THE
STATE OF THE NATION IN EDUCATION:

Trends and Developments seen through Challenge Partners' Quality Assurance Reviews

What are school Quality Assurance Reviews across the country telling us about school priorities and pupil needs?

This report is the third instalment in our series examining key trends and developments in education through the lens of Challenge Partners' Quality Assurance Reviews (QA Reviews). Continuing the foundations laid by "Innovation in the Time of Covid; what worked in our schools and where next?" (20/21) and "Collaborative Responses to Challenging Times" (21/22), this analysis covers the 23/24 academic year. Together, the reports provide a longitudinal perspective, allowing us to see how education priorities, pressures, and responses change over time.

Drawing on 169 QA Review reports from primary, secondary, special and AP schools in 10 of our largest hubs across the North East, Midlands, London and the South East, this report provides a rich tapestry of perspectives and practices from schools across the country.

A huge thank you to all the hubs and schools mentioned in this report from whose QA Review reports we have taken excerpts with their permission. An important principle of Challenge Partners is that QA Review reports are confidential to Challenge Partners and the host schools. This ensures schools embrace the QA Review as a developmental process, acting as a catalyst for their ongoing improvement. This will always be the primary purpose of the QA Review. However the analysis presented in this report demonstrates the additional value of a sector-wide overview, illustrated with real-life examples.

[1] Hubs involved in the pilot: Aspire, Aylesbury Vale, Chrysalis, Compass, East London, East Midlands South, Impact Alliance, South West London, Heart of England, North East Special

Executive Summary

This report provides insight into persistent challenges and barriers as well as examples of excellence in education across Challenge Partners' 23/24 QA Review reports.

Through this in-depth analysis, we aim to:

- **Contribute to a longitudinal understanding of the education sector:** We analyse recurring themes and emerging practices and priorities to inform school leaders, practitioners, and policymakers about the ever-changing landscape within education. This links to Challenge Partners' value of courageous leadership, and our commitment to using evidence and expertise to help shape policy and practice for the sector.

- **Highlight best practice and expertise among our schools and trusts:** We showcase the breadth and depth of expertise within the partnership by highlighting leading practices and innovative approaches to school improvement.

- **Inform action and drive improvement:** The insights in this report are intended to inspire and inform action to deliver better outcomes for children. We use them within Challenge Partners to inform our collaborative school improvement activities. The 10 hubs involved in this pilot have additionally been able to use analysis of QA Review reports from their schools to inform shared priorities for their Challenge Partners-funded local action plan, and to identify areas of expertise to share within the hub. We hope the reports will also be useful to school and trust leaders beyond Challenge Partners, policymakers, and others in the sector committed to improving children's life chances.

Key Findings

Our 23/24 analysis reveals both continuity and change in the key themes and trends shaping education compared to previous reports in this series (summarised in the annex).

Areas of Continuity:

- **Mental health and wellbeing:** Schools continue to prioritise the wellbeing of both pupils and staff, recognising the ongoing impact of the pandemic and the increasing pressures on young people and the education system. This is evident in the continued implementation of wellbeing programmes, the provision of mental health support, and the focus on creating supportive and inclusive learning environments.

- **Curriculum development:** Schools remain focused on curriculum development, with a continued emphasis on ensuring a broad, balanced and enriching curriculum for all pupils. This includes ongoing efforts to decolonise the curriculum, promote diversity, equity and inclusion, and tailor learning experiences.

- **Inclusion:** The commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion remains strong, with schools actively working to address systemic inequalities and create a sense of belonging for all pupils. This includes continued efforts to promote anti-racism, LGBTQ+ inclusion and support for disadvantaged pupils.

Areas of Change:

- **Sophistication in data-informed approaches:** Schools are becoming more sophisticated in their use of data to inform teaching practices, track student progress and evaluate the impact of interventions. This reflects a growing emphasis on evidence-informed practice and a desire to ensure that all pupils are making good progress.

- **Tailored learning:** There is an increased focus on tailoring learning experiences to cater to the diverse needs of all pupils. This includes using technology to differentiate instruction, providing flexible learning pathways and empowering pupils to take ownership of their learning.

- **Student agency:** Schools are empowering pupils to take ownership of their learning and participate in decision-making. This includes providing opportunities for student leadership, encouraging student voice, and involving pupils in the curriculum development process.

- **EdTech integration:** Schools are adopting a more strategic approach to technology integration, focusing on enhancing learning rather than replacing traditional methods. This includes using technology to personalise learning, enhance accessibility and provide targeted support.

Methodology: An AI-assisted approach to analysis

This report introduces an innovative approach to data analysis, harnessing the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance the efficiency and speed of this exercise. With the use of AI, we have the potential to process a larger volume of QA Review reports more quickly, facilitating the identification of key trends and areas for development.

The report is based on an analysis of 169 School QA Review reports. To create it, we first produced hub-level analyses for 10 of our largest hubs. These hub analyses were tested for accuracy with the Senior Partner and Hub Manager for each hub and refinements made. We then aggregated the 10 hub analyses to create this overarching-analysis. The AI platforms we used (Google Gemini and Chat GPT Pro) were set up so that all data was kept private within our own Challenge Partners environment.

The two previous analyses (20/21 and 21/22) were generously funded by the Permira Foundation and undertaken manually by consultants reading and synthesising all of the reports. Sadly, we didn't have the resources to complete the analysis for 22/23, and we are excited by how AI has enabled us to resume the process this year and beyond.
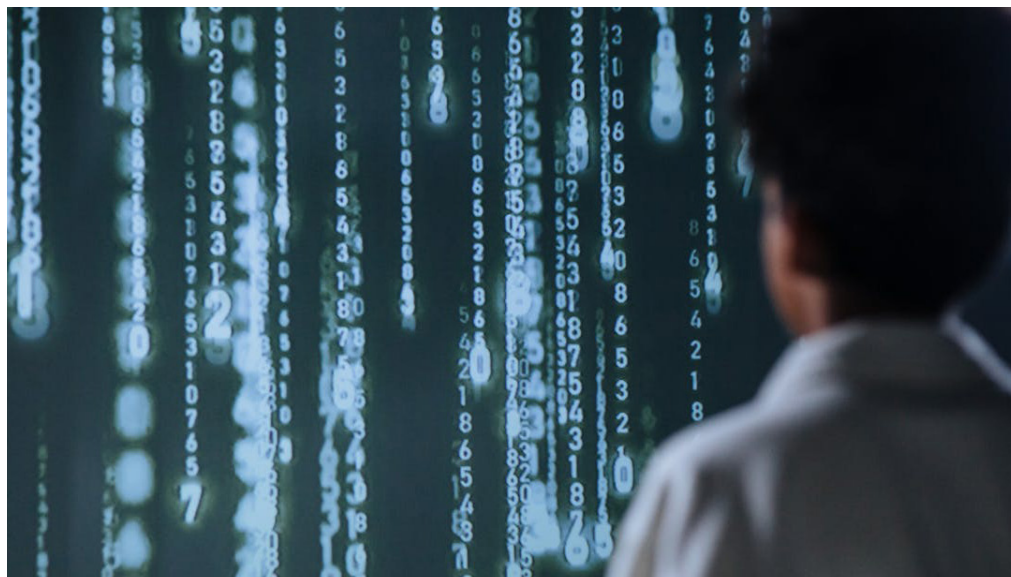
The AI-assisted analysis process:

The AI models used as part of the analysis were trained on the standardised structure of QA Review reports, enabling them to effectively navigate and extract information from various sections:

- **Context and character of the school**

- **Leadership at all levels — What went well...**

- **Leadership at all levels — Even better if...**

- **Quality of provision and outcomes — What went well...**

- **Quality of provision and outcomes — Even better if...**

- **Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs — What went well ...**

- **Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils — Even better if...**

We provided the AI software with a list of potential themes to explore, drawn from previous reports and current priorities, whilst also allowing it to identify other relevant themes emerging from the data. This ensured that the analysis was both focused and responsive to new developments.

Specificity and examples: The AI was explicitly instructed to avoid generalisations and instead prioritise the extraction of specific examples and evidence from QA Review reports to support each identified theme. This ensured that the analysis was grounded in real-world practice and outcomes.

School phase analysis: To ensure clarity and relevance, the AI was tasked with grouping thematic findings by school phase (primary, secondary and special, with two all-through schools from across the hub network). This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how different types of schools are addressing key challenges.

Human oversight: Crucially, the AI's output was subjected to a rigorous review and refinement process by appropriate Challenge Partners' central team members. As part of our commitment to being practitioner-led, we also then engaged with Senior Partners and Hub Managers representing the hubs that were involved in this pilot. They checked the detail in thematic analyses produced for each hub and confirmed that they were happy for their data to be shared in the overall report. This ensured the accuracy of the analysis, mitigated potential bias, and allowed for the addition of expert insights and interpretations.

> For each section, we describe and exemplify the theme identified. We also include a selection of **EBIs** (even better ifs) taken directly from QA Review reports and generalised for the purpose of this report. Because EBIs tend to be very specific to each school, it has been harder to aggregate them into meaningful themes and this is something we hope to address in future reports.

Benefits and limitations of the AI-assisted approach:

Benefits:

- **Increased efficiency:** The AI significantly expedited the analysis process. We hope that in the future we will be able to complete the analysis each summer to inform our activities in the following academic year.

- **Enhanced comprehensiveness:** AI was able to analyse a larger dataset of QA Review reports than would have been feasible for the Challenge Partners central team to analyse manually.

- **Segmentation by hub:** The methodology of analysing QA Review reports first by hub generated more granular hub-level reports which have informed local collaborative school improvement activity and knowledge sharing.

- **Data-driven insights:** AI facilitated the identification of patterns and trends that may have been missed by central team members.

- **Confidentiality:** All of the data used across the individual thematic reports across pilot hubs as well as in this report are confidential and checked with the hubs involved. No personal data was shared within the AI environment.

Limitations:

- **Potential for inaccuracies:** While the AI's accuracy is high, there remains a possibility of misinterpretations or errors in the initial analysis.

- **Bias detection:** The AI model may have inherent biases that could influence its analysis. AI models can identify and reinforce existing patterns in the data, even if those patterns reflect biases. Human oversight was essential to identify and mitigate these biases.

- **Lack of contextual nuance:** While the AI could identify and extract information, it may have missed some of the nuanced contextual factors that influence school practices and outcomes.

A call for feedback:

We recognise that this new methodology driven by AI is still under development. As such, we actively encourage feedback from across the partnership, our funders and others regularly in touch with Challenge Partners to help us refine our AI prompts and ensure future reports are as valuable and insightful as possible. If you have any feedback, please contact us at:

partnershipsteam@challengepartners.org

The Quality Assurance Review (QA Review): A foundation for school improvement

The Challenge Partners Quality Assurance Review (QA Review) serves as a cornerstone for school improvement, providing collaborative, expert-led peer evaluation in the following areas:

- **Leadership at all levels:** The QA Review rigorously evaluates the effectiveness of leadership at all levels within the school and trusts. This includes examining the strategic direction set by the headteacher and senior leaders, the operational management of middle leaders, and the oversight provided by the governing body. The review seeks to understand how leadership creates a culture of continuous improvement and ensures accountability at every level.

- **The quality of provision and outcomes:** The QA Review assesses the overall quality of educational provision and the resulting outcomes for all pupils. This involves a deep evaluation of teaching and learning, including learning explorations, scrutiny of planning documents, and analysis of student work. The review also examines the breadth, balance, and enrichment of the curriculum offered to all pupils and analyses student progress and attainment data to determine the effectiveness of provision in driving positive outcomes.

- **The quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs:** A critical element of the QA Review is its focus on equity. The review specifically scrutinises the quality of provision and the resulting outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, pupils with special education needs and disabilities (SEND), and pupils with any other additional needs or barriers to success (e.g. young carers). Reviewers analyse progress and attainment data for these specific groups, alongside examining the targeted support and interventions provided. This ensures that the needs of these pupils are being effectively met and that they are achieving well.

Key Themes and Findings

1. Staff wellbeing: Prioritising a healthy and supported workforce

While the initial surge of attention to staff wellbeing witnessed during the pandemic appeared to abate somewhat in our 21/22 analysis, it has re-emerged as a priority this year. This is reflected in a variety of approaches, including workload reduction strategies, flexible working arrangements and initiatives to promote work-life balance.

- **Planning and Collaboration:** At Lime Academy Abbotsmede (primary, Peterborough), middle leaders are directly reducing teacher workload. For example, the mathematics lead is involved in creating shared planning templates and model lessons for new curriculum content, while the SENDCo has developed ready-to-use SEND support plans, minimising individual teacher preparation time. The Lime Academy Trust further supports this through six annual collaborative planning days where teachers from across schools jointly develop units of work and share assessment materials, directly reducing individual planning burdens. The Trust's provision of a consistent curriculum and centrally organised shared moderation activities also significantly cuts down on the time teachers spend on curriculum development and assessment administration.

- **Valuing staff through positive environment and leadership support:** At Henry Hinde Infant School (Rugby) the principal and her team have cultivated a learning environment where staff feel genuinely valued. The school operates a distributed leadership model, where expertise and responsibility are shared across the team. For example, the mathematics curriculum is well established, with a senior leader acting as a primary mathematics specialist within the Origin Maths Hub. This in-house expertise provides significant support to colleagues, ensuring clarity about what pupils should know and remember, which can reduce teacher workload and increase confidence. Furthermore, leaders have prioritised the teaching of reading, ensuring daily phonics sessions are consistently well-taught with fidelity to the scheme and regular teacher training. This focus on a foundational skill, backed by leadership support and training, can alleviate teacher anxiety and contribute to a feeling of competence and value.

EBI: Schools could further develop specific and measurable workload reduction targets, potentially by setting limits on meetings, streamlining administrative tasks, and providing more efficient tools and resources. Implement regular surveys and feedback mechanisms to monitor staff workload and identify areas for improvement.

2. Developments in Pupil Wellbeing: A Growing Focus on Prevention and Early Intervention

Our analysis reveals a trend towards a more proactive and preventative approach to pupil wellbeing. Schools are increasingly recognising the importance of early identification and intervention to support pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing. This includes:

- **Emotional Wellbeing Support:** At Bengeworth CE Academy (primary, Evesham), the school has implemented a comprehensive approach to social and emotional learning. This includes the establishment of a 'calm shed,' a designated space where pupils can go to regulate their emotions and find a moment of peace. Additionally, the school has trained mental health ambassadors among the student body. These ambassadors are equipped to provide peer support, cultivating a culture where pupils feel comfortable discussing their feelings. Leaders at Bengeworth CE Academy have prioritised the development of pupils' emotional literacy, enabling them to articulate their feelings and understand those of others. This proactive approach not only supports individual pupils but also cultivates a school-wide environment of empathy and care.

- **Prioritising Wellbeing:** Schools in the South West London Hub consistently prioritise the wellbeing of both pupils and staff. Initiatives include nurture lunchtime clubs, "wellbeing woofer" visits, where fully DBS and insured instructors bring well loved, family trained dogs and puppies into the classroom, yoga sessions, and a focus on clarifying behaviour policies to create positive learning environments. Dorchester Primary School as an example has implemented three key rules - ready, respectful, safe - to promote a positive and supportive atmosphere.

EBI: Schools could continue exploring targeted strategies to further improve wellbeing, particularly for harder-to-reach families, recognising the link between wellbeing and attendance.
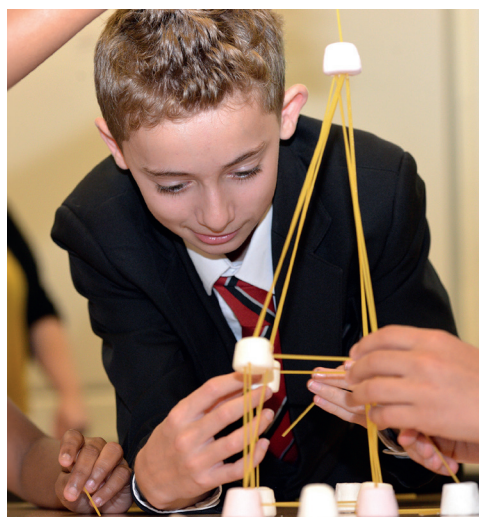
3. Promoting Engaging and Relevant Learning Experiences

Schools across the partnership are developing curricula and pedagogical approaches tailored to the particular needs of their pupils and communities, with the integration of real-world learning experiences.

- **Enquiry-based curriculum with real-world connection:** Staff at Cheam Common Infants' Academy (Worcester Park) pursue a shared vision to provide a curriculum designed to ensure their learners are well-prepared for the next stage of their education and for future life. The impact of this is evident in well-presented books demonstrating coherently planned and well-sequenced learning across a range of curriculum areas. To embed reading skills, all pupils have regular opportunities to explore high-quality texts linked to their topics, which supports the acquisition of vocabulary. The school's curriculum encourages pupils to be curious learners who are actively involved in directing their own learning, using digital technology as appropriate to support their engagement. A recent Year 2 writing session based on the text 'Secret of the Black Rock', which promoted discussions on the impact of pollution in the oceans, provides a strong example of how the school's enquiry-based curriculum has developed pupils' curiosity and connected their learning to real-world issues.

- **Curriculum enrichment and real-world connections:** Thurnby Mead Primary Academy (Leicester) has designed its curriculum to incorporate meaningful life experiences, with a focus on themes like social justice and sustainability. This approach helps pupils connect their learning to real-world issues and contexts, making it more relevant and engaging. For example, pupils participate in local community projects and initiatives related to environmental sustainability.

EBI: To further enhance engagement, schools could explore increased opportunities for collaborative and pupil-led learning activities. Consideration could be given to ensuring learning tasks clearly connect to overarching concepts or 'big questions', enabling greater pupil independence in achieving learning outcomes. Sharing effective practices for innovative and creative strategies that deepen learning across schools could also be beneficial.

4. Curriculum and DEI: Cultivating inclusive excellence

Schools across the partnership are demonstrating a powerful commitment to both enriching their curriculum and embedding diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI) learning environments. These two areas are intrinsically linked, aiming to ensure the curriculum is accessible and relevant to all pupils, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and experiences, while equipping them with the knowledge and skills to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. The following examples reveal how schools are creatively and effectively integrating curriculum development with a deep focus on DEI, creating a culture of belonging and achievement for every student.

■ **Whole-school oracy strategy to support high EAL population:** Cranford Primary School (Hounslow) serves a highly diverse community where a large proportion of pupils have English as an Additional Language (EAL). The school supports above-average numbers of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, holding a strong commitment to its mission to 'learn hand in hand'. The approach is embedded across subjects and includes explicit teaching and drilling of key vocabulary, planned opportunities for structured pupil talk ('talk time', talk partners) within lessons and modelling and use of technical and subject-specific language. By developing pupils' speaking and listening skills, Cranford enables its EAL learners to more rapidly acquire the English language needed to access the full curriculum and participate confidently in classroom discussions. The QA Review noted that this approach helps EAL pupils "quickly pick up new language and access the mainstream curriculum" promoting genuine inclusion and equity in learning outcomes.

- **Comprehensive race equity programme and decolonising the curriculum:** Invicta Primary School (Greenwich) has implemented a comprehensive race equity programme. Their QA Review report highlights the school's multi-faceted approach, which includes staff training on systemic racism, actively decolonising the curriculum, and working closely with families to promote race equity. This proactive approach to DEI is woven into the curriculum itself, ensuring that pupils develop a critical understanding of race and equality.

  EBI: To ensure the curriculum truly helps develop inclusive excellence, schools could further focus on embedding adaptive teaching approaches informed by an understanding of pupils' diverse backgrounds and needs. This could involve:

  - Ensuring teachers consistently use the specific information available from pupil profiles or passports (for SEND and disadvantaged learners) to adapt curriculum planning more effectively and remove barriers to success.

  - Developing how curriculum activity and delivery more closely matches pupils' diverse needs and learning styles.

  - Exploring how pedagogical approaches consistently provide appropriate stretch and challenge for the most able pupils, whilst also strengthening curriculum adaptations and scaffolding for those requiring more support, such as the lowest attaining pupils.

  - Further embedding specific strategies, such as targeted oracy development or ensuring learning criteria are presented accessibly (e.g., in a child-friendly manner for younger pupils), help support pupils with specific language needs or ensure clarity for all learners.

5. Blended learning and technology: Harnessing the power of technology

Schools are adopting a measured and strategic approach to integrating technology into teaching and learning, using it to tailor learning, enhance accessibility, provide targeted support, and promote student agency.

- **Effective Use of Technology to Support Pupil Learning:** In Hurst Park Primary School (West Molesley), pupils make choices about how to use technology to support their learning. For example, in Year 4, pupils use an interactive platform, Polypad, to make a virtual decimal number. All pupils are fully engaged in splitting and merging different partial products of the number. The teacher is then able to instantly monitor and check understanding. In Year 3 PSHE, pupils use their Chrome books to identify the difference between 'fact' and 'fiction' and then write their own examples. Pupils spoke positively about the benefit of 'in the moment' feedback from their teachers, through the use of technology.

- **Technology empowering independent learning and teacher development:** Shawley Community Primary School (Surrey) demonstrates a comprehensive approach to EdTech integration. Pupils actively utilise technology for independent learning across various subjects. For example, they use interactive simulations in science to explore concepts and conduct virtual experiments, enabling deeper understanding and engagement. Teachers leverage digital platforms to provide personalised feedback and track individual progress, allowing for timely interventions and differentiated instruction. The school has also invested in training for staff to integrate technology into their teaching practices, ensuring that tech is used purposefully and effectively to enhance learning outcomes. This approach not only empowers pupils but equips teachers with tools to enhance their pedagogy and support individual needs.

  EBI: Schools could conduct a digital audit to assess pupils' access to technology and identify any gaps. Provide targeted support, such as loaning devices, offering internet access, or providing digital literacy training.

6. Leadership: Cultivating a vision for excellence

QA Review reports continue to highlight strong and effective leadership as a cornerstone of school improvement. Leaders are demonstrating a commitment to creating a shared vision, developing a positive school culture and empowering staff to drive improvement.

- **Leadership Focused on Staff Empowerment:** At Kingsford Community School (secondary, Beckton), leaders have demonstrated a strong commitment to strategic curriculum development and empowering staff to drive improvement. The QA Review highlighted the school's active engagement with external research and best practices, as well as their commitment to sharing their methodologies with the wider educational community. The school has a strong and dynamic senior leadership team, who continuously go beyond the expected. Leaders at all levels are provided with the autonomy and support to ensure that they make a proven contribution to implementing, monitoring, and refining teaching and learning across the school. The impact of their work is shown through the development of opportunities for peer observations, which include coaching conversations that identify personalised next steps.

- **Strategic leadership with SEND focus:** Leaders at Jack Hunt School (secondary, Peterborough) have demonstrated a strategic commitment to inclusivity by elevating the role of the school's SENCo who is now also a key member of the SLT. This structural change ensures that the needs of pupils with SEND are considered at the highest level of decision-making and integrated into the school's overall vision and strategy. This has resulted in a more proactive and holistic approach to supporting pupils with SEND, with a greater focus on early intervention, personalised learning, and collaboration between teachers and support staff. This commitment to inclusivity is not just about providing resources but about creating a school culture where every student feels valued and supported to reach their full potential.

EBI: Building on strong leadership practices, schools could further enhance leadership capacity by: Continuing to develop the role and skills of middle/subject leaders, ensuring they have opportunities to monitor their subjects effectively, support their teams (e.g., through co-planning or modelling), and contribute to curriculum review and consistency.

7. School improvement: A data-driven and collaborative journey

Schools are utilising data-driven decision-making and collaborative approaches to drive positive change and improve student outcomes. This culture of using data to inform practice includes schools increasingly using information to track student progress, inform teaching practices, and evaluate the impact of interventions. They are also actively cultivating student agency, empowering pupils to take ownership of their learning and participate in decision-making.

- **Achievement and continuous improvement:** The data-driven approach at Houlton School (secondary, Rugby) ensures ongoing progress monitoring, allowing leaders to make rapid adjustments to teaching practices. This agility in response to student needs contributes to improved academic outcomes. The school embodies this culture of ambition and creativity and this is also harnessed through a leadership team that encourages staff to work collaboratively and share their ideas to achieve this continuous improvement.

- **Impact on provision and outcomes beyond the school:** Holmwood School (special, Middlesbrough) operates as a pivotal hub for inclusive education, extending its expertise beyond its own student body to significantly impact the wider community. Through its 10-place support centre, the school provides targeted interventions, outreach, and advice to local primary schools, effectively preventing exclusions and supporting families in the EHCP process. The school's success in reintegrating pupils into mainstream settings is evidenced by meticulous progress monitoring and sustained support, with other schools actively observing their best practices. Holmwood's commitment to professional development is demonstrated through its delivery of CPD to 21 primary schools in the region and its contribution to teacher training programmes. Holmwood is recognised as a centre of excellence for inclusion.

EBI: To further drive school improvement, schools could focus on ensuring that assessment information is used consistently and robustly across all subjects and key stages. This could involve:

- Refining systems to track academic progress, ensuring support can be implemented in a timely and effective manner.

- Utilising assessment analysis (such as Question Level Analysis' - a detailed examination of how students have performed on individual questions within an assessment like a test, or quiz) or writing criteria more systematically. This can help address specific learning gaps for individuals and groups, informing targeted interventions or catch-up.

8. Pedagogy: Effective teaching for all learners

Schools are exploring a range of pedagogical approaches to enhance teaching and learning, including scaffolding, assessment for learning and the use of technology to enhance engagement and personalise learning.

- **Structured Learning Environment and Explicit Instruction:** Woodland Grange Primary School (Leicester) demonstrates how a well-structured learning environment, combined with explicit instruction, can enhance teaching and learning. The school utilises the Oak Trust lesson structure, which provides a clear framework for lessons with distinct phases for instruction, activity, and review. This predictable structure helps pupils understand expectations, manage their time effectively, and engage with the learning process. Teachers use explicit instruction techniques, breaking down complex concepts into smaller, manageable steps and providing clear explanations and models. This approach supports pupils in developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter and building their confidence.

- **Cultivating intellectual discourse:** At Mulberry School for Girls (secondary, Tower Hamlets), a strong emphasis is placed on cultivating intellectual discourse and critical thinking. Teachers are adept at employing sophisticated questioning techniques that challenge students to move beyond surface-level understanding. The school promotes a culture where students are encouraged to articulate complex ideas, engage in robust debates, and develop their own well-reasoned arguments. For example, in humanities lessons, students regularly participate in structured debates on contemporary issues, drawing on evidence from diverse sources. In literature classes, teachers facilitate in-depth discussions that encourage students to explore multiple interpretations of texts, strengthening a deep appreciation for nuanced analysis. This approach not only enhances students' academic skills but also equips them with the ability to think critically and engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

EBI: To enhance teaching and learning effectiveness for all pupils, schools could continue to focus on pedagogical refinement by:

- Ensuring teaching activities consistently match pupils' diverse needs.

- Further embedding Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies to effectively check understanding for all pupils before moving on, address misconceptions promptly, and inform subsequent teaching or interventions.

- Developing the consistent use of effective questioning techniques to deepen thinking and gauge understanding.

- Sharing effective pedagogical practices observed within and between schools to promote greater consistency and innovation.

9. Disadvantage: Breaking down barriers to learning

Schools across the partnership are deeply committed to supporting disadvantaged pupils and closing the attainment gap. This commitment is evident in the implementation of a wide range of strategies, including targeted interventions, strong pastoral support systems and close collaboration with families and communities.

- **Targeted Interventions and Removing Barriers to Learning:** At North Mead Primary Academy (Leicester), the school utilises the 'Removing Barriers to Learning' initiative, a programme designed to address the unique challenges faced by disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, ensuring they have equitable access to the curriculum. North Mead focuses on early identification of barriers, such as socio-economic factors or learning difficulties, and then implements targeted interventions. The school implements specific programmes to improve literacy and numeracy skills, with a focus on vocabulary development. As a result of these focused strategies, the school has reported improvements in academic achievement for their disadvantaged and SEND pupils, with a clear focus on closing the attainment gap. The team members are instrumental in ensuring that no family slips through the net and that everyone pulls together to work in the same direction for the very best outcomes. The inclusive environment ensures that the vision and values of the school are promoted consistently and that every pupil is valued as an individual, having equal access to the full curriculum offer. 'Unconditional positive regard' applies to every pupil.

- **Family support and liaison:** Ditton Park Academy (secondary, Slough) has implemented a multi-layered approach to supporting disadvantaged pupils. This includes providing tailored interventions delivered by trained teaching assistants. These interventions are closely monitored to ensure their effectiveness and to maximise pupil progress. The school also prioritises strong communication with families, recognising the importance of parental involvement in addressing barriers to learning. This might involve regular meetings with parents to discuss progress, workshops on how to support learning at home, and providing access to resources and support services. Ditton Park Academy aims to create a comprehensive support system that helps disadvantaged pupils to succeed by combining targeted academic support with strong family liaison.

EBI: To further improve provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs, schools could consider:

- Ensuring information available on pupil profiles (for both SEND and disadvantaged learners) is consistently used by teachers to adapt planning, scaffolding, and teaching approaches to meet specific needs and remove barriers.

- Strengthening curriculum adaptations and quality first teaching strategies to support the progress of the lowest attaining pupils.

10. Special Schools: Beacons of inclusive practices

Almost a quarter of schools in Challenge Partners in 23/24 were special schools (compared to 6% of schools nationally). They welcome the challenge and support derived through peer QA Review and collaboration with other specialist settings in the partnership. Many are also generous in sharing their expertise with mainstream colleagues grappling with the challenge of providing high-quality provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) through tailored learning, targeted interventions, and a focus on student wellbeing.

- **Personalised learning and targeted interventions:** Ash Trees Academy (special primary, Stockton-on-Tees) provides a highly personalised approach to learning for pupils with SEND. The school has developed a key skills framework that supports personal development, including eating, drinking, and personal care. Communication and interaction are taken seriously, with adapted activities and layered communication methods. The school also provides clear opportunities for pupils to engage in reading activities and develop a love of reading through various mediums. Classroom pedagogy complements planned learning, with effective transitions and groupings. This approach ensures that pupils with SEND receive the tailored support and individualised attention they need to thrive.

- **Total communication approach:** Portland Academy (special secondary, Sunderland) displays well-established routines, high expectations, and trusting relationships that encourage pupils to enthusiastically engage with their learning. They use a total communication approach, including signing, symbols, and objects of reference, to ensure that all pupils can effectively communicate and participate in lessons. The school also has a well-organised and highly effective phonics programme. Pupils on Pathway 1, who have more complex needs, are well understood by teaching staff, with personalised targets and the use of sensory stories to support their learning. This focus on personalised learning and targeted interventions ensures that all pupils, regardless of their needs, are able to make progress and achieve their potential.

EBI:
- Information available on student profiles could be used more consistently by teachers to adapt lesson planning to meet the specific needs of learners with SEND.

- Further development of adaptive assessment practices could better inform the planning, scaffolding, and teaching approaches used for pupils with SEND.

- Enhancing specific support where needs are identified, such as for pupils with speech, language and communication needs (e.g., through targeted prompts or specialist input).

- Exploring ways to further enhance integrated learning opportunities between specialist provisions (where applicable) and mainstream settings.

Conclusion

This report underlines how schools in Challenge Partners are demonstrating a commitment to innovation, inclusion, and excellence. They are prioritising staff and student wellbeing; developing inclusive environments and curricula; providing engaging and relevant learning experiences; and harnessing the power of technology to enhance learning. However, analysis of our 23/24 QA Review reports highlight common barriers we are still to overcome, particularly in relation to workload, and providing the additional support needed by disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND.

In highlighting trends and challenges and showcasing examples of excellence, our hope is that this report will be a valuable resource for school leaders, practitioners, and policymakers as they work to improve outcomes for all young people. We believe that the findings here provide valuable insights into the current state of education in England.

Annex A:
Previous thematic analysis reports

A continuous thematic analysis: building on previous insights

This report builds upon the insights gleaned from our previous analyses of QA Review reports. To provide a longitudinal perspective, we summarise the key findings and trends from the 2021 and 2022 reports below, highlighting areas of continuity and change:

2020/21: Innovation in the Time of Covid

■ **Focus:** This report examined how schools adapted and innovated in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It captured a unique moment in educational history, documenting the resilience and resourcefulness of schools in navigating school closures, remote learning and the evolving needs of their communities.

■ **Key themes:**

– **Resilience and innovation:** Schools demonstrated remarkable resilience and innovation in adapting to remote learning, supporting vulnerable pupils and engaging with families. This included rapidly adopting new technologies, developing creative approaches to teaching and learning and providing extensive pastoral support.

– **The rise of EdTech:** The pandemic accelerated the adoption of educational technology, with schools rapidly implementing blended learning approaches and utilising digital tools to support teaching and learning. This shift towards EdTech highlighted the potential of technology to enhance learning and bridge gaps in access to education.

– **Focus on wellbeing:** Schools prioritised the wellbeing of both pupils and staff, recognising the impact of the pandemic on mental health and emotional wellbeing. This included implementing wellbeing programmes, providing mental health support and developing a culture of care and compassion.

– **Curriculum adaptation:** Schools adapted their curricula to address learning loss and ensure continuity of learning during periods of disruption. This involved streamlining curriculum content, prioritising essential skills and developing flexible learning pathways. The renewed spotlight on racism following the 2020 murder of George Floyd prompted some schools to examine their curricula for opportunities to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion.

2021/22: Collaborative responses to challenging times

- **Focus:** This report explored how schools continued to adapt and innovate in the post-pandemic context, with a focus on collaboration and school improvement. It highlighted the importance of peer support, shared learning and collective responsibility in navigating ongoing challenges and uncertainties.

- **Key themes:**

  - **Continuing professional development:** Schools demonstrated a strong commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers, with a focus on collaborative approaches and peer learning. This included investing in coaching programmes, facilitating peer observation and creating opportunities for teachers to share best practice.

  - **Mental health and wellbeing:** Schools continued to prioritise mental health and wellbeing, with a particular focus on supporting pupils who had been impacted by the pandemic. This included providing access to mental health professionals, implementing wellbeing initiatives and creating safe and supportive learning environments.

  - **Inclusion:** Schools emphasised inclusion and diversity, with a focus on anti-racism, LGBTQ+ inclusion and supporting disadvantaged pupils. This involved reviewing and adapting curricula, providing targeted support and nurturing a culture of belonging for all pupils.

  - **Curriculum development:** Schools focused on curriculum development, with many adopting mastery approaches, particularly in mathematics. This reflected a growing emphasis on deep learning, conceptual understanding and ensuring all pupils have access to a high-quality curriculum.

  - **EdTech integration:** While the rapid adoption of EdTech slowed, schools continued to integrate technology into teaching and learning in more strategic ways. This included using technology to personalise learning, enhance accessibility and provide targeted support.

CHALLENGE
PARTNERS