



RSA

Action and Research Centre

No school an island

**Suffolk
education inquiry
executive summary**

*Louise Bamfield,
Joe Hallgarten and
Matthew Taylor*

May 2013

The **RSA** in
partnership with



Foreword by Matthew Taylor: The Suffolk Journey

The announcement by Suffolk County Council in summer 2012 of the RSA's Raising the Bar Inquiry marked a growing awareness among the Suffolk educational community that things had to change. The Council commissioned this report on the explicit agreement that the RSA had the final say over its contents. This independence has been respected throughout and has enabled us to explore issues and proposals without constraint.

At the heart of this report is our belief in the power of collaboration. Our approach is to combine devolution of responsibility and resources to schools with an expectation that they commit to strong partnerships with:

- 'Pyramids' of secondary and their feeder primary schools and early years settings where objectives and accountabilities are focused on the attainment and progression of every child;
- Other neighbouring schools and organisations working with young people and the wider community where the objectives and accountabilities are focused on the well-being of every child;
- Schools with a similar profile to themselves in 'families', where the objectives and accountabilities are focused on the quality of teaching and learning and school improvement.

For this collaboration to make a difference it must be long term, substantive, focused and based on measurable aims. We have called this report 'no school an island' to signal the importance that we attach to the principle that publicly funded institutions must take both individual and shared responsibility for the interests of the children and young people of Suffolk. We believe that schools now need to open their doors more routinely and purposefully to a wider range of partners, engaging with employers to enable children and young people to have a richer understanding of, and engagement in, the world of work, and to involve the wider community, especially parents, in valuing education and raising children's achievement.

The principle of collaboration has also guided the process of the Inquiry. Instead of a conventional expert commission we opted for a more open, discursive and action-focused approach. Nine Inquiry solutions groups involving stakeholders from inside and outside the education system have powerfully shaped the conclusions of this report and – more importantly – they have started to turn their proposals into action.

A number of important insights gained from this process should inform next steps. There is the continued need for clarity and openness about performance, not just at the Local Authority level but in relation to every school. Being satisfied with existing standards is part of what allowed Suffolk to fall so far behind. We believe strong progress can be made in the county, but at a time when all schools are striving to make further improvement, there can never be a return to complacency.

Progress cannot be made by imposing a quick fix imported from elsewhere. A strength of the solution group process has come from the opportunity to discuss what has worked in other systems and to refine these solutions so they fit the specific Suffolk context. The way forward must be stamped ‘designed for Suffolk, in Suffolk’. In future years other localities looking for ways to improve should be seeking to learn the lessons from Suffolk’s success.

When exploring successful improvement strategies there is a tendency to overlay a post hoc neatness on the process but, on closer inspection these success stories – from Ontario to London Challenge – turn out to have been multi-faceted and emergent. Achieving a step-change in performance will require effort and adaptation. Some ideas will work well, others will need to be refined. The work of the solutions group should not end with the publication of this report; indeed, their on-going role exemplifies the call for Raising the Bar to be seen not as a one off process but as a continuing campaign.

Just about everyone we have met over the last ten months seeks the same destination for Suffolk; for every child and young person to have the best possible chance to grow into successful, fulfilled and responsible citizens. We believe that our recommendations provide a strong and distinctive framework, but ultimately it is not further deliberation that Suffolk needs, but action. We are confident and excited about the progress that Suffolk’s schools and communities will be able to achieve in the months and years to come.

Ten key facts about Suffolk's children, young people and schools

- 1 Suffolk is home to 166,900 children and young people, 22.9 percent of the total population of 728,200.
- 2 The total population of Suffolk is predicted to grow by 14.6 percent by 2032. During the same period, the population of 0–19 year olds is predicted to grow by 6.1 percent.
- 3 5 percent of all primary aged children and 10 percent of all pupils at secondary school in Suffolk do not hold English as a first language. The average for England is 17 percent.
- 4 Approximately one in six children in Suffolk is born into poverty, lower than the national average of nearly one in three.
- 5 There are 268 first and primary schools, 17 middle schools and 46 secondary schools in Suffolk. Seven primary schools, two middle schools and 28 of the secondary schools are Academies. There are four secondary Free Schools in Suffolk.
- 6 There are 10 maintained schools with sixth forms, 13 Academies with sixth forms, one sixth form college, 4 further education colleges and one 16–19 school.
- 7 Suffolk is ranked 148 out of 150 local authorities for attainment at age 11 and 142 out of 150 at age 16.
- 8 57 percent of Disadvantaged* pupils and 79 percent of Other** pupils in Suffolk achieved the expected level in both English and maths at age 11, compared with 68 percent and 84 percent nationally for each group.
- 9 27 percent of Disadvantaged* pupils and 56 percent of Other** pupils in Suffolk achieved five A*–C GCSEs or equivalent, including English and maths, compared with 39 percent and 66 percent nationally.
- 10 Currently (April 2013) 2.3 percent (241) of 16–17 year olds in Suffolk are in employment without any training opportunities associated with their job, while 4.8 percent (509) are not in any kind of employment or training.

* Disadvantaged pupils are defined as those in receipt of the Pupil Premium funds (Looked After Pupils and those who are FSM Ever6 – have ever been FSM in the past 6 years).

** Other pupils are those who are not in the Disadvantaged group

Introduction

In July 2012, the **RSA** was invited by Suffolk County Council to conduct an independent Inquiry into how to achieve a significant and sustained improvement in pupil attainment and improved capabilities for young people in the world of work.

Our goal over the ten months of the Inquiry has been to contribute to a fundamental change in the way that education is discussed, perceived and delivered across the county. We have involved stakeholders in the process of designing long-term solutions by forming **Solutions Groups**¹ to focus on particular issues and test new ideas. We have also benefited from the contributions of hundreds of people to **Shout Out Suffolk**² and the **Call for Ideas**.³ The opportunity to take part in the conversation will continue beyond this report through continuing **Raising the Bar** activity.

Although the Inquiry has explored some issues relating to the early years, and its work on employer engagement is connected to post-16 learning opportunities, the central focus has been on pupils aged 5–16, since this was where the data demonstrated particular underperformance.

Background and context

A period of rapid change is underway in the English education system. The scale and pace of reform presents new challenges, particularly in dealing with potential isolation and polarisation in an increasingly diversified school system. There is also the challenge of a difficult economic climate. Nevertheless, the reforms present new opportunities for schools to lead improvements together, exercising greater responsibility over how resources are spent.

The situation in Suffolk

The performance of Suffolk's schools has followed an erratic course over the last decade. Despite recent improvements, Suffolk is still performing poorly in comparison with national averages and its statistical neighbours. Poor aggregate levels of pupil progress and attainment are combined with wide gaps in educational achievement between disadvantaged groups and other pupils, leading to poor outcomes for disadvantaged young people beyond schooling and in later life. In the words of the County Council, 'Suffolk is stuck'. Worrying too is the higher than average proportion of young people who do not continue in education beyond age 16, and who fail to complete post-compulsory courses in school or college. Suffolk's 2008 Community Strategy set the ambition to be in the top quartile nationally for performance in learning and skills by 2028. It has made no progress so far towards this goal.

1. www.suffolk.gov.uk/your-council/plans-and-policies/raising-the-bar-briefing/raising-the-bar-solution-groups/

2. <http://shoutoutsuffolk.org/>

3. <http://rtbsuffolk.org/>

Suffolk's poor student outcomes appear particularly disappointing when judged against its relative prosperity, although the headline figures conceal significant variations in rates of employment and living standards.

What is causing this poor performance? Within the county, there is still a tendency to attribute this to individual factors, particularly 'low aspirations' by parents and young people. However, there is no evidence that pupil or parental aspirations in Suffolk are lower than anywhere else in England. In any case, research demonstrates that personal aspiration explains very little of the attainment gap.⁴ Instead, we need to look at features of the organisational culture in Suffolk schools and the wider environment.

Our starting point

Turning around the performance in Suffolk calls for an integrated strategy to transform school performance, narrow the socio-economic gap in children's learning and broaden young people's horizons for employment and adult life. Our proposals to achieve these goals are based on a model of building collaborative capacity.

The power of collaboration is one of the key lessons to emerge from successful education reform programmes. Strong partnership working can make a significant difference to the quality of teaching and learning. The practical experience of working with pupils and teachers in other settings can help foster a stronger sense of moral purpose and shared responsibility for children's learning. It is the combination of these two important factors that gives collaboration 'the power to make the ordinary extraordinary'.

1. Building a movement for educational change

In the words of the County Council's chief executive Deborah Cadman, Suffolk requires not a series of piecemeal reforms but a concerted, community-wide 'movement for educational change'. People in Suffolk are at different places along this journey. Sustained action is needed to achieve deeper levels of engagement by all relevant groups.

To transform the culture of learning across the county, we believe that Suffolk schools and local communities need to:

- **Connect and collaborate more routinely and systematically** with people, ideas and practices across and beyond the county, fostering a culture that is outward looking and open-minded;
- **Challenge learners and teachers to set high expectations** for themselves and their peers, driving out complacency in performance and generating an organisational culture in which practices are not just shared but genuinely interrogated and improved;

4. For all references, see the full report at www.thersa.org/suffolkinquiry

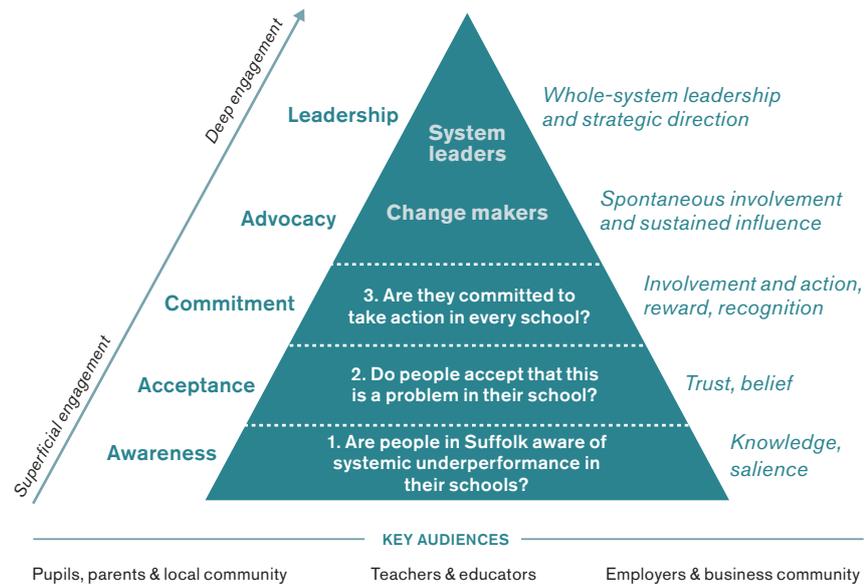
- **Innovate and implement effective practice**, encouraging people to design their own solutions, building on the best available evidence and contributing to a growing evidence base about what works to improve outcomes; and
- **Create a more inclusive educational culture**, which empowers individuals and groups from all social backgrounds and helps create a sense of common purpose across different (and partially competing) institutions.

Recommendation 1

Stimulate new thinking and ways of working through a new strategic partnership between Suffolk and a London Borough

In order to stimulate new thinking and create the impetus for more radical change, we propose that Suffolk should negotiate a long-term strategic partnership with an educationally improving east London Borough, to be jointly funded by both local authorities and through external funding. Based upon a programme of cultural and educational exchange and work-related learning, a reciprocal arrangement would offer mutual benefits at multiple levels: enriching pupils’ learning through joint projects; broadening and deepening teachers’ professional expertise; and strengthening leadership capacity at all levels, with a new future leaders exchange programme for teachers with outstanding leadership potential.

Figure 1a: A model of how engagement is built



Source: Adapted from the Ipsos-Mori model of engagement, in Castell and Thompson (2007) 'Understanding attitudes to poverty in the UK', York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Suffolk’s education leaders need to move from focusing overwhelmingly on their particular school or community, to leading action across the whole county. With some exceptions, there is still a tendency for schools to look to the Local Authority to set the strategic priorities and provide the resources to fund them. Although the County Council’s school improvement strategy is already partly built on school to school support approaches, these are very much led through the Local Authority. The County Council may still be sustaining a kind of compliant dependency

where many schools (including Academies) welcome the cushion of Local Authority ‘bailout’, but lack genuine commitment to shared accountability and cross-county educational success.

We believe that the County Council’s current plan for a new learning partnership could be the foundation of a more radical shift in responsibilities to schools. It is time for schools to accept that they cannot keep looking to the Local Authority to drive change or provide the resources to make it happen. Schools now need to take collective and shared responsibility for raising the achievements of every pupil across the county.

Recommendation 2

Foster a county-wide change in leadership through a new school-led Suffolk Partnership for Excellence in Learning

To foster a county-wide change in leadership, we recommend that a new Suffolk Partnership for Excellence in Learning (SPEL) be established by April 2014. With a broad membership, this would provide a forum for all schools, regardless of status, to come together and agree a shared vision and strategic priorities for the whole system. To achieve a genuinely self-improving school system, we recommend that activities and resources for school improvement (including staff resources) be devolved over time to the SPEL, with the aim of making services more responsive to the needs of schools, whilst strengthening the oversight function of the Local Authority.

| SPEL leadership and intervention role | Local Authority support and challenge role |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ creating and reviewing education strategy, priorities and targets ▪ driving system-wide improvement ▪ creating a culture of purposeful collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ convening partnerships ▪ making and shaping effective commissioning ▪ champion of children, parents and the community |

A key first step for the SPEL will be to develop a compelling vision and identify longer-term strategic priorities. Whilst it would run against the spirit of the Inquiry’s approach to set specific targets for improvement, we believe that the longer-term educational aspirations could include the following range of qualitative but measurable goals. By 2016:

- Suffolk will have created a highly effective ‘self-improving school system’ which is influencing the approaches of other localities in England and internationally;
- Pupils in Suffolk will be more engaged in their learning, as reported by pupils themselves through an annual survey which captures the voice of children and young people;
- Children and young people will demonstrate significant improvements in their well-being;
- Every school will have evidence to show how robust partnerships with at least one other school have contributed to improved outcomes;
- Suffolk will have nationally regarded collaborative practice focused on closing the gap in attainment between disadvantaged and other pupils;
- Suffolk will have a national reputation for the quality and depth of its partnerships between employers and educators.

At the same time, the SPEL will need to work with its schools to set some ambitious improvement goals. For illustration, these could include the following:

| Accountability measure | Current performance | 2016 aspiration |
|---|--|---|
| Percent of Y6 pupils achieving L4 English and Maths | 74 percent; 5 percent lower than national average | At least 85 percent and above national average |
| Percent of disadvantaged Y6 pupils achieving L4 English and Maths | 57 percent; 11 percent lower than national average | At least 70 percent and above national average |
| Percent of Y11 pupils achieving 5 A*-Cs including English and Maths | 51 percent; 8 percent lower than national average | At least 65 percent, and above national average |
| Percent of disadvantaged Y11 pupils achieving 5 A*-Cs including English and Maths | 27 percent; 12 percent lower than national average | At least 50 percent and above national average |
| Percent of schools currently rated at least 'good' by OFSTED | 69 percent; 5 percent lower than national average | At least 85 percent and above national average |
| Percent of schools currently rated 'outstanding' by OFSTED | 19 percent; 2 percent lower than national average | At least 25 percent and above national average |

2. Strengthen capacity for leadership and collaboration

Headteachers, governors and senior leaders all have a vital role to play as system leaders in a more devolved and collaborative school system. The challenge for Suffolk is two-fold: first, to build capacity for leadership and governance at all levels in order to drive school improvement; and second, to deploy this capacity to ensure that every school partnership is focused on achieving its core purpose and improving outcomes for children.

Governors have an increasingly important role to play as system leaders and change makers in a more devolved and collaborative school system. Our analysis here indicates that there is much room for improvement in each core area of governance defined in statute: giving strategic direction; acting as a critical friend; and ensuring accountability. To address these issues, **we recommend that all governing bodies be encouraged and expected to build capacity through processes of peer review and mutual challenge.**⁵

Now, more than ever, schools need to work together to make best use of the knowledge and resources that are available in the system. However, teaching and learning will not improve if partnerships are allowed to

5. The recommendations in this executive summary are in a slightly different order from the full report. For ease of reference, the recommendations' numbering has remained the same as in the full report.

Recommendation 4

More challenging and strategic governing bodies

Recommendation 5

Critical review and audit of partnership arrangements

drift without clear strategic focus. **To ensure that all partnerships are ‘fit for purpose’, we propose that all schools should undertake a process of critical self-evaluation and partnership review.** This will enable schools to make informed decisions about the future of existing partnerships.

Recommendation 6

Support every child’s journey through effective cross-phase partnerships and shared accountability for outcomes

One of the most important partnerships is the ‘pyramid’ relationship between feeder primary schools and receiving secondary schools. **To ensure that pupils make successful transitions across phases of learning, we recommend that secondary schools agree to monitor pupil outcomes in their first term of Year Seven** and produce a report for governors in all schools in the pyramid, which highlights any difficulties that individuals or groups of pupils have in settling in and progressing. By studying the evidence together in this way, schools will be enabled to agree joint processes to improve coordination and support.

Recommendation 7

Foster challenge and peer review through ‘families of schools’

Partners need to be prepared to work together in a constructive but critical way, being ready to give and receive challenging feedback rather than simply offering ‘soft’ forms of support and advice. To help schools look afresh at what they do, **we recommend that Suffolk adopts the ‘families of schools’ model developed in the City Challenge.** This groups schools together in different areas but with similar pupil intakes, allowing schools to elicit best practice through interrogation of data and practices from partner schools outside their locality. Building on the solution group’s initial trialling, this model should look to include schools from neighbouring counties and the East London borough partnership.

Recommendation 8

Federation for Small Schools

Finally, more needs to be done to end isolation and break down barriers to collaboration at the local level. To this end, **we recommend that any small school with a roll lower than 100 pupils should enter a federation.** Schools should begin the process as early as possible, to allow for greater time to find appropriate school partners and work together to establish strong relationships, maximise resources and ensure a smooth transition to the new partnership.

Recommendation 9

Promote parental voice through a parent and community council for every school, especially those in a trust or federation

In addition **we suggest that every school should establish a parents’ council, with representatives from the local community,** which should be given specific responsibility for engaging with the school leadership to *‘support pupils’ achievement, behaviour and safety and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’*. A council would be especially beneficial for schools which enter a formal Federation or Multi-Academy Trust, as it will help promote community voice and protect the distinctive identity of each federated school.

3. Enhance and enrich the quality of teaching and learning

Achieving a step-change in school performance depends above all on improving the quality of teaching. Drawing on a sub-sample of Ofsted inspection reports, our analysis identified a number of common issues around inconsistent quality, lack of differentiation, inadequate use of information to meet pupils' needs and poor use of marking to provide feedback.

While the new national Teacher Standards provide a useful baseline of expectations, we believe that schools in Suffolk could go further to define what good and outstanding teaching looks like in the Suffolk context, recognising the demands that come from working in a large, rural and coastal county, and responding to the particular cultural and organisational challenges identified through this Inquiry.

We recommend that a new set of 'Suffolk core teacher competences' should be developed by the teaching schools and wider partners. These will set out the specific knowledge, skills and experiences that Suffolk teachers should be able to demonstrate at different stages of their career, as part of a new 'Suffolk Teacher' identity. These competences should then form the basis of a new framework of professional development, which incorporates the principles of joint practice development (JPD). The SPEL should set an aspiration for all teachers to pursue a Masters level qualification.

Conversations with headteachers and governors in Suffolk have revealed two common frustrations: first, the difficulty in attracting high quality teachers to apply to Suffolk schools, especially in secondary subjects; and second, the perception that too many teachers in Suffolk have only ever taught in the county, leading to an inward looking professional culture. A combination of incentives is needed to attract high quality recruits to the county and develop outstanding leaders. Building on existing recruitment strategies, **we recommend that Suffolk schools widen the pool of talent by investing in the salaried element of the School Direct programme**, as a way of encouraging outstanding recent graduates and career-changers to consider teaching in Suffolk schools. At the same time, the County Council should take advantage of opportunities to promote the attractiveness of Suffolk as a place to live and work, looking to attract dynamic leaders, mid-career teachers and subject specialists to the county.

To encourage effective, evidence-based partnerships across Suffolk and beyond, the SPEL should establish a Challenge Fund to provide seed funding for innovative joint working with a strong research component. With support from experienced researchers, applicants will need to show that they have developed a robust methodology and evaluation framework, demonstrating that their idea has the potential to contribute to the evidence base on school improvement and help build lasting change.

As part of a coordinated drive to create a more inclusive and collaborative culture in Suffolk schools, **we recommend that school partnerships explore options to 'pool' a percentage of their pupil premium to design joint approaches to narrowing the achievement gap.**

Recommendation 10

Promote and celebrate professional expertise through a new Suffolk Teacher identity and annual Suffolk Excellence in Teaching awards

Recommendation 3

Widen the pool of talent by investing in teacher recruitment and School Direct

Recommendation 11

Establish a new Challenge Fund to provide seed funding for innovative, evidence-based practice

Recommendation 12

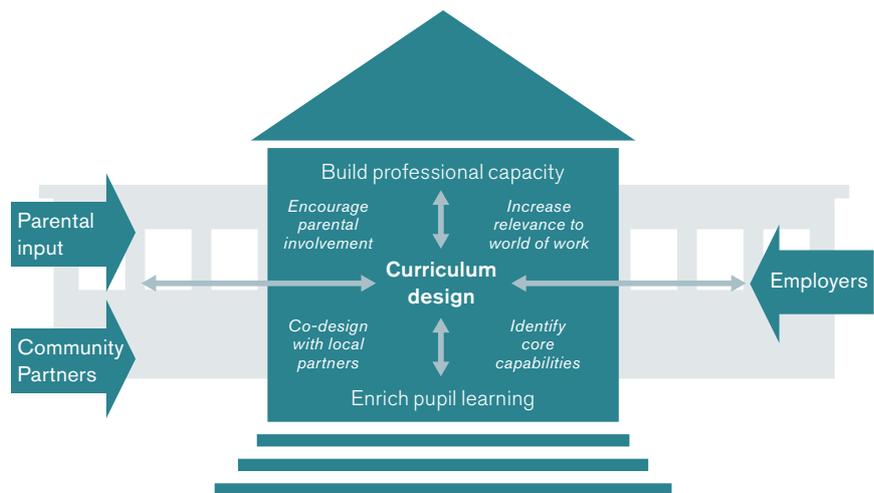
Effective, collaborative use of the pupil premium

Recommendation 13

Innovative Curriculum Design to enrich pupil and professional learning

Although the new slimmed down national curriculum is focused on the ‘core knowledge’ to which all young people should be guaranteed access, this core entitlement should form just one part of a locally-generated curriculum which has equal status to the national curriculum. **We propose that all schools should be encouraged to participate in a programme of innovative curriculum design, in partnership with individuals and institutions in a school’s community.** This approach can build a high quality curriculum that is outward facing, flexible and responsive to the particular needs and aspirations of students and their communities.

Figure 3a: Enriching learning through innovative curriculum design



Recommendation 14

Develop and expand the Suffolk Baccalaureate to foster a broader set of competences and wider educational engagement

A Suffolk Baccalaureate could bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience and provide young people with a valuable record of their achievements in all areas of learning. **Building on the encouraging early progress with a 9–14 Baccalaureate, we recommend that pilot schools should be empowered to act as lead developers for a 9–19 Suffolk Baccalaureate.**

4. Broaden horizons for growth, enterprise and well-being

Recommendation 15

Campaign to make Raising the Bar every parent’s business

As the most important ‘educators’ of children, parents have a responsibility to do as much as they can to support their child’s learning and development, as well as having the right to be treated fairly by schools and the education system and have their voices valued and respected. **We propose that Suffolk County Council, as champions of children and families, should lead a campaign to make Raising the Bar every parent’s business,** which shows how parents, schools and early years providers can work together to meet the needs of children and promote their well-being.

Recommendation 16

Children and young people's board to support achievement and well-being in every locality

Recommendation 17

An entitlement to earlier, richer and more empowering engagement with the world of work

Recommendation 18

Empower young people to design and commission an effective cross-county approach to mentoring

Furthermore, **we suggest that new children and young people's boards to support achievement and well-being should be established in each locality in Suffolk, to provide a forum for sharing knowledge and enhancing communication at a local level.** With support from District and Borough Councils where appropriate, the boards would provide a regular opportunity for schools to take part in a structured conversation with other groups and organisations in the local area, as well as creating a 'match making' space for networking, which will foster deeper engagement between organisations.

One of the core aims of education in the twenty-first century is to support students to become independent learners, equipping them with the formal qualifications and flexible life skills that will be vital for adult life and an ever-changing world of work. **We believe that children need – and are entitled to receive – earlier, richer and more empowering engagement with the world of work. Building progressively from the primary years, this entitlement should be based on a new learning framework for citizenship, enterprise and employability.** We further recommend that Suffolk schools and County Council support the development of a new brokerage service to connect business and education, consisting of a small team supported by an online facility, which would provide a single and personal contact point for educators, employers and young people.

We also believe that further action is needed to broaden young people's horizons and make sure they have the practical knowledge, advice and support they need to make wise choices about their career, and achieve successful transitions to further education and employment. **We suggest that young people themselves should be in the driving seat of designing and developing a coherent, targeted approach to mentoring across the whole county and all age groups.** To be genuinely empowering, students themselves should assume the role of commissioner, holding a (delegated) budget and control over resources to ensure that the types of mentoring available meet their needs.

5. Celebrate success and sustain momentum over time

Transforming education outcomes is not a goal that can be achieved overnight. Experience shows that many education reforms fail or falter because they are not given the time to succeed. Thus, the process of 'raising the bar' in Suffolk will not end either with the publishing of this report, or the response from Suffolk County Council that will follow. Instead, the capacity for continued improvement must be embedded within the new structures proposed here, but above all in a new set of cultural attitudes, beliefs and expectations about what is possible and what can be achieved.

Just as people need the right incentives to become involved at the outset, so too do they need reward and recognition for their efforts

Recommendation 19

Annual 'change makers' awards to celebrate outstanding educational achievement and collaboration

Recommendation 20

Annual review and self-evaluation to renew and refresh the strategy for school improvement

and contribution. Acknowledging and celebrating success has a real and tangible impact on people's motivations and hence on sustaining momentum and progress over time. To provide a chance to celebrate and publicise the county's achievements, **we recommend that, in partnership with community, corporate and media partners, Suffolk County Council and the SPEL should host an annual Suffolk Change Makers event for pupils, parents, staff and teachers, school governors, employers and other partners in the local community.** With input from pupils themselves in designing the awards, the event would provide a chance to showcase innovative practice and effective partnerships and celebrate schools' successes in rapidly improving performance.

Needless to say, the process of reflection and renewal will not be wholly celebratory. Openness and candour are needed about the challenges that have yet to be overcome. **To renew and refresh the county-wide strategy for school improvement, the SPEL should undertake an annual review and evaluation of progress.** Led by schools rather than the Local Authority, the annual review should be seen as a genuine opportunity for renewal and reflection, based on honest and critical appraisal.

The RSA: an enlightenment organisation committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today's social challenges. Through its ideas, research and 27,000-strong Fellowship it seeks to understand and enhance human capability so we can close the gap between today's reality and people's hopes for a better world.



8 John Adam Street
London WC2N 6EZ
+44 (0)20 7930 5115

Registered as a charity
in England and Wales
no. 212424

Copyright © RSA 2013

www.thersa.org

Designed by www.soapbox.co.uk