

# CHALLENGE PARTNERS

## State of the Nation in Education

Trends and developments seen through Challenge  
Partners' Quality Assurance Reviews 2024/25



March 2026

in partnership with Ilion analytics



# About this report

## Purpose and methodology

This report is the fourth instalment in our series (beginning in 2020/21) examining key trends and developments in education through the lens of Challenge Partners' Quality Assurance Reviews (QA Reviews). Like our 2023/24 report, this 2024/25 edition was generated using artificial intelligence (AI) and quality assured using human intelligence. We are grateful to Ilion Analytics who generously ran the AI analysis for us pro bono.<sup>1</sup>

The national picture presented here is based on analysis of anonymised reports from 209 of the 408 QA Reviews<sup>2</sup> conducted in primary, secondary and special schools across England in 2024/25, broken down as follows:

### Geographic coverage

- **London:** 84 schools
- **West Midlands:** 45 schools
- **East Midlands:** 35 schools
- **South East:** 28 schools
- **Yorkshire and Humber:** 7 schools
- **North East:** 7 schools
- **South West:** 3 schools

### School types

- **Primary schools:** 95 schools
- **Secondary schools:** 102 schools
- **Special schools:** 12 schools

We first used the 209 QA Review reports to generate 28 Hub-level analyses. The Hub-level outputs were sent to Senior Partners and Hub Managers so they could use them to plan collaborative school improvement activities tailored to the needs of schools in their Hubs.<sup>3</sup>

This State of the Nation report was generated by aggregating information from the 28 Hub-level analyses. We are using it within Challenge Partners to plan activities across our programmes and national Network of Excellence. By sharing it more widely, we aim to:

- **Contribute to a longitudinal understanding of the education sector in England.** This links to Challenge Partners' value of courageous leadership, and our commitment to using and generating evidence and expertise to help shape policy and practice across the wider sector.
- **Highlight the strengths and expertise among our schools and trusts so that others may learn and draw from them.**
- **Inform action and drive improvement:** The insights in this report are intended to inspire and inform action from educational professionals, sector bodies and policymakers to deliver better life chances for children within and beyond Challenge Partners.

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<sup>1</sup> A full statement on our use of AI is presented in annex 1.

<sup>2</sup> An explanation of our QA Review process is presented in annex 2.

<sup>3</sup> An explanation of Challenge Partners' Hub is presented in annex 3.

# Findings

## What Went Well: Strengths across our schools

Analysis of the "What Went Well" (WWW) sections across all Hub synthesis reports reveals areas where schools are demonstrating strong practice and achieving positive outcomes.

### Leadership excellence

QA Review reports suggest many schools in Challenge Partners consistently demonstrate:

#### Strong and strategic leadership

- Ambitious, collaborative, and reflective leadership teams
- Clear vision and values embedded across the school community
- Strategic approaches to school improvement and change management
- Distributed leadership models that empower staff at all levels
- Outward-looking leadership that builds partnerships and learns from others

#### Effective governance and collaboration

- Active governing bodies providing appropriate challenge and support
- Governors serving as "eyes and ears" of the community
- Strong Multi-Academy Trust (trust) partnerships offering resources and expertise
- Collaborative working across schools within trusts and Hubs

#### Focus on staff development and wellbeing

- Bespoke continuing professional development opportunities
- High-quality coaching programmes for all staff
- Prioritisation of staff wellbeing with open-door policies
- Staff feeling valued, listened to, and supported
- Manageable workload considerations in new initiatives
- Trust-wide and Hub-wide professional learning offers

### Quality of provision

#### Curriculum strengths

- Well-sequenced, ambitious curricula that meet pupil needs
- Subject leaders providing effective support for implementation
- Regular review and adaptation of curriculum to context
- Strong subject knowledge among teaching staff
- Effective use of curriculum monitoring and quality assurance

#### Teaching and learning

- High expectations for all pupils leading to strong outcomes
- Strong classroom routines and respectful relationships
- Effective use of retrieval practice, questioning, and modelling

- Vocabulary development prioritised across the curriculum
- Technology integrated effectively to enhance learning
- Smooth transitions between activities and year groups

### Assessment and feedback

- Effective use of assessment to identify needs and plan interventions
- Rigorous tracking systems providing insight into pupil progress
- Live marking and immediate feedback approaches
- Regular book scrutinies and pupil conversations informing practice

### Support for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND

#### Inclusive ethos

- School cultures centered on building relationships and understanding needs
- Celebration of diversity and individual strengths
- Pupils with additional needs feeling valued and included
- Strong pastoral systems supporting vulnerable pupils and families

#### Support for disadvantaged pupils

- Proactive identification and removal of barriers to participation
- Targeted interventions addressing specific barriers to learning
- Evidence-based plans and case studies tracking progress
- High levels of adult support and mentoring

#### SEND provision and support

Across special and mainstream, multiple schools demonstrated strengths in:

- Knowledgeable SENCos ensuring equal opportunities for all
- All teachers embracing their role as teachers of SEND
- Personalised, scaffolded provision linked to real-life contexts
- Tailored strategies and skilled support fostering independence
- Strong communication with parents as partners in learning
- Warm relationships ensuring full access to extracurricular activities

Reports from **special schools** highlighted strengths in:

- Highly personalised curricula
- Trauma-informed practice
- Holistic approaches integrating academic, social and emotional development

Reports from **primary schools** highlighted WWWs in:

- Inclusive ethos
- Effective use of support assistants
- Parent partnerships

Reports for **secondary schools** highlighted WWWs in:

- Clear processes for identifying needs

- Effective use of data
- Targeted interventions

## Wider Development

### Reading and early literacy

- Strong emphasis on reading across schools
- Well-resourced libraries and reading promotion initiatives
- Effective phonics programmes and early reading interventions
- Focus on vocabulary development supporting articulate pupils

### Character development and personal growth

- Comprehensive personal development curricula
- Rich extracurricular and enrichment programmes
- Opportunities for leadership and responsibility
- Focus on character education and values
- Strong preparation for life beyond school

### Community partnerships

- Strong links with primary feeder/secondary transition schools
- Successful partnerships with external providers
- Engagement with local community organisations
- Partnerships enhancing curriculum offer (e.g. Sports Partnerships, subject associations)



## Even Better If: What our schools are working on

Every QA Review Report captures agreed “Even Better Ifs” (EBIs) which are collaboratively identified through the three-day peer QA Review process and used by the host school to inform next steps in their continuous improvement.

### Overview

The most frequently identified areas for development captured under each of the three sections found in QA Review reports were:

#### Leadership at all levels

Schools are working to strengthen leadership capacity, particularly at middle leadership level; enhance monitoring and evaluation systems; and ensure consistent implementation of school vision and priorities.

#### Quality of provision and outcomes

Focus areas include curriculum consistency; teaching quality across all subjects; assessment practices; and ensuring challenge for all learners.

#### Support for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND

Ongoing work to strengthen support mechanisms; improve tracking systems; enhance precision of interventions; and improve attendance particularly for vulnerable groups.

### Improvement priorities

#### Assessment and monitoring systems

The single most common area for development is strengthening assessment for learning practices and monitoring systems. Schools are working to:

- Embed assessment for learning strategies more effectively
- Develop more precise support plans with effective review cycles
- Improve tracking systems for pupil progress
- Use data more judiciously to inform planning and evaluate impact
- Enhance monitoring and evaluation of curriculum impact

#### Curriculum

Curriculum remains a significant priority, but the focus has shifted this year from creation (with curriculum design dominant in previous years) to consistency of implementation and impact measurement.

Priority activities include:

- Ensuring consistent curriculum implementation across subjects
- Enhancing curriculum monitoring processes
- Developing middle leaders' curriculum expertise
- Strengthening subject leadership capacity
- Ensuring curriculum meets diverse pupil needs

## Leadership capacity building

Middle leadership was a particular area of focus, including:

- Developing middle leaders' expertise in monitoring teaching quality
- Enhancing subject leaders' accountability and autonomy
- Providing adequate time for leaders to fulfil responsibilities
- Strengthening coaching and mentoring systems

## Support for disadvantaged pupils

A consistent priority across all previous State of the Nation reports, this again proved to be a focus area including:

- Strengthening support mechanisms for disadvantaged pupils
- Enhancing precision of interventions
- Improving tracking of progress for disadvantaged learners
- Increasing access to enrichment and extracurricular activities
- Improving attendance

## Teaching quality and consistency

- Ensuring consistent application of teaching strategies across all subjects and share best practices more systematically across the school
- Enhancing challenge for all learners, particularly higher attainers
- Improving questioning and checking for understanding
- Increasing opportunities for independent learning

## SEND provision

- Utilising student profiles more effectively in planning
- Strengthening adaptations for SEND students in lessons
- Improving communication systems for SEND provisions
- Enhancing professional development for staff supporting complex needs
- Reviewing SEND record-keeping systems
- **Special school-specific EBIs:** Education, Health and Care Plan target tracking; therapeutic interventions; progress monitoring toward individual education plans
- **Primary school-specific EBIs:** Adaptations in lessons; SEND communication systems; support plan precision; staff training on complex needs
- **Secondary school-specific EBIs:** Tracking SEND student progress; consistency of adaptations across subjects; participation in extracurricular activities

## Oracy and communication

Oracy and communication registered as an emerging priority, appearing more prominent in 2024/25 than previous years. EBIs included:

- Increase focus on oracy across the curriculum
- Develop pupils' oral presentation skills
- Create more opportunities for pupils to articulate their learning
- Enhance opportunities for pupil discussion in foundation subjects

## Attendance

Continuing concern, with EBIs including:

- Improve attendance, particularly for persistent absentees
- Sustain analysis of attendance data for disadvantaged pupils
- Build on improvements in disadvantaged students' attendance

## Trends over time

### Continuing priorities

- Support for disadvantaged pupils remains as important in 2024/25 as in previous reports
- Leadership development continues as a key focus, especially for middle leaders
- Pupil and staff wellbeing, while less explicitly mentioned in EBIs, appears frequently in WWWs suggesting it remains a priority but more embedded

### Shifting focus

- **Greater emphasis on assessment systems:** More sophisticated approaches to tracking and intervention selection emerged as a theme in 2023/24 reports and has continued in 2024/25
- **From curriculum design to curriculum implementation:** Where earlier reports focused on curriculum design (and also curriculum recovery and adaptation in the early post-COVID era), 2024/25 analysis suggests schools have progressed from design to ensuring consistency and quality of delivery
- **Emergence of oracy:** This appears as a new priority area not prominent in earlier reports

### Reduced emphasis

- Remote learning and technology integration (prominent in 2020/21 and 2021/22) receives fewer mentions in 2024/25 reports
- Pandemic-specific concerns around pupil absence and learning loss have evolved into more systemic attendance and progress tracking challenges



# Conclusion: So what?

While our schools demonstrate many strengths, the EBI analysis reveals common areas where they are seeking to improve. We are using these insights to inform our programme, network and knowledge exchange activities within Challenge Partners, and invite other sector organisations and policymakers to consider what more they can do to support schools in addressing these sector-led priorities.

## Assessment for learning and progress tracking

The most prevalent challenge across Hubs involves strengthening assessment systems. While assessment was mentioned in previous State of the Nation reports, the 2024/25 data shows this has become more prominent as schools move from curriculum design to ensuring implementation impact.

### What are the challenges?

- Inconsistent application of assessment for learning strategies
- Gap between assessment data collection and its use to drive improvement:
  - Tracking systems not always informing timely interventions
  - Need for more precise support plans with effective review cycles
- Difficulties in measuring impact of curriculum in foundation subjects

### Why it matters

Without robust assessment systems, schools struggle to identify learning gaps quickly, target interventions effectively, and ensure all pupils make expected progress.

## Consistency of curriculum implementation

While curriculum design appears strong (as evidenced in WWWs), ensuring consistent, high-quality implementation across all subjects and classes remains challenging. This represents significant progress from earlier reports when curriculum design itself was the challenge. Schools have largely moved from "what to teach" to "how to ensure it is taught well everywhere."

### What are the challenges?

- Variability in how well curriculum is delivered in different subjects:
  - Foundation subjects sometimes lacking the same rigor as core subjects
  - Middle leaders at different stages of development in curriculum expertise and leadership
  - Need for stronger quality assurance processes
- Ensuring ambitious activities remove "glass ceilings" for higher attaining pupils

### Why it matters

Inconsistent implementation means pupils' experiences vary depending on which class or subject they're in, potentially widening achievement gaps.

## Middle leadership development

Fifteen hub synthesis reports identified middle leadership capacity as an area for development.

### What are the challenges?

- New or developing subject leaders needing support with monitoring and evaluation:
  - Middle leaders requiring adequate time to fulfil their responsibilities
  - Need for enhanced coaching and mentoring of middle leaders
- Developing accountability and autonomy in curriculum leadership
- Building expertise in assessing curriculum impact

### Why it matters

Without strong middle leadership, schools cannot ensure consistent quality across subjects, making it difficult to identify and address areas of weakness or spread best practice.

## Challenge Partners' support for middle and subject leadership

We are supporting schools and trusts to strengthen their middle and subject leadership through two programmes offered at Hub level:

### Middle Leader Quality Assurance Review

The Middle Leader QA Review translates the rigorous principles of our national Quality Assurance Review into a subject-specific context. It is designed for Hubs within the Network of Excellence that want to build evaluation capacity from the ground up. By empowering subject leaders to act as peer reviewers, Hubs can create a self-sustaining culture of professional challenge and subject-level improvement.

Find more information [here](#)

### Leadership Residency Programme

A dedicated programme for middle or senior leaders, providing opportunities for focused leadership development through purposeful immersion in another school.

Find more information [here](#)

## Meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils

This has been a consistent priority across all four State of the Nation reports (2020/21, 2021/22, 2023/24, and 2024/25), suggesting it remains one of education's most intractable challenges. While individual schools show excellent practice (as evidenced in WWWs and Areas of Excellence), system-wide inconsistency persists.

## What are the challenges?

- Strengthening support mechanisms to accelerate progress
- Tracking progress more effectively to enable timely support
- Improving precision of interventions
- Ensuring full participation in enrichment activities
- Building on improvements in attendance

## Why it matters

This remains our most enduring and urgent challenge as a sector. Tackling it is crucial to the betterment of individual life chances, the economy and our communities. Our [2030 Strategy](#) sets out the contribution we will make and we invite you to join us in this important endeavour.

## Reducing educational inequality: Our 2030 Strategy

Challenge Partners' mission is to reduce educational inequality and enhance the life chances of all children. Our 2030 Strategy, published in November 2025, commits us to reaching and benefiting more disadvantaged pupils - growing beyond the 110,000 pupils eligible for Free School Meals in our schools and trusts in 2024/25.

### We will do this by:

1. Targeting our growth efforts in areas and schools with above-average levels of disadvantaged without compromising our commitments to building Hubs and programmes around proven excellent practice, and improving life chances for all children. To achieve this we will:
  - Upgrade our CRM and secure data analytics support or capabilities so we can identify and engage schools and trusts in greatest need
  - Better leverage the intelligence, networks and capacity in our local Hubs to identify and engage schools in greatest need
  - Secure donors and partners to boost our growth efforts in deprived regions, with sensitivity to local context and understanding of regional variation in how deprivation manifests
  - Build our central team presence in the regions we are targeting
2. Ensuring our suite of programmes continues to prioritise improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, and better life chances for all, including:
  - Implementing and evaluating changes to the QA Review to tighten evaluation of how well schools serve their disadvantaged pupils and foster engagement and inclusion
  - Gaining a more nuanced understanding of disadvantage and how it manifests for different groups of pupils and in different areas so we can support schools and Hubs to deliver a more nuanced and impactful response

# Annex 1: AI transparency statement

## Methodology and ethical AI use

This report was compiled using data-driven insights from 209 Quality Assurance (QA) Reviews conducted across the English education sector. To ensure the highest standards of data integrity and privacy, our analysis adhered to the following ethical framework:

- **Secure processing:** All qualitative data was processed using enterprise-grade Artificial Intelligence tools within a private, secure environment.
- **Data sovereignty:** No school-specific data, department identifiers, or staff job titles were used to train or refine public AI models. Our "closed-loop" system ensures that the information remains within our charitable organisation and its trusted partners.
- **Thematic aggregation:** While AI assisted in identifying broad themes and correlations, all findings have been aggregated and anonymised. This report focuses exclusively on macro-level trends; no individual institution or professional is identifiable.
- **Human-in-the-loop:** All AI-generated insights were reviewed and validated by human experts to ensure contextual accuracy and professional rigour.

# Annex 2: Quality Assurance Review

Our flagship peer Quality Assurance Review (QA Review) drives school- and system-level improvements to benefit all pupils.

Over three days, the QA Review rigorously evaluates teaching and learning, curriculum and outcomes, as well as leadership at all levels. It places a strong emphasis on how schools are supporting their most disadvantaged learners and those with additional needs, providing a dedicated assessment of how well schools do this. From 2025/26, the QA Review also evaluates how well schools promote engagement and inclusion.

Through the process, schools and visiting reviewers work collaboratively under the guidance of an expert Lead Reviewer to identify areas of strength for celebration (WWWs or What Went Wells) and areas where improvements can be made (EBIs or Even Better Ifs). These are captured in a report written by the Lead Reviewer.

Schools participating in the programme host an annual review and reciprocate by sending their headteacher and senior leaders to review other schools within the partnership, offering continuous professional development for everyone involved.

## Areas of Excellence

Schools have the option of putting forward very strong practice for recognition as an Area of Excellence. If accredited through the QA Review process, schools and trusts are supported and encouraged to share their expertise with peers nationwide.

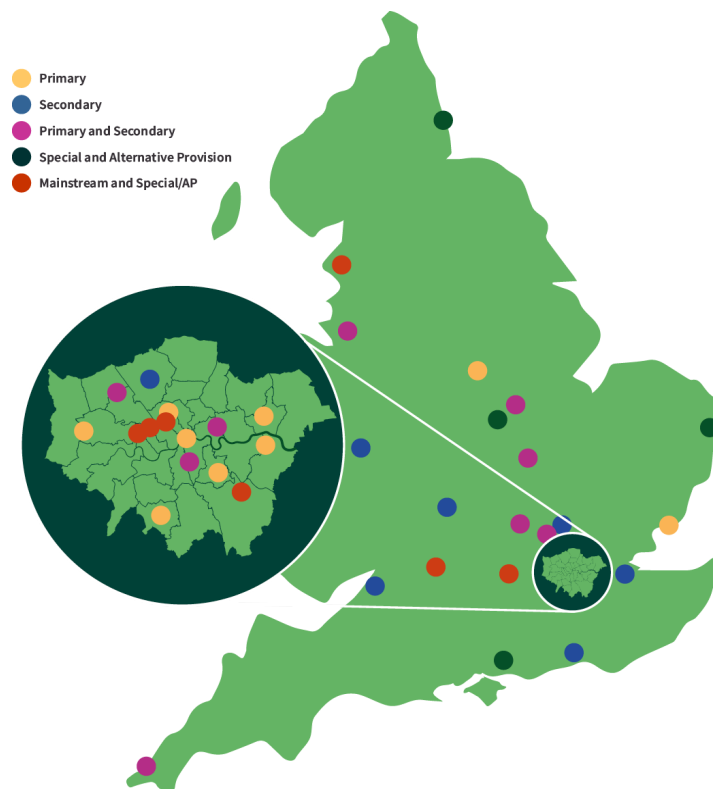
Across all 408 2024/25 QA Reviews, review teams accredited 82 Areas of Excellence (AoEs).

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF AREAS OF EXCELLENCE ACCREDITED
Curriculum	12
Equality and Inclusion	24
Leadership and Ethos	23
Outcomes for Pupils	2
Pupil Learning	5
School Improvement	1
Subjects	11
Teaching	4

# Annex 3: Hubs

Local collaboration is a crucial ingredient in Challenge Partners’ impact. It allows schools to come together to address local priorities by harnessing their collective expertise and resources. By working together, schools in our Hubs achieve what no single school can do alone, sharing expertise, co-creating initiatives, and strengthening leadership. Their collaborative efforts improve teaching, develop leadership at all levels, and maximise outcomes for all pupils. By connecting Hubs to each other in our national Network of Excellence we ensure excellence flows between localities, combating the longstanding regional disparities that blight our system and country.

Hubs are led by Senior Partners and Hub Managers from high-performing schools or trusts, equipping them to model excellent practice, develop leadership within the Hub, and amplify impact across their Hub and beyond. Each Hub co-creates a Hub Action Plan each year, identifying local priorities and opportunities for impact. Hub Funding from Challenge Partners brings the plan to life, enabling schools to collaborate, innovate, and drive sustained improvement across their area.



## Hubs represented in this report

**28 Hubs that operated in both 2024/25 and 2025/26 are included in this report:** Ambition North, Ambition South, Ashfield, Aspire, Aylesbury Vale, Beacon, Brighton and Hove, Camden, Charter School Educational Trust, Chrysalis, Compass, Compton, Cornwall, East London, East Midlands South, Empower, Impact Alliance, Inspire, Lighthouse, London Special and AP, Midlands Primary, Midlands Secondary, North East Mainstream, North East Special, Shared Horizons, South East London, South West London, and The Heart of England.

We are grateful to them all.