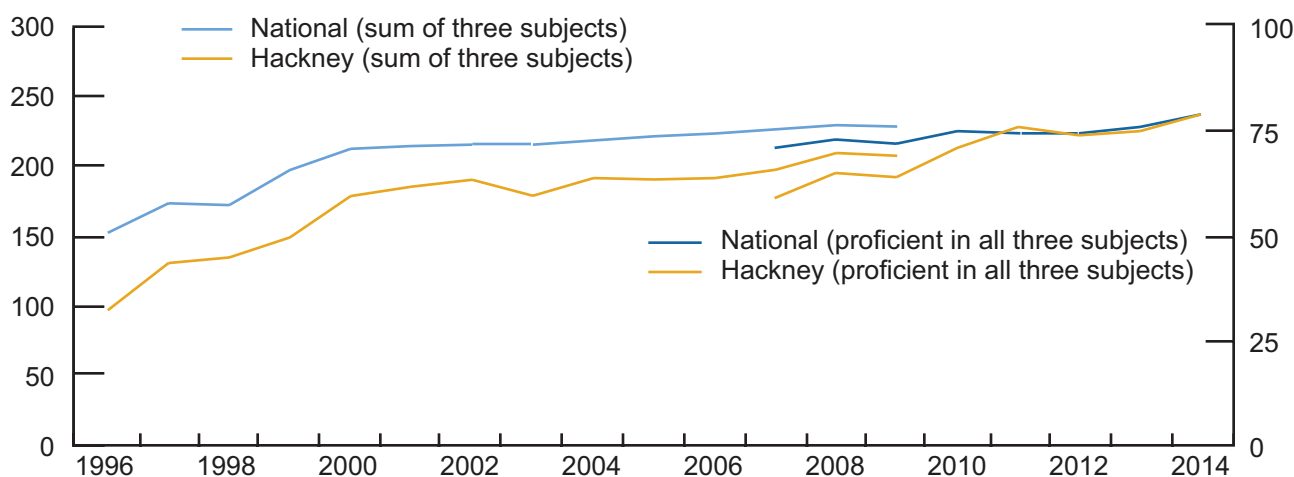
**Figure 1a: Pupil performance in Tower Hamlets**



<sup>4</sup> Initially established by a 1992 law, Ofsted was for many years simply the Office for Standards in Education. Its responsibilities were later extend to day care and other children’s services and in 2007 to a broader set of training programs for adults.

<sup>5</sup> The source for the aggregate measure of performance in math, reading and science is School Performance data, from 1996-2009. The measure for grade level performance in both math and reading from 2007 to 2011 comes from the National Curriculum Assessment at Key Stage 2 in Local authority and regional tables, Table 18. The 2011 figure is reported in that source but is from the national pupil data base. For math and reading, 2012 to 2014, the source is the National Curriculum Assessment at Key State 2 in England, 2014, revised, in local authority and regional tables.

## Figure 1b: Pupil performance in Hackney



The first takeaway from the graphs is that achievement of primary school pupils in both boroughs was far below the national average in 1996, with the gaps remaining relatively constant until 1998. The 1996 gaps placed the two boroughs among the three lowest performing local education authorities in the country. The second is the remarkable rate of improvement in Tower Hamlets between 1998 and 2001, with continued improvement (other than a minor downward blip in 2002) until the achievement of primary students in Tower Hamlets reached the national average in 2004. In contrast, although there were clearly gains in achievement in Hackney prior to 2002, the most consistent upward trend in Hackney relative to the national average did not begin until 2006, after which it continued gradually until the Hackney students reached the national average in 2011. Since then achievement in both boroughs has increased generally in line with the national average, but with performance in Tower Hamlets remaining somewhat above that of both Hackney and the nation.

Although our focus is on Hackney and Tower Hamlets, gains in student achievement are not unique to those boroughs. Indeed, every borough in Inner London except one in 2012, and all of them in 2013 and 2014, featured proficiency rates at or above the national average. This performance is impressive given that the percentage of low income students in all the Inner London boroughs far exceeds the national average. In 2013, for example, while 18 percent of the primary school students nationally were from low income families, as defined by eligibility for free school meals<sup>6</sup>, the comparable percentages ranged from 26 to 48 across Inner London boroughs, with the highest percentage in Tower Hamlets. For some purposes, including the distribution of additional funds for schools serving disadvantaged students, the national government now also uses a broader measure of disadvantage, namely whether a pupil has been eligible for free school meals in any of the prior six years or is cared for by the state. By this measure 31 percent of the country's primary school children were disadvantaged, far below the range of 42 to 72 percent across boroughs in Inner London.<sup>7</sup>

The high overall average achievement of primary school pupils in the Inner London boroughs largely reflects the fact that their students from low-income families—whether defined by eligibility for eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

<sup>6</sup> Eligibility for free schools meals in England is based primarily on whether the child's parents receive income support through one of several programs for low-income families.

<sup>7</sup> These figures are based on data from the Department of Education, National curriculum assessments at key stage 2, 2014 (revised). Disadvantage is the measure used in the pupil premium program.

or by the broader concept of disadvantage—far outperform their counterparts in the rest of the country (Blanden et al, 2015). We show the patterns in 2013 by FSM status for Hackney and Tower Hamlets in Table 1, where meeting standards refers to achieving a grade at level 4 or above in reading, writing and math.<sup>8</sup> The table shows that while FSM students in our two London boroughs continue to underperform relative to their more advantaged local counterparts, their achievement levels far exceed that of FSM students in the nation. Moreover, the gap between the achievement of non-FSM and FSM students in Hackney and Tower Hamlets is less than half that in the nation.

**Table 1: Performance by free school meals (FSM) status, 2013**

	Hackney	Tower Hamlets	Nation
% FSM primary school pupils	40	48	18
% of FSM pupils meeting standard	76	74	60
% of other pupils meeting standard	84	83	79
Gap (other –FSM)	+8	+9	+19

**Source:** National curriculum assessments at key stage 2, 2014 (revised), Department for Education.

**Summary observation.** Other researchers have documented that the London Effect emerges not only for students at the secondary level but also, importantly, for pupils at the primary level, who then continue on to achieve at relatively high levels at the secondary level (Greaves et al, 2014, and Blanden et al, 2015). Thus, gains at the primary level are the precursor to gains the secondary level. The data on Key Stage 2 results for our two illustrative boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets confirm that both boroughs have experienced impressive turnarounds for their primary school pupils from their extremely poor performance in the mid-1990s. In the following sections we turn to possible explanations, paying careful attention to the different timing of the turnarounds in the two boroughs.

**POSSIBLE CONTEXTUAL EXPLANATIONS**

What explains the London Effect at the primary level both (1) generally and (2) as it shows itself in Hackney and Tower Hamlets? Or, more specifically, what changes in context, or what particular policies and practices, generated such remarkable turnarounds? Several contextual or external factors—notably the changing ethnic mix of the students, gentrification, significant growth in school funding directed toward disadvantaged students, and other national policies—are potential contributors to the success of the pupils in Inner London. Our data show that, while one or more of them, may have facilitated the turnaround, they do not represent the full explanation.

**THE ETHNIC MIX OF STUDENTS**

Many observers have noted that the presence of large numbers of upwardly mobile immigrants with high aspirations may have been a strong positive force for high academic achievement in London. Indeed one researcher makes an empirically-backed claim that 100 percent of the London Effect at the secondary level reflects the city’s disproportionately large share of ethnic minorities, who happen to be disproportionately composed of highly motivated Asians (Burgess,

<sup>8</sup> The standard used here is the one reported by the National Department for Education for the most recent years.

2014). Other researchers acknowledge the potential importance of ethnicity for explaining the differential *levels* of achievement between disadvantaged primary school pupils in Inner London and the rest of England, but conclude that ethnicity plays at most a small role (less than 20 percent) in explaining the *gains* in the achievement of the London students relative to their counterparts elsewhere in the country during the 2002-2013 period (Blandon, 2015, Table 5).

The ethnicity argument is most tempting for Tower Hamlets whose population is comprised of more than 69 percent ethnic minorities, the largest group of whom are Bangladeshi. According to Census data, the borough's population increased by about 30 percent, from about 196,000 to 254,000, from 2001 to 2011. During this time, the white British population share fell from about 43 percent to 31 percent, making Bangladeshis who had long represented more than 30 percent of the population, the largest ethnic group at 32 percent. Other represented groups include white non-British (12 percent), black Africans (4 percent), Chinese (3 percent) and many other smaller groups.<sup>9</sup> Because Asian students improved more than most other groups of students throughout the country at the secondary level over the relevant period, it is tempting to attribute at least some of the improvement in Tower Hamlets to its Asian residents.<sup>10</sup>

Hackney, too, has been growing, but somewhat less rapidly than Tower Hamlets. Its population increased by 21 percent, from 202,800 in 2001 to 246,300 in 2011. Just over a third of the population is white British, with the rest made up of various other groups, the largest ones being white non-British (6 percent) (which includes Turks and Kurds) and black Africans (11 percent). The proportion of black Caribbean residents fell slightly, from 10 percent of the population in 2001 to 8 percent in 2011.

A common indicator for ethnic status as it relates to education is whether or not English is the first language of a pupil. Those with other mother tongues are often referred to as needing English as an additional Language (EAL). Table 2 documents patterns in 2013 for primary school pupils in the two boroughs and in the nation. Tower Hamlets, with 79 percent, has the highest share of EAL students, followed by Hackney with 55 percent, and the nation far below at 17 percent. With respect to student attainment, as measured by achievement of level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics on the Key Stage 2 tests, the EAL students in both boroughs do slightly better than the non-EAL students, and also substantially better than the national average for EAL pupils. Thus, while the attainment of EAL students in the nation falls short of their English-speaking counterparts, that is not the case in the two London boroughs in our study. Such patterns might well lead one to argue that the ethnic mix in the two boroughs helps to account for their current high achievement levels.

**Table 2: Performance by EAL status, 2013**

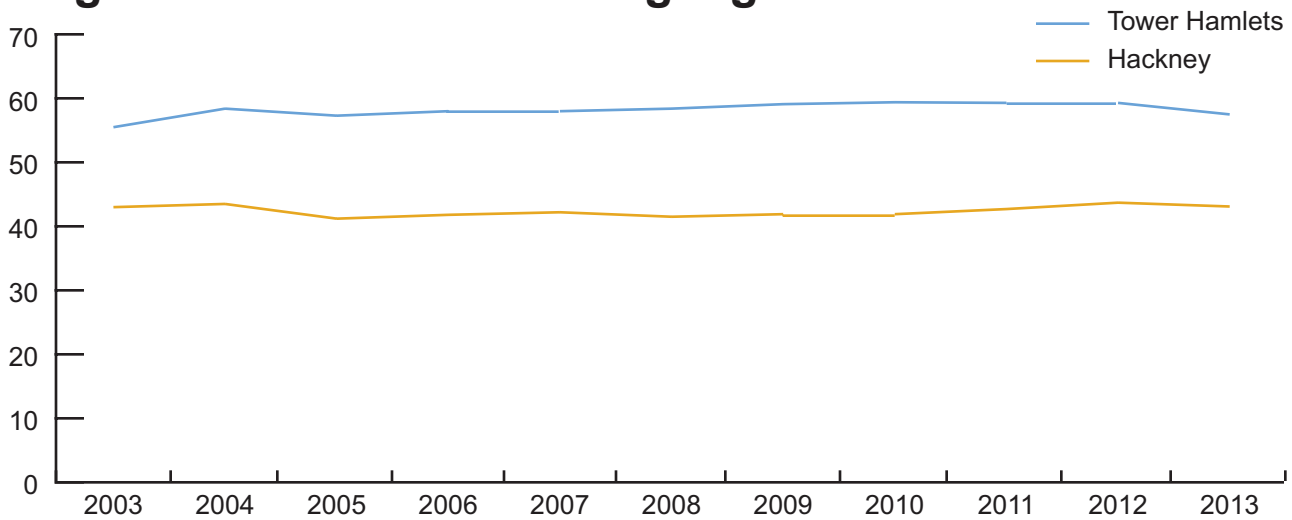
	Hackney	Tower Hamlets	Nation
% pupils whose first language is not English (EAL pupils)	55	79	17
% of EAL pupils meeting the standard	82	79	73
% of non EAL pupils meeting the standard	81	78	76
Gap (Eng. - not English)	-1	-1	+3

<sup>9</sup> The source for these figures is *Trial by Jeory (2012)*.

<sup>10</sup> In his study of the overall London effect, Burgess (2014) documents that pupil progress beyond primary schools was greatest both in London and in the rest of England among Bangladeshi, Indians, Black Africans and Chinese (Table 3).

But the pattern cannot account for the gains in performance from the late 1990s to the present unless it is the case that high performing EAL students were increasing as a share of all primary students. The following graph (which starts only in 2003 because of data limitations) shows no evidence of that pattern in either of two boroughs. Unfortunately, the fact that we have no evidence prior to 2003 on the ethnic mix of primary school students in Tower Hamlets means that we cannot completely rule out the possibility that a rising share of ethnic minorities between 1998-2002 contributed to the rapid achievement gains in that borough during that period. We find that explanation quite improbable, however, given that Bengalis and other ethnic minorities were performing so poorly in Tower Hamlets in 1996. Similarly, rising shares of ethnic students cannot explain the turnaround in Hackney, where the turnaround relative to the nation did not start until 2006. Hence, we need to consider other possible explanations.

**Figure 2: Percent of primary school students with English as an additional language**



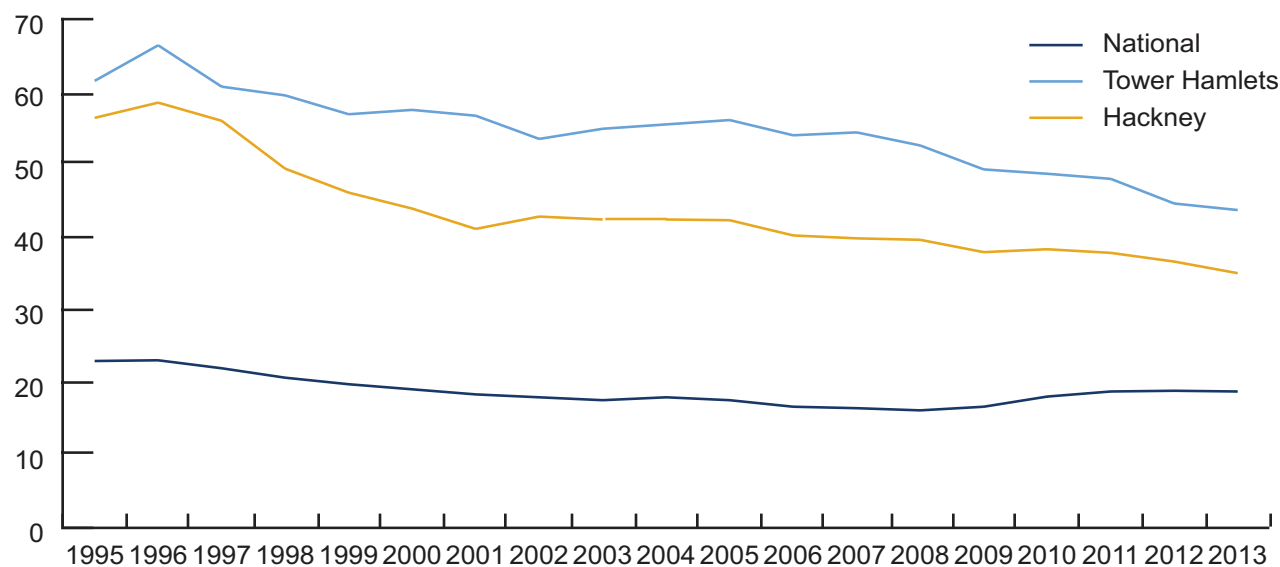
**Source:** Calculated by the authors from LEASIS data.

## GENTRIFICATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

One of the many reasons for the rapid recent population growth in both boroughs is the tight housing market in London. With house prices rising in Central London and becoming unaffordable for many young families, both boroughs, and especially Hackney, have become increasingly attractive places for young professionals to settle. The influx of more advantaged families will over time undoubtedly have a significant effect on the economic mix of children in the borough’s schools, and it could in turn lead to further rises in student achievement. The question is the extent to which the change to date could account for the observed improvement in the two boroughs documented in Figures 1a and 1b above.

At the school level, the only consistently available measure of student disadvantage over time is eligibility for free school meals. Figure 3 depicts trends in the percent of primary school students who are eligible for free lunch in the two boroughs and in the country as a whole. The downward trends starting in both boroughs in 1997 is very clear.

## Percent of primary school students eligible for FSM, by year



Source: Calculated by the authors from LEASIS data.

Several points are worth noting. First the most dramatic decline (from about 58 percent to 41 percent) in Hackney occurred between 1997 and 2001, which could well account for some of the improvement in the performance of its pupils during those years. Second, the decline during the period 2006 to 2011, when student achievement in Hackney was rising to the national average, is much less marked, with the share falling from about 40 percent to 38 percent. That two percentage point decline appears somewhat larger, however, when compared to the two percentage point increase at the national level during the same period. Thus gentrification in Hackney, with its associated reduction in the share of low income students, may well have played some role in that borough's success after 2006.

The evidence supports a different story in Tower Hamlets. Recall that the most rapid improvement in test scores relative to the national average in Tower Hamlets occurred between 1998 and 2001. The graph indicates that during this period, the economic situation of students was improving, with the share declining by 2.8 percentage points, from 59.5 percent to 56.7 percent. This decline, however, was only slightly larger than the 2.3 percentage point decline for the nation as a whole. Hence, it would be hard to attribute much of the achievement growth relative to the nation during that early period to the borough's declining share of low-income pupils. Nevertheless, the decline in the borough's low-income students after 2005 probably helped the borough sustain its earlier improvement.

Importantly, even if the mix of pupils matters to some extent for average performance, a decline in the share of low income students cannot, by itself, explain the fact that low income students in Inner London boroughs outperform their national counterparts.<sup>11</sup> In Table 1 above we showed that low-income pupils in Hackney and Tower Hamlets far outperformed their national low-income peers in 2013. Other researchers have used student-level performance data (in contrast to the school and borough data used in this study) to document that low-income pupils in the Inner London boroughs have experienced greater growth in achievement over the last 15 years than other groups of London students (Blanden, 2015). Other factors must explain those gains.

<sup>11</sup> One minor qualification to this statement would be if the achievement of low-income students were positively affected by the presence of a growing proportion of more advantaged peers.



In addition to altering the mix of pupils in the schools, a growing and vibrant community may also improve educational outcomes in other less direct ways. For example, a borough that is becoming an increasingly attractive location for young professionals may have an easier time attracting high quality headteachers (school principals) and teachers eager to live and work in the community. Of course, continuing gentrification can eventually also work in the other direction by leading to rising housing prices that over time become out of the reach of many teachers. As we will see below, the ability to be selective in hiring headteachers and teachers was an important contributor to the turnaround in both boroughs. Hence, although gentrification of the two boroughs may not be a major contributor to their turnarounds, it clearly facilitated them.

## SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN SCHOOL FUNDING

Another factor that facilitated the change in both boroughs was the dramatic increase in school funding during the period. The government provides funding to local authorities who then distribute the funds to individual schools using borough-specific allocation formulas. Schools then have substantial control over how to spend the money.

The Labour Government, which governed between 1997 and 2010, poured huge amounts of money into education, with the new funding heavily weighted toward disadvantaged students. Starting with 2011-2012 school year, the coalition government introduced an explicit “pupil premium” for all disadvantaged students, where disadvantaged is broadly defined to include any pupil whose family was eligible for free school meals during any of the preceding six years. The amount was initially £430 and, by 2014, had been increased to £1300 per primary school pupil. Even before then, however, funding was differentially targeted toward schools serving disadvantaged pupils. Between 2000 and 2013, per pupil funding for primary school students rose by 69 percent in inflation-adjusted terms, with funding rising by more than 83 percent in the most deprived quintile of schools compared to 56 percent in the least deprived quintile (Subieta, 2015, Tables 1 and 2).

The following table, which is based on 2011 data, shows that Hackney and Tower Hamlets were advantaged relative both to London and to the rest of England in terms of resources for primary schools. Moreover, it documents that schools serving high proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals had access to more resources than those with lower proportions throughout the country. The above- average resources in Hackney and Tower Hamlets

**Table 3: Grant funding and resources, 2011**

2011	Hackney	Tower Hamlets	London	Non-London
<b>Grant funding (per pupil)</b>				
Low FSM (20%)	£5672	--	£4077	£3738
Med. FSM	£5637	£5857	£4836	£4248
High FSM > 35%	£6150	£6295	£5268	£4787
Pupil/ teacher ratio	16.8	14.6	--	16.3
Teacher ass't/ teachers	0.446	0.520	--	0.416
Teacher salaries	£42,900	£43,800	--	£38,000

**Source:** Department for Education, school performance tables. 2011 download data archive

translated into smaller class sizes in Tower Hamlets as indicated by the pupil/teacher ratio (but not in Hackney in 2011)<sup>12</sup> and more teacher assistants per teacher. Teachers are paid according to a national salary schedule that provides higher salaries for teachers in London, where living costs are high.

Officials in Hackney and Tower Hamlets are frank to say that these greater resources enabled them to implement educational policies designed to improve schools, especially those serving low-income students. However, both boroughs also had high levels of resources relative to other areas in the late 1990s at a time when the performance of their students was extremely low and the quality of their schools was poor. Thus, while access to high levels of resources is undoubtedly helpful—and most likely necessary—for improving schools and raising student performance it is not sufficient by itself.

## OTHER NATIONAL OR LONDON-SPECIFIC POLICY INITIATIVES

Additional funding was not the only policy initiative during the years of the Labour government that may have contributed to the “London Effect.” When Labour came to power in 1997 it introduced a series of new policies designed to improve teaching and learning among primary school pupils. These included a reduction of class sizes for five to seven year olds and, starting in 1998, the National Literacy Strategy and, the following year, the National Numeracy Strategy. The National Literacy Strategy placed a new and rigid structure on the curriculum for English teaching, including a mandatory national literacy hour that had been piloted in about 400 schools in disadvantaged areas in 1996–97 by an earlier administration. Careful research on that program based on the pilot schools found that it succeeded in raising pupil test scores in reading and writing (Machin and McNally, 2007). This emphasis on heightened educational achievement represented a change from policies in previous years, when much of the emphasis in state schools in disadvantaged areas was on assuring that schools were places where children would be safe. Although these initiatives were national in scope and hence applied to all areas, they were likely to have had disproportionately large effects in the Inner London Boroughs that were serving high proportions of disadvantaged children and became pilots for the national program.

The Labour government also focused on early childhood programs. Its 2003 publication of a Green Paper entitled “Every Child Matters: Change for Children,” created a framework for radical restructuring of children’s services throughout England. Later that year Parliament enacted the Children’s Act, which, among other things, provided for the establishment of a network of Children’s Centers to provide wraparound health and other services for families and children. Initially established in the country’s most deprived local areas, they were later made universal, albeit with far less funding per child. It is still far too early to attribute much of the achievement gains of 11 year olds in Inner London to the Children’s Centers. That is clearly the case for Tower Hamlets. Nonetheless, the large number and high quality of the centers, particularly in Hackney in recent years, appear to have made it easier for primary schools effectively to serve children from disadvantaged families in that borough.

Two other policy initiatives receive attention in discussions about the London Effect but are less directly relevant for our investigation of primary schools because both apply mainly to secondary schools. One is the “London Challenge,” which began officially in 2003 and continued for five years.<sup>13</sup> The goal of this partnership between central government

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<sup>12</sup> The relatively high pupil/teacher ratio for Hackney in 2011 appears to be an anomaly. In the following year, the Hackney ratio is below the national average (19.9 vs. 21).

<sup>13</sup> This discussion draws on several articles about the London challenge (see, for example, Hutchings and Mansaray, 2013) and our October interview in Oxford with Tim Brighouse, the head of the London Challenge. He had previously been director of education services in Birmingham and was brought to London in 2002 to establish and run the London Challenge.

and local authorities, schools and other key local stakeholders was to improve secondary schools within designated geographic areas by changing the culture and raising expectations. Importantly, it imposed no single view of what schools needed to do to improve and, instead, allowed boroughs to pursue their own strategies within a framework of area-wide improvement, high expectations for schools and students accompanied by positive and constructive supports, and individual schools working together to expand good practice across schools. Although the approach was expanded in 2007 (with a name change) to Birmingham and Manchester and also to a few primary schools in the three cities, its main focus for the five years it existed was secondary schools in London. Although some observers (e.g. CfBT Education Trust, 2014) have credited the London Effect in part to this London-specific program, which researchers have deemed effective, it cannot explain the improvement in the primary schools. As will become clear below, however, most of the core values that drove the London Challenge also drove school improvement in Hackney and Tower Hamlets. Significantly, however, the improvement in Tower Hamlets preceded the London Challenge.

The other national policy initiative during the period was the Academies Programme established by Labour in 2002. Academies are schools that are outside the control of local authorities and report only to the national government. Academies were initially intended to serve secondary school students in disadvantaged areas, and by 2010, there were 203 of them (Machin and Vernoir, 2010). The coalition government that succeeded Labour in 2010, however, dramatically expanded the number of academies by inviting all secondary schools to become academies and by providing new facilities funding only to academies. Currently about two-thirds of all secondary schools in the country are academies, and the concept is gradually spreading down to the primary level. Hackney converted several of its failing secondary schools but Tower Hamlets strongly resisted them. In any case, during the time frame we are looking at, academies are not directly relevant to our discussion of primary schools in Hackney

Summary observation: It is likely that most of these essentially “external” forces play some role in the overall London Effect, but closer analysis of what happened in our two boroughs suggests that they are not the whole story, especially for pupil outcomes at the primary level. The starting point for this conclusion is evidence that, as we discuss in the next section, the quality of state-maintained primary schools in Hackney and Tower Hamlets as judged by contemporaneous Ofsted reports improved significantly, with the timing of the improvements roughly coincident with the timing of the gains in student achievement. While external forces such as gentrification and school funding patterns may well have facilitated that improvement, they cannot alone explain its timing. In short, in both boroughs the schools themselves were getting better.

## EVIDENCE THAT SCHOOLS IMPROVED

Defining and measuring school quality is always a challenge (see discussion in Ladd and Loeb, 2013). To demonstrate whether schools have improved over time we need a measure of school quality that is available for a significant number of schools over the relevant period. The measure we use is the school-specific ratings provided by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). Starting in the early to mid-1990s, the government had introduced national tests along with league tables showing results by school. Importantly, however, at that time, it also introduced publicly available school-specific inspection reports as tools for holding increasingly self-managing schools accountable not only for the performance of their students but also for their internal school policies and practices. The inspections take place in all state funded schools, regardless of whether they are community schools (that is fully under the control of the local authority) or schools for which the property is owned by a trust, most commonly a church. All the schools are governed by school governing boards.

Starting in the mid-1990s, teams of professional staff from OFSTED have inspected every English state-funded school on a periodic base—usually about every three-to-four years but with wide variations in the timing. After each inspection, Ofsted publishes a publically available report with commentary on various dimensions of school quality, recommendations for areas needing improvement, and an overall rating of how good the school is. The ratings are one for outstanding, two for good, three for satisfactory and four for inadequate. Although these ratings are based in part on how well the students are doing relative to comparable students elsewhere, the bulk of the inspectors’ comments and ratings focus on a range of other considerations, including the quality of school management and teaching, and the extent to which the school is addressing the needs of its disadvantaged students.<sup>14</sup> This is not the place to evaluate the Ofsted process as a whole, which has antagonized many schools and educators. Its observations can be harsh and punitive and an inadequate rating from Ofsted can lead to special measures or to government takeover. Nonetheless, the Ofsted ratings and the accompanying discussion provide rich data for shedding light on the quality of schools in Hackney and Tower Hamlets and how they have changed over time.

The Ofsted reports to which we have access go back only to 2000 (with a few for 1999). That is generally not a problem for Hackney, given that most of the school improvement occurred after 2000. It is somewhat more problematic for Tower Hamlets, however, because many schools were already well functioning by the early 2000s. As a result we have had to infer a school’s quality prior to 2000 from post-2000 inspection reports that refer to earlier reports. Another limitation of the Ofsted reports is that for the years prior to about 2006 the reports typically do not include summary evaluation numbers (one, two, three, or four) as they do for the more recent years. Nonetheless, we are typically able to classify a school into one of the four categories by the report’s discussion in the section labeled “How good is the school?” For example, if a report uses the word “good” to describe the school, we classify it as a two; if “satisfactory,” we classify it as a three. Although the Ofsted inspections themselves have undoubtedly changed somewhat over time, both in terms of how much time the inspectors spend in a school and how the inspection proceeds (e.g. how far in advance is the visit announced), the rankings are useful for our purposes to the extent that they highlight differences between the two boroughs in the timing of improvements in school quality.

Table 4 provides our findings over time for both boroughs. In the first column, we report the number of school inspections by specified time period. Recall that not all schools are inspected every year or in every sub-period that we have highlighted in the table. In addition, within a single period such as 2007-2010 a school may be inspected more than once.<sup>15</sup> Hence the number of inspections does not correspond precisely to the number of schools inspected. The total number of schools appears in the third column in which we refer to the most recent inspection as of 2010 or 2014, regardless of the year in which it occurred.

The pattern for Hackney indicates that many of the schools were of low quality at the beginning of the period. Of the schools inspected between 2000 and 2002, two thirds (65 percent) were judged to be less than “good,” meaning they had ratings of satisfactory or inadequate. The situation improved somewhat for the 40 inspections during the subsequent 2003-2007 period. Not until after 2006 do more than half of the inspected schools emerge with ratings of two or better. Hence it is not surprising that student performance in Hackney did not start rising relative to the national average until after 2006. The improvement continued between 2011 and 2014, with the percentage of weak

<sup>14</sup> Ofsted inspections currently take no more than two days with the size of the professionally trained inspection team differing with the size and nature of the school. The inspectors make a judgement on overall effectiveness of the school based on judgements about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; personal development, behavior and welfare; and outcomes for pupils. In addition, they evaluate the leadership and management of the school. For a complete description of the process, see [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/458866/School\\_inspection\\_handbook\\_section\\_5\\_from\\_September\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458866/School_inspection_handbook_section_5_from_September_2015.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> We are counting only full inspections. If a school receives a poor grade in one year, it is often monitored for the next year or two. The figures in the table do not include the monitoring inspections.

**Table 4: School quality based on inspection reports in Hackney and Tower Hamlets**

	Inspections (number)	Schools (number)	Rating below good (number) (percent)		Outstanding ratings (number) (percent)	
<b>HACKNEY</b>						
2000-2002	23		15	0.65	2	0.09
2003-2006	40		20	0.50	4	0.10
2007-2010	66		28	0.42	7	0.11
2011-2014	62		15	0.24	15	0.24
2010, most recent		51	16	0.31	7	0.14
2014, most recent		52	4	0.08	14	0.27
<b>TOWER HAMLETS</b>						
2000-2002	40		8	0.20	9	0.23
2003-2006	49		16	0.33	9	0.18
2007-2010	78		23	0.29	17	0.22
2011-2014	79		23	0.29	9	0.11
2010, most recent		63	14	0.22	15	0.24
2014, most recent		65	9	0.14	13	0.20
EARLY TOWER HAMLETS*		60	51	0.85	0	0

\* The entries in this row are based on inferences drawn by the authors from Ofsted reports after 1999 and hence are more subject to interpretation than the figures in the rest of the table.

ratings falling to 24 percent. As of 2010, at about the same time that the primary school pupils in Hackney were achieving at close to the national average on the KS2 tests, about 70 percent of the primary schools were deemed “good” or better, and by the end of 2014, about 92 percent met that standard. We interpret these patterns as being relatively consistent with the observed changes in pupil achievement for Hackney shown in Figure 1b above.

The timing of the improvement in school quality looks very different in Tower Hamlets. There, only 20 percent of the schools inspected between 2000 and 2002 were rated below good, with 23 percent rated as outstanding. Although the number of weak ratings as a share of the total inspections (presumably based on a different set of schools) increased to 33 percent between 2003 and 2006, that percentage is still far below the percentage of weak schools in Hackney during the comparable period. The point is that throughout the period before 2007 reported in the main part of the table, the primary schools in Tower Hamlets were far stronger than those in Hackney. Most compelling is the rapid improvement in school quality in Tower Hamlets between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, which is indicated separately by the information at the bottom of the table. Based on the wording in the reports after 2000,

all of which refer back to prior reports we estimate that well over 50 schools—about 85 percent of all the primary schools—had a rating of three or below during their prior inspections, and that a number of the schools had serious problems. Hence, there appears to have been a dramatic improvement in school quality in Hamlets between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, a pattern that is fully consistent with the rise in student achievement during that early period.

**Summary Observations:** The evidence presented so far confirms that there was indeed a London Effect on achievement as measured by increases in test scores at the primary level in these two Inner London boroughs. In addition, it indicates that while some demographic or other contextual changes may have played some role in the achievement gains, it is also the case—as shown in the numerous Ofsted reports—is that the quality of the primary schools improved significantly over time in both boroughs. We now turn to the question of what policies and practices at the borough and school levels contributed to the better schools and higher student performance.

## LOCAL POLICY EXPLANATIONS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In 2014, the CfBT Education Trust, a charitable organization devoted to global school reform, published an in-depth study of the London Effect. In the words of Steve Munby, its chief executive: “The London story is above all about the power of purposeful leadership at every level of the system. From national politicians to headteachers, leaders were responsible for driving the changes.” (CfBT, 2014 p. 2) We provide evidence in this section that supports this assertion for Hackney and Tower Hamlets. Specifically we show how strong leadership at the borough level, driven by a community-wide shared vision of what was needed to improve education, helps to explain the improvement in schools in both boroughs.

We base our discussion on information gleaned from several sources. We conducted interviews with the key policy makers who were responsible for designing and implementing the initial school reform efforts in each of the two boroughs, as well as with current leaders in both boroughs. We also visited some primary schools and spoke with headteachers and others to learn about past and current practices at the school level. We supplemented this information from local educators with various reports and other documents specifically related to the two boroughs. Particularly noteworthy are Michael Fullan’s 2014 book of school reform in three major cities around the world (Toronto, New York and London) which uses both Hackney and Tower Hamlets to illustrate London’s success, and a comprehensive report by Woods et al, 2013 on the transformation of education in Tower Hamlets. We also had discussions with national practitioners and academics familiar with education policy and practices in London and the country. Finally, we examined in some detail the contemporaneous reports on boroughs and individual schools that Ofsted published during the years relevant to our study. In this manner, we were able to cross validate information from various sources. A list of the people we interviewed is included in the appendix.

## STRONG LEADERSHIP AT THE BOROUGH LEVEL

The development of powerful leadership took different forms in the two boroughs and, consistent with their different patterns of school improvement, occurred at different times. The leadership change occurred in 1997 in Tower Hamlets and in 2002 in Hackney.

## TOWER HAMLETS

The new leadership in Tower Hamlets appeared in the form of Christine Gilbert, who took over the post of Director of Education in September of 1997.<sup>16</sup> Gilbert was a savvy and experienced educator—formerly a successful head teacher and a director of education in an Outer London borough—who later went on to become Chief Inspector of Ofsted. Gilbert set about implementing an ambitious strategic plan for 1998-2002 marked by ambitious goals for pupils and educators alike. “She is unequivocal about the need to raise standards urgently, and has won the enthusiastic assent of Headteachers to a more challenging and ambitious approach,” a 1998 borough-wide Ofsted report declared.

The challenges that Gilbert inherited were daunting. The 1998 Ofsted report, issued shortly after her arrival, was a devastating document that, while expressing support for some of her early moves, characterized attainment levels in the borough as “unacceptably low at all levels.” Significantly, the chief inspector of schools, with Gilbert’s assent, insisted that the report be presented not only to her in her capacity as director of education services but also to the full borough council (Woods et al, 2013, p. 9). The council members, well aware that they were under the gun from Ofsted to show significant improvement in schools, responded with strong support for education. Among other things, the local authority provided support for the district’s school improvement plans, recruited partners in the corporate sector to bring business expertise and volunteers into schools, and funded an attendance project organized through the local Muslim community (Fullan, 2014). Thus education and political leaders began working together to make sure that the education system improved enough by the next Ofsted report in 2000 to avoid being taken over by the government.

The subsequent Ofsted report in 2000 attributed much of the initial improvements in the Tower Hamlets schools to “the high quality of leadership shown by the director and senior officers” and the confidence that they inspired among headteachers and others. The report went on to cite strong leadership throughout the system as a key factor in the borough’s subsequent gains in achievement, attendance and other areas. “Headteachers, Governors and Members all expressed their confidence in the leadership of the Director and senior officers,” it reported, “Key features of LEA leadership now included effective consultation with Headteachers, Governors and other stakeholders, good strategic planning, the development of effective working partnerships with schools, and high expectations for the performance of schools and LEA services” (Woods et al., 2013, p. 9,.) “Christine led from the front, there were no excuses, only challenges to be overcome,” observed one Tower Hamlets official (Woods et al, 2013, p.20).

In 2001, Christine moved from director of education to chief executive of the council. She was replaced as director by Stephen Grix, who had previously been head of post-16 provision at Ofsted and then by Kevan Collins who, like Christine, went on to be chief executive. These subsequent leaders shared her educational philosophy and continued her core policies.

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<sup>16</sup> This and subsequent discussion of Tower Hamlets draws on interviews with Christine Gilbert, Terry Parkin who was a borough inspector during her tenure and is currently interim director of Education in Tower Hamlets, Kevan Collins who later became Director of Children’s Services in Tower Hamlets, and two of the three authors of a detailed 2013 report of the educational transformation in Tower Hamlets (Woods et al, 2013). Their recollections were generally corroborated by material in various contemporaneous Ofsted reports and by the analysis in Fullan (2014).

## HACKNEY

The leadership change took a different form in Hackney.<sup>17</sup> A series of three Ofsted reports between 1997 and 2000 had documented unacceptably low academic standards in the schools as well as pervasive ineptitude on the part of the governing council. “We do not believe that Hackney LEA has the capacity to provide a secure, stable context for continuous educational improvement,” the November September 2000 report concluded. “The time has come for radical change.” The government’s first instinct in 1999 had been to outsource the School Improvement and Ethnic Minority Services component of education to a private firm. However, the council was too dysfunctional to manage that contract, and it was abandoned within three years.

Accordingly, in 2002, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills ordered the LEA to surrender control of all education-related functions to an independent nonprofit-making body, the Learning Trust, for a 10 year period. The first such body formed to run education services for an entire borough, the trust was run by a board whose members included council appointees, educators, parents and other stakeholders. This change had the advantage of insulating educational services from the political process and assuring that Trust leaders could focus their attention on educational matters. The government made it clear that the contract would end in ten years. This commitment was important because it signaled the government’s intent to return the education services to the local council—that is, to the elected local government—once governance and administrative issues had been sorted out. Responsibility for education in Hackney was indeed turned back on schedule in 2012, but authorities retained the name and branding of the Learning Trust, which had gained the trust of the local community.

As in Tower Hamlets, strong leaders were recruited to head the effort. Sir Mike Tomlinson, who had just stepped down as chief inspector at Ofsted, became the first chairman of The Learning Trust. Alan Wood, a former education director at Lambeth, another Inner London borough, was hired by the Hackney Council in 2001 to prepare for the move from the council to The Learning Trust, and when the Trust began work in September 2002 he became its director of Education. He returned to the Hackney Council in 2011 as director of Children’s Services in order to manage the transition back to public governance.

It took time for the new leaders to focus on the primary schools given their first priority had to be at the secondary level with its failing schools. Consistent with the national government’s focus on academies, it shut down failing secondary schools and set up five academies with totally new staffs and facilities. At the primary level, much of the work during the first five years focused responding to Ofsted critiques of specific schools and the goal of getting all children reading by age 7. Leaders could then turn their attention to implementing a comprehensive plan for school improvement throughout the borough.

## SHARED VISION

In both boroughs, the new leaders were driven by essentially the same vision of how to operate a successful urban education system. This vision centered on two beliefs: (1) a commitment to high academic expectations for all children, including those from low-income backgrounds, and (2) the importance of establishing a culture of mutual responsibility and of cooperation throughout the borough.

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<sup>17</sup> This discussion is based primarily on our interview with Alan Woods in June, 2015 and accounts in Fullan, 2014; Boyle and Humphreys, 2012, and The Learning Trust (2012), as well as the 2003 Ofsted report on Hackney. The 2012 internal report by The Learning Trust documents the borough’s progress over time. The Boyle and Humphreys book was published by Leanta Education Associates, a private company, based on extensive interviews with 36 people involved with Hackney education during the life of the Trust. The subsequent Fullan (2014) discussion of Hackney draws heavily on the Boyle and Humphreys study.



## HIGH ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL CHILDREN

Statistical correlations between socio-economic status and academic achievement are well known. In every developed country, including those with top-rated schools systems, children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve at lower levels on average than their more privileged peers. Such correlations are then frequently used to justify lower academic expectations for children from low-income backgrounds. Leaders in both Tower Hamlets and Hackney flatly rejected this attitude and set out to systematically raise expectations for all children. Poor children may bring special challenges with them when they come to school, they maintained, but schools have it within their power to help them meet these challenges. “That was the mantra——poverty is no excuse,” recalled Terry Parkin, a former local school Inspector and now interim director of education in Tower Hamlets. “Christine created a culture and climate where failure was not an option.”

“We know that all children can learn,” said Michelle Thomas, executive head of a federation of schools in Hackney. “We just have to figure out how to open the box differently with different children.”

Alan Wood and his colleagues at the Learning Trust in Hackney sent similar signals, and in both boroughs this message was internalized at the school level. “We know that all children can learn,” said Michelle Thomas, executive head of a federation of schools in Hackney. “We just have to figure out how to open the box differently with different children.” Significantly, in both boroughs high expectations for all children were established within a broader culture of high expectations for all adults in the system, not only for headteachers and teachers within schools but also for administrators at the borough level.

## CULTURE OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND COOPERATION

The second element of the shared vision——a sense of collective responsibility for all children in the local area——also permeated the culture in both boroughs. Leaders sent signals that education is a borough-wide system of inter-connected parts, not a collection of free-standing schools, and that everyone in the system——top administrators, headteachers, teachers and staff alike——had a stake in the success of every child.

Significantly, leaders in both boroughs often described their shared vision in terms of a “moral purpose.” The tasks of raising expectations for all children; improving their academic, social, and emotional lives; and narrowing chronic achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and more privileged peers were elevated to the level of a moral crusade. As Alan Wood of the Learning Trust put it in an interview, “We are acting from a moral imperative.” Likewise, the establishment of a culture of collaboration and mutual responsibility for the flourishing of every child in the borough was viewed as an ethical imperative. “Schools in Hackney are like a family,” said Nicole Reid, head teacher at Shacklewell Primary School. “We share a common purpose——a moral purpose.”

## IMPLEMENTING THE SHARED VISION: LEADERSHIP AND COMMITMENT AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Individual schools have significant autonomy within the current English school system. Each school has a governing board composed of parents, staff, community members, and representatives of the local authority that is responsible for setting strategic goals, holding the headteacher to account, and assuring that the school spends money productively. At the same time, the schools are constrained in various ways by higher level authorities. All state funded schools are subject to periodic Ofsted inspections and to national testing and, unless they are academies, are part of the system of schools for which the borough has responsibility.

As a former headteacher, Christine Gilbert clearly understood the importance of making sure that headteachers shared her vision of education for Tower Hamlets and were prepared to do the hard work necessary to realize it. “The key barrier was raising headteachers’ aspirations,” she told us. “Once you get the headteachers thinking, they will find a way.” She added that early in her tenure she spent six months “talking to everyone” about her goals because, as she put it, “expectations had to be owned by the community.” Gilbert also made it clear that any headteachers who were unwilling or unable to step up to the task should look for another job. In the process, a significant number of headteachers were essentially fired (Parkin interview). She translated borough-wide achievement targets set by the national government into school-level targets and used them to put pressure on the schools to perform. The goal was not to punish those that fell short but rather to work with them to do better. In the end, she noted in our conversation, she set local targets higher than the national ones.

One arrow in Gilbert’s administrative quiver was the Labour government’s National Literacy Strategy, which was rolled out nationally starting in 1998 but which had been piloted earlier by the previous government in Tower Hamlets as part of the National Literacy Project. Gilbert used the resulting additional support staff that came as part of the pilot project to demonstrate the power of a structured approach to teaching literacy and convince local educators that all children can learn. Martin Tune, headteacher at Bonner Primary School in Tower Hamlets since 1995, confirmed in an interview the significance of the new attention to literacy. “We looked at the pilot literacy materials and said that for the next year we would focus on aspects of literacy, including reading. We targeted a few children and found the way to make a difference. So we raised expectations for more students. We went from 19 to 52 percent of pupils at grade level, and the next year we were above the national average. We had to work differently because we were working in different circumstances. We learned to look at every child individually, to look at what they could do, not what they can’t do.”<sup>18</sup>

Although Hackney was slower to achieve the goal of the shared vision, as is evident from the summary of the Ofsted school evaluations reported in Table 4 above, its leaders understood the importance of strong leadership within schools. A review of the inspection reports of the Hackney primary schools that improved during the period shows that the Ofsted inspectors frequently cited strong leadership as the key driver of progress. In the box that follows, we highlight some illustrative examples of Ofsted praise for headteachers who promoted a common purpose within their schools, set high expectations for pupil performance, and established systems to ensure that these expectations were met.

Schools in both boroughs place a large emphasis on providing professional support for teachers, typically including giving teachers a half a day of planning time each week. Teaching and learning coaches often spend time supporting teachers, and new teachers frequently observe classes taught by experienced colleagues.

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<sup>18</sup> School performance data for the Bonner School for the year 1996 confirms his recollection. For that year, 52 percent of the students achieved grade level standards in English, at a time when only 43 percent reached that standard in math. By 1999, 80 percent of the Bonner students achieved grade level standards in English. See Beard 2000 for background on the National Literacy Project and National Literacy Strategy.

## HOW STRONG LEADERSHIP DROVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN HACKNEY

Excerpts from Ofsted school reports in Hackney illustrate the importance of strong leadership in driving school improvement and achieving higher ratings. In each case, the quotes come from reports in the more recent of the two years mentioned.

**William Patten Primary School** (Rating of 3 in 2004 to 2 in 2008) “The school has moved forward under the strong leadership of the headteacher and the senior staff, and it is in a good position to improve further. Along with her senior leadership team, she has instilled a common purpose amongst all the staff to raise standards.”

(Rating of 2 in 2008 to 1 in 2012) “The senior leadership team and governors have a clear vision and relentless drive to improve standards through systems for checking and assessing the daily practice within the school.”

**Thomas Abney School** (Rating of 3 in 2001 to 2 in 2007) “The headteacher leads the school with exemplary drive, commitment and enthusiasm. She has built an informed and effective leadership team whose work has a strong impact on pupils’ progress and personal development. For instance, senior leaders’ rigorous checks on the quality of teaching followed by support where needed have raised learning to a consistently good level and helped reduce the disadvantage of the high staff turnover.”

**Nightingale Primary School** (Rating of 3 in 2007 to 2 in 2010). “The headteacher’s good leadership has been a key factor in the success of the school. She has promoted a strong sense of common purpose, so all are clear about the school’s key priorities.”

**London Fields Primary School** (Rating of 4 in 2007 to 2 in 2008) “Since September 2008, the school has been operating in close partnership with a highly successful primary school. Many leaders and experienced teachers, including the new executive principal, head of school, deputy and assistant head, have transferred to the school and brought with them effective systems based on best practice.”

(Rating of 2 in 2008 to 1 in 2011) “The senior leadership team and other leaders and managers have inspired the school community to create a common sense of drive and purpose....The governing body has played a key role in articulating this vision; it has shown itself prepared to take tough decisions and is totally clear about the outcomes it wants for pupils.”

**Grazebrook Primary School** (Rating of 4 in 2008 to 2 in 2009) “The new headteacher provides a very clear direction.... (She) has used the challenge and support provided by the local authority to help create a leadership team which demonstrates significant influence and has a positive impact in all areas of school life.... All senior and many middle leaders now play a crucial part in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in classroom.... Leaders provide relevant feedback to staff and ensure that teachers get the support and training they need to act upon this feedback.”

## IMPLEMENTING THE SHARED VISION: SYSTEMS AND STRATEGIES

With strong leadership in place, the next priority in both boroughs was to develop and implement *systems* designed to assure implementation of the various components of the collective vision. Leaders in both boroughs understood that, in the absence of effective strategies to improve teaching and learning, any talk of pursuing a “moral purpose” was empty rhetoric. In particular they understand that disadvantaged pupils need help in overcoming their particular challenges. As one headteacher, Nicole Reid, said, “Our vision was that all children can learn, so we set up a system with all elements working together to make this happen.”

Thus borough leaders set out to create an environment whereby large numbers of competent school leaders—armed with the right resources, direction, support and encouragement—could operate high quality schools with high performing pupils. We highlight four key strategies.

### 1. USE OF DATA TO MONITOR INDIVIDUAL PUPIL PERFORMANCE

Schools in both boroughs are intentional about using data to guide the learning process. Teachers keep detailed records of the extent to which individual pupils have mastered particular learning tasks and then use these data to inform subsequent instruction. Teachers also typically meet in small groups to monitor academic progress and to discuss strategies to help individual pupils. The emphasis is on “diagnostic” or “formative” assessments that provide information that then feeds back into instruction.

Gillian Kemp, head teacher at Cyril Jackson Primary School in Tower Hamlets, explained that her teachers enter test results and other pupil performance data into a computer program that generates a detailed report documenting each pupil’s progress and whether it is “emerging,” “developing,” or “secure.” Teachers then meet regularly to discuss these data and devise interventions. At the end of each term the computer issues a comprehensive academic review that compares pupil performance both over time and in relation to national averages and spells out learning strategies and priorities for the next term. Another important tool for teachers at Cyril Jackson is the book that each child keeps showing his or her work. “By the time we meet to formally monitor a child’s progress, we have usually dealt with issues,” she said. “There are no surprises.” We found similar procedures and use of data in the Hackney schools.

While these practices have undoubtedly been developed and refined over time, the focus on monitoring student progress was evident in Tower Hamlets even in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In our review of the earliest available Ofsted reports for each of the primary schools in Tower Hamlets, we frequently found that “more rigorous monitoring of pupil performance” was one of the factors identified as contributing to the improvement of individual schools.

### 2. EARLY INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS LEARNING DEFICIENCIES

Once learning deficiencies are identified, schools in both boroughs organize “booster groups” and other forms of small group tutoring targeted toward specific learning needs that teachers had identified. Such interventions can take place before, during, and after school, and teachers will sometime look for moments during the school day to pull a student aside and work on a particular learning issue that has just arisen. Some interventions can be quite creative. Grazebrook Primary School organizes weekly speech therapy sessions for children about to enter the school. At London Fields Primary School in Hackney 4 year olds scheduled to enter kindergarten in the fall are put into the nursery for several weeks the previous spring in order to help them feel comfortable. At Cyril Jackson lunch

room workers are paid to come in a half hour early each day to supplement teachers in providing one-on-one math tutoring to pupils. “We don’t give up,” commented Gillian Kemp. “We push, push, push.”

With the introduction of the pupil premium for disadvantaged students in 2011, the schools are now required to report on their websites on how they spend the funds. A July 2014 Ofsted report on the national program found that many schools used the additional funds to “pay for additional staff, including teachers and teaching assistants, who deliver one-to-one support instruction, typically focused on English and mathematics.” Other uses include support for booster classes, “raising aspiration” programs and reductions of class sizes as well as assuring that eligible pupils can participate fully in after-school clubs and activities and educational visits. (Ofsted July 2014 report on per pupil funding).

### 3. STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

Primary schools in Tower Hamlets and Hackney are intentional about building strong relationships with the families they serve. Once a school receives the list of pupils who will be attending in the coming year, teachers and other staff members normally visit each of their homes. “We send the family a letter and set up an appointment,” explained Caroline Tyson, head teacher at London Fields Primary School in Hackney. “These visits provide early identification of special needs that we may have to address once school starts. They are a way to begin building strong bonds with the family.” Some primary schools have “parent advocates” or “family liaison teams” or a “home school worker” charged with building bridges between families and the school. They also identify health, employment, housing or other non-educational needs and, if appropriate, provide referrals to appropriate social services to address them.

Schools in both boroughs routinely offer workshops for parents on topics ranging from parenting skills to English as an additional language. Cyril Jackson provides parents with “teaching cards” on topics such as “Healthy Lifestyles” and “Sleeping for Success.” When parents drop a child off at the school each morning they often spend ten minutes in the classroom with the child in some cases watching the teacher model effective teaching.

Such bonds are particularly important in a borough such as Tower Hamlets, where a high proportion of families are immigrants and parents are unfamiliar with the culture of schooling. Several schools worked with local mosques to help convince parents not to take their children on visits to their home countries during the school year. At Cyril Jackson parents are called in to discuss the situation of every child whose attendance record falls below 95 percent.

### 4. ADDRESSING SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND OTHER NEEDS

Primary schools in Tower Hamlets and Hackney benefit from the fact that England has a universal national health system that addresses many of the problems, such as impaired hearing or sight, that are likely to interfere with learning. Another important resource is the network of Children’s Centres, established under the 2003 Children’s Act in disadvantaged areas. These centres provide wrap-around services ranging from out-of-school programs, parent education, and mental health services to help for the homeless and youths involved in the justice system.

There are 22 Children’s Centres in Hackney. Anne Canning, head of the Learning Trust and director of education for the borough, says that they reflect “our strong belief in early intervention” to address children’s social, emotional, and other needs. They serve schools, she said, both by helping pupils to arrive at primary school socialized to learn and by “helping us to identify vulnerable families.”

There is a room where parents can spend all day if they wish—in cold weather some do—and they can leave their young children in the crèche while taking English as an Additional Language classes. Amin said that staff members look for ways to model how best to interact with their children. “We don’t want to overwhelm them,” said Amin, “but we seek to give them a few messages, such as how they can help their child with writing.”

One of the Hackney centres is the Anne Tayler Children’s Centre, which occupies a large facility near Lincoln Fields Primary School and serves 110 children, some as young as two years old, on a full- or half-day basis. Parents pay fees on a sliding scale, but all 2 year olds throughout the country are now entitled to 15 hours a week of free child care. Kaushika Amin, the manager, explained that “the curriculum is planned each week for each child,” and each child has a book, amply illustrated with photographs, documenting their academic progress. Serving parents is a major priority. There is a room where parents can spend all day if they wish—in cold weather some do—and they can leave their young children in the crèche while taking English as an Additional Language classes. Amin said that staff members look for ways to model how best to interact with their children. “We don’t want to overwhelm them,” said Amin, “but we seek to give them a few messages, such as how they can help

their child with writing.” The Centre is host to pre-natal and other health services, some financed by the local education authority (LEA). “We encourage access to these services,” said Amin. “Parents don’t have to run around to 15 places. They can walk across the hall.”

In summary, both Tower Hamlets and Hackney have installed systems that support high academic expectations—not only for low-income pupils but for the adults charged with helping them succeed. Schools are expected to find ways to help poor children to deal with the special challenges that they face when they come to school—thus making a reality of the convictions that all children can learn and that poverty is not an excuse for low performance.

## IMPLEMENTING THE SHARED VISION: A CULTURE OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most striking enablers of the primary school turnarounds in Tower Hamlets and Hackney—especially to the eyes of U.S. observers—is the way in which schools collaborate with each other in a spirit of shared professional responsibility. Education is viewed as a borough-wide enterprise in which all schools have a stake in the success of every school and the long-term fortunes of one school are inextricably linked to the success other schools in the area. “There is a sense that we are all in it together,” said Martin Tune. As we have previously noted, Christine Gilbert clearly understood that the vision had to be shared by the community.

The practical consequences of this area- or borough-wide approach are considerable, starting with the ways in which headteachers from successful schools are frequently persuaded by borough authorities to work with less successful ones. Likewise, strong teachers work full- or part time in struggling schools. “We know where good practice is going on,” commented Martin Tune. Numerous formal and informal structures have been created whereby teachers and administrators with similar responsibilities—from subject heads to facilities managers—meet regularly to share information on common concerns.

In Hackney, cooperation sometimes takes the form of formal “federations.” These are governing arrangements in which two or more schools operate under a single governing body with an executive headteacher who supervises the headteachers in other member schools. In addition, schools sometimes form less formal “partnerships.” Federations, which typically link failing schools with strong ones, are seen as a way to enhance overall capacity through the sharing of leadership and resources. For example, the first federation came about after the headteacher of Holy Trinity Primary school resigned in the wake of a negative Ofsted report, and Sian Davies, the head of the successful St. John & St. James Primary school, was recruited to serve as “executive head” of both schools. Davies instituted a recovery plan that involved, among other things, using teachers at St. John & St. James to model effective instruction and promoting two of her outstanding teachers to become “heads of school,” one at each school (Fullan, 2014). One incentive for the federations in Hackney was the difficulty in some cases of attracting qualified head teachers.

Membership in federations and partnerships is fluid, with schools often moving in and out of such arrangements. At the present time there are currently eight federations in Hackney involving two dozen schools. Nicole Reid, head teacher at Shacklewell Primary School is executive director of a 3 year old federation that also includes Grazebrook and Woodberry Down Primary Schools. Leaders of the three schools collaborate on professional development and other instructional issues, and they pool resources to share specialists, such as art and music teachers and counselors, that they would otherwise not be able to afford. “We think of ourselves as teachers in a federation, not in an individual school,” commented Michelle Thomas, the headteacher at Grazebrook.

By contrast, schools in Tower Hamlets have for the most part resisted banding together into formal federations or partnerships. Given the web of informal relationships that are part of the educational climate in the borough, and an adequate supply of good head teachers, they were viewed as unnecessary. “We all share ideas and go to meetings,” said Gillian Kemp of Cyril Jackson. “We can always find someone on the phone to help.”

In both boroughs this culture of cooperation is driven in part by the attitude that educational success at the borough level is defined not simply by the achievements of some high-flying schools but by collective success. “Our view is that we are only as good as our weakest school,” commented Terry Parkin.

Educators in the two boroughs say that this “we’re all in it together” attitude has the effect of reducing destructive competition between schools. “There is a healthy spirit of competition in the sense that we want to be as good as the next school,” observed Martin Tune. The fact that there are plenty of examples of schools doing well while serving large numbers of disadvantaged pupils also serves as a prod to improvement. “It makes it harder for schools to be weak,” said Christine Gilbert. It also leads to a largely non-punitive climate.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The evidence shows that the primary schools in both Hackney and Tower Hamlets improved significantly over time, and that all children benefitted, including those from low-income families. Evidence also shows that the key to the London Effect at the primary level as it developed in these two boroughs—and most likely in other Inner London boroughs as well—was the fact that schools got better. To be sure, other factors facilitated the task of school improvement in both areas, such as the declining share of disadvantaged families, the presence of motivated immigrant families, a national funding policy that provided for disproportionately high funding for disadvantaged students and a national inspection-based school accountability system. Nonetheless, policy decisions and actions at the local level also played decisive roles.

We draw the following conclusions from our investigation.

First, contrary to much popular wisdom and the experience of numerous developed countries, it is possible for a country to provide high quality schooling that leads to **high levels of average achievement across densely populated urban areas with large concentrations of disadvantaged students**. As of 2011, 11 year old pupils in both Hackney and Tower Hamlets were achieving above the national average, and most schools in both boroughs were rated by Ofsted as good or better. Thus the so-called London Effect was real.

Second, a key to the educational success of each area was **strong educational leadership** at the local area-wide level, which in London means boroughs. Significantly, in each area the rise in student achievement coincided with changes in borough-wide education leadership that had the active or tacit support of the local council. In the case of Tower Hamlets, the educational leaders worked effectively with local political leaders. In Hackney, the educational leaders were isolated from the vagaries of the political process for a limited period of time in order to focus on their educational mission. Importantly, though, everyone in Hackney understood that responsibility for education would, after ten years, be returned to the local council.

Third, educational improvement in both boroughs was driven by a compelling shared vision that became the basis for significant changes in the culture surrounding the delivery of educational services. This shared vision was built on the twin pillars of high expectations for all children and a sense of collective responsibility for all children in the respective boroughs. The assertion that *all* children can achieve academic success when given appropriate support was important because it countered the notion that poverty was an acceptable excuse for low academic expectations. That assertion was particularly clear in Tower Hamlets, where educators previously had viewed their primary responsibility as providing children with a safe and secure environment, not promoting high achievement by all pupils. The commitment to collective responsibility for all children in the area made it possible for leaders to get all stakeholders working together and to make the most efficient and effective use of borough resources, human and otherwise.

Fourth, both boroughs understood that fulfilling their two-pronged shared vision requires a systemic approach in which all elements involved in the delivery of education work together toward common goals. The education system is seen not as a collection of independent schools competing with each other but rather as a coherent whole. Operationally, such an approach implies borough-wide coordination of curriculum, professional development, assessment, and other key elements as well as cooperative deployment of teachers and other personnel. Under such a systemic approach, success is defined not by the performance of a few high-flying schools but by how well all schools are doing, especially those with the most disadvantaged pupils. Healthy competition among schools is encouraged not in the spirit of a zero-sum game but as a spur to improvement.

Fifth, importantly the boroughs were able to realize the vision in part because they had **sufficient resources** from the national government, which understood that more resources are needed to address the many challenges that low-income children bring to school. Attending to the challenges that low income children bring to the classroom clearly requires substantial dedicated resources. The experience of the two boroughs illustrates, however, that money alone is not sufficient to assure educational success. Strong leadership and a systematic approach in pursuit of a clear vision are also required. In other words, the money must be well spent.



A final and more general point is that the collaborative area-wide reform of schools of the type we have described will be difficult to maintain in the context of national policies that are increasingly based on other values. Indeed it appears that the conditions that were present during the period of our investigation of London primary schools are now being undermined by the current government's national policy focus on academies. Recall that academies are schools run by non-governmental entities that are accountable to the central government, not to the local authorities.

Officials in Tower Hamlets strongly resisted allowing academies because they were seen as a threat to the collective goal of all schools working together for common ends. Even that borough, however, now has two academies, one at the secondary level and one at the primary level, and will most likely have a few more in the future. Hackney, in contrast, was not able to resist the pressure to allow academies at the secondary level. Early on, The Learning Trust concluded that the borough's secondary schools were so ineffective that several had to be shut down. Given the national government's capital funding policy at that time, the only way to obtain funding for replacement secondary schools was to allow new ones to be established as academies. In allowing five new academies, however, the Learning Trust tried to protect collective interests by requiring academy sponsors to demonstrate existing ties to Hackney, commit to serving the full range of students, and agree not to select students. Churches and other faith groups were also barred from becoming sponsors.

With two thirds of all secondary schools throughout the country now in the form of academies, and with a growing number at the elementary level, the role of the local authority in supporting schools for its local area is being undermined. Indeed, the policies of the current government appear specifically designed to weaken the power of the education function of local authorities. Hence, going forward, it will be increasingly difficult for local educational and political leaders to come together in pursuit of a common shared vision for all schools in the borough.

## RELEVANCE OF THE LONDON EFFECT TO SCHOOL REFORM IN THE U.S.

Despite significant differences between the education systems of England and the U.S., the experiences of Hackney and Tower Hamlets described in this paper offer some potentially powerful lessons for education policymakers in the U.S. and other developed countries. In drawing such lessons, it is important to keep in mind that the two London boroughs benefitted from a generous national school funding policy that directed additional funds to boroughs serving large proportions of disadvantaged students and that gave local policymakers the means to implement their preferred programs and practices. Access to resources undoubtedly facilitated the improvement of schools in these two boroughs. At the same time, money in and of itself was not sufficient to bring about the changes that led to the "London Effect." Resources had to be used wisely toward the boroughs' goals.

## KEY FEATURES OF EDUCATION POLICY IN THE LONDON BOROUGHS

We first highlight three features of the Hackney and Tower Hamlets experiences that were key to their success and are relevant for U.S. policy debates. The first is their reliance on area-wide school reform strategies. The second, consistent with the first, is the role of external accountability applied not only to schools but also to the boroughs. The third is the backing up of high academic expectations with policies and practices at both the borough and school levels that support all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in meeting the educational

challenges they face. In the final section, we draw lessons for U.S. policy makers in the context of current policy discussions and debates.

## AREA-WIDE SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGIES

The most striking feature of the way in which both Hackney and Tower Hamlets improved student outcomes is that the strategies they used were area-wide. As we have shown, leaders in both boroughs focused attention not simply on the performance of a few specific schools but rather on the ability of the borough as a whole to serve all children in the area. To be sure, the Learning Trust in Hackney determined—mainly for reasons having to do with the national government’s capital funding policy—that the only way to promote a borough-wide strategy at the high school level was to permit some new academies, which are equivalent to charter schools in the U.S. But the overall objective of the leaders in both boroughs was to encourage schools to work together toward the common goal of meeting the needs of all the borough’s children.

This area-wide strategy worked well because strong schools were able to help weaker schools, headteachers could collaborate across schools, and the system as a whole benefited from a healthy competition directed toward making all schools better. Moreover, borough leaders were able to deploy resources flexibly and efficiently to minimize any systemic inequities across schools, to provide services such as professional development that were best provided at the borough level, and to maximize chances that all children in the area had access to quality schools. A key element in the success of these area-wide strategies was strong leadership at the borough level that promoted a shared vision among the borough’s educators and, importantly, within the local community as well.

## AN EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM FOR BOROUGHS AS WELL AS FOR SCHOOLS

At both the borough and the school levels Tower Hamlets and Hackney were subject to external accountability that directed attention not only to student outcomes but also to leadership and managerial capacity and to internal policies and practices. The attention to processes as well as outcomes in individual schools provided useful and actionable information not only to the schools themselves but also to borough officials. These officials could use the information in the Ofsted school reports, along with their own detailed data on student performance, to identify problems at the school level that needed attention. Such information enabled them to set up appropriate support or intervention mechanisms.

Ofsted’s borough-wide performance reviews (a practice that ended in 2008) also played a major role in both boroughs. That was most evident in Tower Hamlets, where the devastating 1998 Ofsted report spurred both the Council and the education leaders to work hard together to improve their schools out of fear of being taken over by the national government. In Hackney, the external pressure initially had little initial positive impact because of the borough’s dysfunctional council. That failure subsequently led to stronger measures in the form of the establishment of The Learning Trust and the development of internal capacity that enabled the area to improve its schools.

## ATTENTION TO SUPPORT FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO BACK UP HIGH EXPECTATIONS

As described above, the shared vision of Hackney and Tower Hamlets was built on the convictions that all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can learn and that, by implication, poverty is not an excuse for low achievement. Christine Gilbert and other leaders in Tower Hamlets and The Learning Trust in Hackney adopted this belief as their mantra and then directed significant resources to helping poor children deal with the special challenges they bring to school. The use of detailed and sophisticated data allowed schools and teachers to diagnose the learning needs of each child and to address them promptly. Schools supported school breakfast and health programs, set up booster groups and worked closely with families. They facilitated after-school and other enrichment programs designed to provide disadvantaged pupils with the kind of social capital that their more privileged peers take for granted.

## LESSONS FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS

The 2015 revision of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act marks a significant change in U.S. education policy. After 13 years of significant federal involvement in the performance of individual schools, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) returns significant authority over school reform to the states. Thus, the states are now in a position to develop new or modified ways to improve their schools and to raise student outcomes. In this new environment, states would do well to pay attention to three lessons that emerge from the London experience:

### LESSON 1. THE POWER OF DISTRICT-WIDE REFORMS.

The area-wide approach contrasts sharply with much of the recent school turnaround activity in the United States. For example, in recent years, the federal government put significant pressure on states to identify and turn around the lowest-performing five percent of their schools. Any state receiving school turnaround funds from Washington was required to use one of four specific strategies to improve the identified schools.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach is clearly not area-wide in the sense we found in London. Instead, it applied only to a few schools in any specific district; its spillovers to other district schools—whether positive or negative—were ignored in federal policy; and it was not designed to be grounded in local community support. Moreover, simply turning a school around need not assure its continued success.

The concept of area-wide reform strategies is now gaining traction in the U.S. Some states and districts have begun implementing turnaround strategies that move in the directions that we observed in London. Such strategies include achievement or recovery districts, innovation zones, and receiverships. These strategies differ both in the extent to which they are area-wide and the degree to which they promote and sustain local community support. While each of these may have some potential in some contexts, none has the benefit of a coherent vision that is shared by all relevant stakeholders within the local area and that is powerful enough both to drive the initial turnaround and to generate the community support needed to sustain it over time.

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<sup>19</sup> Under the Race to the Top Program for example, the four strategies consisted of a *transformation model* that required the school principal to be replaced, a *turnaround model* that required the replacement of both the principal and 50% of the teachers, a *restart model* in which the school would be converted to charter status or closed and reopened under new management, and *school closure*, which means the school would be closed and students enrolled in district schools that were higher achieving.

In the side box (See box at end) we describe a number of the strategies being used to improve low-performing schools, listed in order of the extent to which they employ an area-wide orientation. At the top is the federally promoted school-specific approach; at the bottom is a district-based approach. The bottom two strategies are closest to the area-wide approaches used successfully in the London boroughs.

The lesson that we take from the London experience is that, as they move forward in the new educational climate, states would do well to think in terms of area-wide strategies. They would be well advised to recognize that individual schools are embedded in districts and that well-funded districts with strong leaders have an important role to play in assuring that all of their children have access to high quality schools.

## LESSON 2. THE BENEFITS OF BROADER ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

The test based system for holding schools accountable in the United States differs significantly from England's use of an inspection-based accountability system. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in place from 2002 to

### CURRENT APPROACHES TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE U.S.

#### 1. School-specific turnaround strategies

**Characteristics:** Focus on individual schools identified as low-performing.

**Example:** Federal strategy promoted by Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants to states and implemented by the states.

**Comment:** Not area-wide, although the specific models could, in principle, be incorporated into district-wide strategies.

#### 2. State-operated achievement districts

**Definition:** Established by states and composed entirely of low-performing schools under the control of the state. A state can either operate the schools itself or transfer operating authority to charter schools.

**Examples:** Recovery School District in Louisiana (which now oversees charter schools educating 70 percent of students in New Orleans); Achievement District in Tennessee that oversees 29 schools; Education Achievement Authority in Michigan that is in charge of 15 schools in Detroit.

**Comment:** Such districts typically cut across geographically defined districts and sever the managerial ties between schools and the local district in which they are located. That makes it difficult for local school district leaders to implement area-wide strategic plans.

#### 3. Innovation Zones (I-Zones)

**Definition:** Created by districts as an analogue to a state-run Achievement District. Each school has budgetary and hiring autonomy and may ultimately be converted to a charter school.

**Example:** Metro Nashville Public Schools I-zone with 10 schools; Springfield, MA empowerment zone (collaboration of state and local officials and teachers); Shelby County, TN. I-Zone with 16 schools.

**Comment:** Can be consistent with an area-wide strategy to the extent that it serves as an explicit component of a district strategy based on clear goals and shared values. Special treatment of those schools, however, may interfere with the collective responsibility of all schools for all children in the district.

#### **4.School autonomy within a district**

**Definition:** Charter-like autonomy and flexibility given to all schools in the district regardless of whether they are charter schools or traditional public schools.

**Examples:** No clear examples at this point.

**Comment:** Extent to which this is an area-wide strategy depends on the power of the district leaders to control the location and enrollment policies of the schools and on the capacity of the district to support struggling schools.

#### **5.State takeover of a district with the district put into receivership**

**Definition:** State replaces locally elected school board and the superintendent and appoints a receiver who is given full authority to run the school district. Authority typically includes authorizing charter schools, firing principals and replacing teachers.

**Example:** Lawrence, Massachusetts.

**Comment:** Success depends largely on the capacity of the receiver both to run the school system and to achieve buy-in from the local community. Somewhat comparable to the situation in Hackney, albeit with the potential for a greater reliance on non-traditional public schools. A major difference is that authority in Hackney was transferred for a finite period of time to a non-profit organization governed by a board rather than to a single receiver.

#### **6.District-wide turnaround**

**Definition:** District with multiple low-performing schools takes responsibility for ensuring high quality schools throughout the district.

**Example:** Union City, New Jersey

**Comment:** Most comparable to the area-wide approach in Tower Hamlets. As in that case, it depends on strong leadership, appropriate external pressure, sufficient resources and a clear vision.

Note on sources. See Education Commission of the States (2015) for description of Achievement Districts and I-Zones ; David Kirp (2013) for discussion of Union City, NJ; and Lawrence Public Schools (2015) for description of Lawrence, MA.

2015, the federal government held individual schools accountable primarily for student outcomes as measured by test scores in math and reading. The new law gives states far more authority to develop their own approaches to accountability, albeit still with significant attention to student test scores.

London's experience suggests that it would behoove states to use their additional flexibility under ESSA to explore new forms of accountability. For schools, that would mean going beyond the use of student test scores (still required under federal law) or other easily measured outcomes to incorporate input from trained professional inspectors. Such inspectors would visit schools on a periodic basis and then publicly report on the quality of their internal policies and practices that contribute not only to student achievement but also to the quality of the child's experience in school. A broader accountability system of this type would explicitly recognize that high quality schools are essential for the success of all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In addition, the London experience suggests that states should consider expanding their accountability programs to cover the performance of whole school districts. Several states have already moved in this direction, with Massachusetts currently having the most developed system. For the past five years, Massachusetts has rated not only schools but districts. The state reviews at least 40 districts per year (75 percent of which have students who are low-performing relative to comparable students and some of which are high-performing). Based on reports from teams of trained professionals, the state classifies districts into categories. For districts with low ratings, the state then provides support or intervenes, as appropriate, with the most serious intervention being state takeover (Klein, 2016). In addition, the state also writes reports on best district practices drawn from its reviews of individual districts. Thus, this district review process of pressure and support facilitates the sharing of successful strategies across districts.

The lesson is that if districts are to play a key role in efforts to improve schools and to sustain those improvements over time, states will need to monitor the performance of districts to identify those that need support and assistance in carrying out their responsibilities to serve all children within their boundaries well. Such attention from the state level is particularly important given that not all districts will have the capacity, resources, or political will, to be successful on their own.

### LESSON 3. THE NEED FOR SUPPORT WITHIN SCHOOL SYSTEMS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

The major U.S. federal education initiatives of the last 15 years—No Child Left Behind under George W. Bush and Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants under Barack Obama—made strong declarations about the importance of high expectations for all children. In promoting his legislation, former President Bush famously decried the “soft tyranny of low expectations” for disadvantaged children, but his administration paid little or no attention to the supports needed to meet those expectations (Ladd, 2012). While the federal government has recently allocated substantial amounts of new funding for school turnaround efforts through Race to the Top and School Improvement grants, it is not clear the extent to which state and district officials used these funds to address the external circumstances of disadvantaged families and, thereby, to give them the support necessary to meet the high expectations.

U.S. policymakers are now increasingly recognizing the importance of addressing the educational barriers that many children from disadvantaged children face, and they have made progress in some areas. That shows up in greater support for early childhood programs, the expansion of health care coverage, and the provision of nutrition supports and wraparound social services in some communities. Nonetheless large numbers of disadvantaged children do not receive the individualized attention they need to succeed, and many schools are not equipped to help address the emotional and other problems such children bring to the classroom.

If they work together, states, school districts, and individual schools can make sure that schools have the capacity they need to help disadvantaged students be successful. Doing so may well require that state school aid be disproportionately directed to districts with high proportions of needy students and that districts provide more support to schools serving such students. Importantly, districts will need to make sure that local schools have the analytical capacity to identify and monitor the progress of individual students. And the districts will need to work with other local agencies to make sure that individual schools have either the internal capacity to meet the needs of their students or the ability to access the local social services needed by the children and their families.

The lesson from the London experience is that, for districts and schools to be successful, they will need to work hard to offset the particular challenges that disadvantaged children bring to the classroom. Although districts and schools obviously lack the capability to eliminate poverty in general, they do have the ability to mitigate many of the ways in which poverty has a negative impact on student learning.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

Some of the English educators with whom we spoke suggested that there was nothing particularly new or innovative about the strategies they were pursuing. They were simply implementing fundamental time-honored principles of effective education by establishing an overall vision and working closely with strong headteachers and other leaders to implement it. That meant training and supporting good teachers, arming them with coherent curricula, holding them accountable while treating them as responsible professionals, using resources productively, and making sure that all pupils get the support they need to succeed.

This paper began with the observation that London is one of the relatively few urban areas in any developed country to have found a way to generate educational excellence while serving large concentrations of low-income pupils. The “London Effect” was real. To American eyes, the educational successes in Tower Hamlets and Hackney are particularly noteworthy for the overall approach that they took. Rather than trying to improve schools through governance, structural, or other changes that have little direct impact on what happens in classrooms, they focused their attention on time-honored fundamentals of good education.

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## INTERVIEWS

All of these interviews were conducted in October 2015 unless noted

Kaushika Amin—Interim Head, Ann Tyler Children's Centre

Tim Brighouse—Former Schools Commissioner for London

Chris Brown—Senior Lecturer, Institute of Education, University College London

Simon Burgess—Professor of Economics, University of Bristol

Anne Canning—Director of Education and Head of Hackney Learning Trust

Sir Kevan Collins—Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation

Naomi Eisenstadt—Department of Education, University of Oxford (June, 2015)

Christine Gilbert—Director of Education in Tower Hamlets 1997-2001, Chief Executive Officer in Tower Hamlets, and Ofsted Chief Inspector (2006-2011)

Derek Hewie—Headteacher, Woodberry Down Community Primary School, Hackney

Lucy Heller—Chief Executive, Ark

Chris Husbands—Director, Institute of Education, University of London

Gillian Kemp—Headteacher, Cyril Jackson Primary School

Ann Marie Kerrigan—Manager, Morningside Children's Centre

Peter Lauener—Chief Executive of the Education Funding Agency (since 2012) and the Skills Funding Agency of the Department for Education since 2015 (June, 2015)

Frankie Martin—Assistant Head, London Fields Primary School, Hackney

Andrew McCully—Director General for School Infrastructure and Funding, Department for Education (June, 2015)

Frank O'Donoghue—Head of Information & Business Services, Hackney Learning Trust

Terry Parkin—Interim Service Head, Learning and Achievement, Tower Hamlets

Nicole Reid—Headteacher, Shacklewell Primary School, Hackney

Angela Scattergood—Head of Early Years Services, Hackney Learning Trust (June and October, 2015)

Michelle Thomas—Headteacher, Federation of Grazebrook and Shacklewell Primary Schools

Martin Tune—Headteacher, Bonner Primary School, Tower Hamlets

Caroline Tyson—Headteacher, London Fields Primary School, Hackney

Alan Wood—Director of the Learning Trust; now Director of Children’s Services, Borough of Hackney. (June, 2015)