



## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT : A TRANSFER REVIEW 1996**

### **MAIN ISSUES**

1. This paper reports the outcomes of a review carried out by the Suffolk advisory team into what happens when pupils transfer into their next schools at the ages of 9, 11 and 13. It was started because school improvement data showed a dip in pupil progress in reading when they transfer schools. This progress dip is a national phenomenon. Transfer issues for English, mathematics, science and 'pastoral' arrangements were investigated
2. In the overwhelming majority of cases, schools are very good at ensuring that pupils are well prepared for transfer and that they settle into the routines of their new schools with a minimum of disturbance.
3. Although some schools are much better than others, 'receiving' schools tend to underestimate what their new pupils, particularly the above average pupils, know, understand and are able to do. This can lead to low teacher expectations which inhibits pupil progress. Continuing provision for pupils who have some learning difficulties tends to be much better.
4. Improvement issues which arise from this investigation include improving teachers' knowledge of what has been achieved by the pupils in their new intake, using this in planning courses and lessons; focusing meetings between staffs on pupil attainment; and ensuring the systematic planning and implementation of the effective teaching of reading through all phases of a pupil's school life.
5. Suffolk schools are responding already to the improvement issues which relate to transfer as part of their wider improvement strategies, which include their responses to national initiatives. Similarly, the LEA is responding in support of the work of schools in this area, through its INSET provision and in further developing arrangements for the electronic transfer of information on individual pupil performance between schools.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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- 1.1 This paper is about the outcomes of a review carried out by the Suffolk advisory team into what happens when pupils transfer into their next schools at the ages of 9, 11 and 13. The review was started because data collected as part of the school improvement project showed consistently that there is a dip in progress in reading when pupils transfer from one phase of schooling to the next. A dip in reading progress is of concern because this fundamental skill in literacy is the key to many aspects of learning as well as being a sound predictor of future levels of attainment. Also, it was important to see if the dip in progress was reflected in other subjects of the curriculum.
- 1.2 With the national and local concern to improve standards and levels of achievement, with targets being set by, and in some cases for schools, factors which might be inhibiting pupil progress need to be identified and improvement strategies devised to eliminate them. A related factor was that, on occasion, some receiving schools had suggested that they had to face additional improvement challenges because the levels of attainment of their pupil intakes were not all they should be. Clearly, all schools do not perform equally and in some cases socio-economic disadvantage is a contributory factor. On the other hand, there was some evidence that some receiving schools seemed to lack confidence in the data with which they had been provided on the attainment of their pupil intakes and were giving insufficient regard to this. So, it was important to find out if there were factors inhibiting progress in receiving as well as the 'feeder' schools.
- 1.3 We know that the 'progress dip' on transfer is not confined to Suffolk. National, and indeed international, research shows that it occurs elsewhere when pupils transfer schools. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA] and the Standards and Effectiveness Unit [SEU] have identified it as a major improvement issue and have expressed interest in the Suffolk investigation. What is particularly powerful in the Suffolk data, is that we were able to compare two systems with transfer at different stages. We could see that pupils who are in 5-11 schools made more progress on average between the ages of 9 and 11 than did pupils who transfer to middle schools. Similarly, pupils in middle schools made more progress in reading in Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14) than did pupils who transferred at 11 into high schools. Inspection evidence also suggested that the quality of work in Year 9 in upper schools was weaker than elsewhere in those schools.
- 1.4 The pace of educational change is rapid, and there are many competing demands on the time of the advisory team. Nonetheless, this was considered to be sufficiently important to carry out a major review. Indeed, the review was ambitious in scope and demanding of time. The outcomes, which are set out below, justified the effort. These have been ordered as responses to key questions.

## **2. THE NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

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- 2.1 The transfer investigation: This was undertaken in the summer and autumn of 1996. Teams of advisers and advisory teachers visited schools and watched the work and judged the standards of named pupils in Year 4 in a sample of 4-9 schools, in Year 6 in some 5-11 schools, and in Year 8 in selected middle schools. The focus of the work was on English, mathematics and science. These are the core subjects and, if the situation could be accurately described in terms of these subjects, it was unlikely to be very different in terms of the rest. The quality of 'pastoral' transfer was also investigated along with the arrangements made for pupils with special educational needs. Four weeks after the summer holiday the same advisers visited the same pupils in their new schools and

were able to make judgements on the degree to which their previous standards were being built on, the expectations of them in their new schools, similarities and differences in the way they were being taught and the use to which records of their educational history were being put. They also made judgements on the overall impact of the schools' arrangements for ensuring a smooth transfer. A vast amount of data was collected. 360 pupils were individually tracked through their transfer. 32 schools of different phases were visited. Observations and discussions took place for over 500 hours.

- 2.2 The analysis and nature of the data: There was a full day meeting of those involved in the investigation at which broad conclusions were made. A substantial number of field notes were scrutinised and three papers, one for each subject, were written as well as a summary report.

Main themes emerged from an analysis of this mass of data. Inevitably there were schools, subjects and teachers whose practice conflicts with the main conclusions. Nonetheless the team which carried out the investigation held strongly to the view that its conclusions were accurate, based on the evidence which was collected, and had important implications for schools.

### **3. HOW GOOD ARE SCHOOLS AT PREPARING PUPILS FOR THEIR NEW SCHOOLS?**

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Suffolk schools are very good at this aspect of their work. Much time and energy goes into it and the results revealed by the investigation were very positive. Through such strategies as 'pyramid days' when all the pupils move up a year, through meetings for pupils and parents, through pupil pairing systems, welcome booklets and a range of other things, schools made sure, in almost all cases, that the transition to the new school was smooth and trauma free.

Pupils confirmed this. They reported that the preparation for transfer had been done well, that they knew the routines and that any fears and anxieties had been quickly allayed. Most were looking forward in June to going to their new schools in September and talked cogently of their aspirations and expectations. At the end of September they talked equally cogently of similarities and differences, the things they liked and disliked. They were robust individuals who, with schools' help, were well able to make the transition with very little impact on their confidence and self-esteem.

Most liked their new schools and appreciated that they were now in a more grown-up environment. For some, particularly the more able pupils, the novelty was beginning to wear off.

### **4. HOW GOOD ARE SCHOOLS AT BUILDING ON THE PREVIOUS ATTAINMENT OF INDIVIDUAL PUPILS WHEN THEY TRANSFER?**

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The dip in the progress indicated by reading progress data, which takes place in many schools when pupils transfer, is often the result of a reading curriculum which is too narrow. In all phases, and particularly in schools where standards are lower than might be expected, the full range of reading skills is not being systematically taught. A simple example is that the books chosen by pupils in their new schools were frequently less challenging than those they were reading in their former schools and were sometimes inappropriate. Better teachers intervened and adopt strategies for encouraging more

demanding personal reading by their pupils. There was evidence in all phases that teachers' understanding and skills in the teaching of reading need to be improved. Progress in speaking and listening was uneven. In writing, it was usually better.

On transfer between first and middle schools, there was insufficient continuity in pupils' learning in mathematics. This slows pupils' progress. Similarly, whilst there were examples of good teaching, in general, teachers in high schools did not take sufficient steps to find out what their pupils could do already and many aimed lessons at the middle or lower third of the class. The situation in science was similar, although some teachers showed what is possible.

In general, things were better at the point of transfer from middle to upper schools. There are almost always fewer middle schools which feed an upper school than there are first schools which feed middles, or primaries which feed high schools. Liaison meetings were more effective. Consequently the picture in mathematics and English was brighter than elsewhere although it was more variable in science.

The degree to which schools built on the standards achieved already by pupils in previous schools varied from school to school and subject to subject. In general, it needed to be done much better, as the work of pupils and teachers in previous schools was undervalued. The standards which were often given the least attention were those achieved by the higher attaining pupils. Continuing provision for pupils who have some learning difficulties tended to be much better.

### **5. WHAT DO STAFF EXPECT OF THEIR PUPILS**

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This is a complicated question and subtly different to that concerned with the degree to which teachers build on prior pupil attainment. High expectations are fundamental to good teaching in every subject and year group. Some teachers seemed to work backwards from the standards expected at the end of the key stage and consequently demonstrated high expectations even though they did not know what pupils had achieved previously. This was the exception rather than the rule. In general, expectations of incoming pupils were too low. Most teachers in pupils' new schools were often too concerned to provide a gentle start, making few real demands on pupils, particularly the more able, and failed to establish an immediate momentum. This was partly due to lack of understanding about what the pupils could do already, but it was also due to the concept of a 'fresh start'. This is detrimental to pupil progress, especially the more able. It has to be recognised that often the organisational complexity overwhelms some teachers as their pupils come in from different feeder schools and have been doing different things. Nonetheless, a sharper start needs to be made in many schools in terms of what incoming pupils will learn, how long it will take them and how much homework will be done.

Expectations of pupils with special educational needs were usually appropriately high. The records passed and the use to which they were put tended to be much better than for other pupils. There was usually an effective relationship and trust between the special educational needs co-ordinator in the receiving school and those of the feeder schools.

## **6. WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF TRANSFER DOCUMENTATION AND HOW WELL IS IT USED?**

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If teachers are to build on the previous attainment of their new pupils in order to give them a sharper start and thereby raise standards, they clearly need to know what those attainments are. They need information not only for the purpose of grouping pupils but also to enable them to target their teaching appropriately.

The quality and use of documentation sent by feeder schools to the receiving schools was variable and, in general, was not good. It was much better in English than in mathematics or science. Even in those cases where pyramids had worked to secure agreements, not all schools complied. Sometimes where good quality information was provided, it did not reach the teachers who needed it.

More work needs to be done across pyramids to secure agreement on the data to be provided, keeping this to the necessary minimum with headteachers and subject leaders in the receiving schools making sure it is used.

## **7. WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF MEETINGS BETWEEN FEEDER AND RECEIVING SCHOOLS?**

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In general, the impact of cross-phase meetings was best between middle and upper schools and poorest between primary and high schools. The impact of those where first and middle school teachers meet was very variable.

Across the three subjects, these meetings have most benefit when they are focused on pupils' standards and where teachers from different phases spend time looking at and talking about pupils' work. Trust develops and teachers in receiving schools can see the standards which have been reached and can build on this knowledge. Where staff have taught in each other's schools, just for a lesson or so a week, the benefits had been enormous.

Although there were examples of good practice, such sharply focused meetings were not the rule. In some pyramids, meetings of teachers had not taken place for some time. Meetings are expensive of staff time and must focus more on the essentials of standards with the associated provision of relevant information.

## **8. OBSERVATIONS**

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- 8.1 This investigation was carried out under the umbrella of the school improvement project in partnership with schools. The investigation with its considerable data collection demands caused intrusion in the work of schools because of the unavoidable logistical constraints. The project teams were received by schools with great co-operation by headteachers and teachers. The strength of the subsequent report was in its brevity, candour and direct style. Indeed its very directness tested the quality of the partnership. Nonetheless, it was very well received by headteachers for the contribution it can make to their improvement work.
- 8.2 The report has been considered at headteacher conferences and disseminated to schools. There was an associated LEA expectation that schools would meet in their pyramids and, in the light of the report, decide their key issues for action. These have been

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followed up in the last Autumn Term by a series of headteacher conferences which considered case studies of effective practice arising from the pyramid meetings. Also of importance is the use to which the report is being put by subject leaders in their 'liaison' meetings. It is at this level that the liaison can bear very valuable fruit.

- 8.3 In addition, transfer issues have been set as an important priority in the work with schools by members of the advisory team. They are being addressed in INSET provision, particularly for subject leaders, as is the teaching of reading. The role of the Authority in data management continues to grow and develop. Since the report was produced the LEA has provided schools with more data on individual pupil performance, which is transferred to schools by electronic means. High schools were provided with a complete electronic record of the individual attainment of their incoming pupils in late July 1997. This removes from the schools the burden of the manual handling and analysis of much of the transfer data and allows them to concentrate on using it effectively to improve teaching and learning. Of course, this data provides only part of what is needed. There is still much for schools to do in sharing other information on pupil attainment and progress.

While the right steps are being taken, this will remain a continuing challenge with the key issues being regularly revisited. Further investigation will need to be made in due course to see if improvement has taken place.