



S.P.A. Study into partnership activities to reach disadvantaged pupils

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Executive Summary

Partnerships between state-maintained and independent schools have existed for decades, formally introduced by the Labour government in 1997, when they charged private schools with sharing their facilities and teachers with local state-maintained schools to address the 'educational apartheid created by the public/private divide diminishes the whole education system' (DFEE, 1997). Successive Governments funded independent state school partnerships, investing around £15 million in them between 1998 and 2011 (ISC, 2013). Since then, funding has been sporadic, with the last in 2019. In this round, applicants had to show how their project would 'support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds' (DfE, 2019a, p.4).

This report is an analysis of responses to a survey investigating how their partnership work is reaching disadvantaged pupils. It was completed by six members of the School Partnerships Alliance, all of which were secondary phase independent schools. In total, the research covers 10 secondary independent schools working with a high number of state-maintained schools.

Good practice sees programmes co-created by schools from both sectors, with heads contributing to their strategic direction. There was no single arrangement for partnerships, their structures varied according to the contexts of the partner schools involved.

The aims of programmes for disadvantaged pupils focused on raising aspiration, broadening education, deepening academic knowledge and understanding, and increasing academic confidence. Activities to deliver programme academic aims included core subject sessions for both primary and secondary pupils. Cultural and social capital, pupil wellbeing and skills development also featured in partnership aims.

Participating pupils were identified and invited to join programmes by staff in their own schools. Senior students from independent schools were involved in delivering sessions to primary pupils in several partnerships.

The independent schools in this study reported participating in programmes for disadvantaged pupils because 'it is the right thing to do'. They also acknowledged that it helped their students to develop skills, through planning and leading sessions, and avoid the insularity that can come from being educated with culturally similar others.

Recommendations:

- Disadvantaged pupils should be identified and selected for partnership programmes by their schools.
- While pupil premium, free school meals, SEND pupils and looked after children are likely to be considered, schools may identify needs in other pupils.
- A memorandum of understanding between partner schools records joint aims and secures the commitment of all partners.
- Establishing programme aims with awareness of current DfE PPG priorities would help ensure that partnerships contribute to meeting national needs.
- Programme impact evaluation should be planned when aims are drawn up, including qualitative data where relevant.
- Partnership programmes should be strategic, with headteachers contributing to their strategic directions.
- Every school needs a partnership champion, a named individual responsible for the school's cross-sector working.

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Introduction

The School Partnerships Alliance (S.P.A.) is a charity dedicated to researching, enabling and promoting meaningful partnerships between different schools across the state and independent sectors for the benefit of children throughout the national education system. We are a member organisation that supports and promotes schools of different types working together – and learning from one another – to improve outcomes for all young people. Our over-arching objective is to be a force for school improvement and the strongest pupil outcomes, informed by research and driven by impact.

The School Partnerships Alliance believes that reaching those most in need is a core component of cross-sector partnership working. It also supports partnerships that are strategic, sustainable, impactful, and that are mutual.

This report is an analysis of responses from six S.P.A. members (see Appendix 1). All were secondary phase independent schools. In total, the research covers 10 secondary independent schools and more than 20 state-maintained schools (13 primary and 7 secondary are specified in reports, with a further 100+ from both phases referred to in general).

Constitution of partnerships

Some arrangements are bilateral, involving one independent school working with a single state school. Others involve independent schools working with a high number of state-maintained partners. For example, one participating group of schools works in hubs with state schools nearby, alongside an international partner, with its partnerships free to schools from all phases.

Some arrangements are non-contractual, while others are each governed by a Memorandum of Understanding.

‘One partnership was founded on four principles – sustainability, impact, mutual benefit for all stakeholders and a commitment to challenging disadvantage.’

Some activities were embedded in curriculum time, some took place in days off timetable, and others took place outside normal school hours.

Drawing up the programme

The partnership lead typically works with staff from partner schools to develop the overall shape and focus of each programme. Specialist teachers then work together to put the strategy into operation.

‘We consider: For whom? Focused on what? Aiming to achieve what?’

The design of secondary programmes includes feedback from both students and mentors who have participated in them.

Senior students from host schools are often involved in delivering sessions, especially to primary pupils.

One school has a five-year strategy ‘based on future workplace skills and knowledge, through experiential learning for both independent and state school partners’.

Theory of Change

The schools in our study did not have a theory of change for their work with disadvantaged pupils. Most were clear in what they are seeking to achieve

‘We focus on providing a real partnership opportunity, pupils from both spaces interacting and having positive, purposeful experiences and interactions. Providing an extension / cultural development for pupils outside of their core curriculum.’

One school was working on a five year strategy for its partnership working, which will include SEND in its next strategy. Another reported four key principles that underpin its partnership work: be mutually beneficial, build community, be long-term, sustainable, and build capacity.

Activities

Partnerships offer activities in a range of curriculum subjects, with maths, English and science cited most often. Other activities on offer ranged from sport to robotics. The focus of activities included academic enrichment, both in core subjects and applied topics such as sustainability and journalism. These enrichment opportunities included debates, quizzes and competitions. Alongside academic enrichment, some activities were designed to deepen the pupils’ cultural capital, through trips and visits.

Activities were run in various ways. These included one-off days, where pupils are off timetable to join together for partnership activities and events, summer schools, residential trips, and online mentoring. Activities also take place during timetabled slots and in co-curricular sessions. The type and timing of delivery is tailored to suit the needs of the schools.

Aims (see Appendix 2)

All of our partnerships had aims that included raising aspiration, broadening education, deepening academic knowledge and understanding, and increasing academic confidence. This reflected the strong commitment to the academic development of disadvantaged pupils. For a third of the partnerships, this included preparation for public examinations.

The majority of the partnerships in our study aimed to increase the cultural capital of the pupils. This included, but was not limited to, an associated aim of developing sporting, creative or performing skills. While some addressed one aspect of cultural capital through drama workshops, others did so by taking pupils to a performance at a theatre. Most partnerships also had aims about preparation for university, another component of cultural capital that disadvantaged pupils may lack. One partnership provides each secondary pupil with a university mentor as part of this.

The importance of pupil wellbeing was evident through partnership aims, with the majority setting out to support pupil wellbeing, and also develop their resilience.

In addition to developing cultural capital, half of the partnerships also set out to develop the social capital of disadvantaged pupils.

The partnerships that worked exclusively with primary schools all had aims that covered individual mentoring, alongside wrap-round activities. These latter did not feature in aims of secondary partnerships.

Scope

Most of the partnerships ran focused programmes for 30-100 disadvantaged pupils. In one partnership for secondary pupils, each one is also given a university mentor to work with throughout the academic year.

Two ran extensive programmes, each reaching more than a thousand disadvantaged pupils, and also involving more than a hundred of their own students.

Impact

One secondary partnership provided objective quantitative evidence of impact, reporting that those involved in its programme achieved 1-2 grades higher in Progress 8 scores than pupils not in the programme.

Where impact was rated by participants, or their teachers, the impact was reported as 90%+.

The remaining partnerships reported positive impact for all pupils.

How were the disadvantaged children identified and recruited?

The disadvantaged pupils involved in partnership working were identified and recruited by their schools. Schools pointed out that there was more than one way to consider disadvantage, but they accepted that free school meals (FSM) and pupil premium (PP) were widely accepted indicators.

One secondary partnership considered a range of criteria in determining eligibility for its programme:

- Postcode against deprivation index
- First generation university applicant
- Owned / rented / social housing
- Household income
- PP / FSM eligibility
- Looked after child
- Young carer

Benefits to pupils

The benefits of partnership working reported for disadvantaged pupils included academic progress, skills development and increased social capital. Alongside these areas, schools reported that they developed pupils' 'love of learning'.

Academic progress was made through deepening and enriching learning. For example, one primary partnership reported Key Stage 2 English assessments rising from 'working towards' to 'working at expected' standard. English development for primary pupils was reported in both speaking and writing.

Improved examination results were evidenced in one secondary partnership. Feedback also evidenced raised aspirations among partnership participants, with one secondary partnership reporting that more than 95% of attendees moved on to university degrees or high-level apprenticeships.

Developing skills was another area identified as tangible benefits to disadvantaged pupils. Pupils were often given the opportunity to develop their speaking skills, from talking aloud in sessions to public speaking activities. Some partnerships developed the pupils' competence in their sporting skills, exemplified by primary pupils swimming 25m by the end of a programme for novices.

Soft skills such as increased confidence and improved social skills were reported as being developed through partnership working. These social skills were referenced in terms of building relationships, both with other pupils and with older student mentors, where mutual understanding, respect and support were developed.

Does impact evaluation evidence benefits to the disadvantaged pupils' schools and teachers

Impact on parents and teachers was reported in qualitative terms, saying that both parties benefit from the programmes.

One partnership reported benefits to parents and school staff through events run specifically for them. Furthermore, the independent school says that it works collaboratively with its partner schools to ensure from its design that the programme benefits them.

In one primary partnership, some teachers from the pupils' schools are involved in delivering aspects of the programme. Another secondary partnership involves trainee teachers visiting the independent school, but this is not through the programme for disadvantaged pupils.

Benefits to independent school staff and students

Most of the programmes run for disadvantaged pupils included independent school students, either as activity leaders, pupil mentors or as equal partners. Students are given opportunities to develop valuable future workplace skills and knowledge. In activities where students take the lead, they develop their leadership and mentoring competencies. Some students are also responsible for planning and teaching the sessions, developing communication, time management and organisational skills. Several reports highlighted the importance of the positive relationships that students developed with the pupils they worked with.

Schools reported that being involved in these programmes gave students a chance to share their passions, and to be role models, especially when older students were working with primary pupils. They also felt that it was an important way for students to broaden their horizons, by working with pupils from different backgrounds. Through pupil 'exchanges' in a secondary partnership, students worked with academically gifted disadvantaged pupils, which schools said helped their students develop empathy.

One school reported that its teachers benefit from being able to teach with freedom, as they are not restricted to a specific syllabus. Secondary partnerships said that staff take pride in sharing their knowledge and expertise, and that their feedback is always positive. Staff also enjoy supporting students with their planning and teaching sessions.

Why do independent schools participate in partnership programmes for disadvantaged and/or vulnerable pupils?

The overwhelming answer to this question was that they participate in programmes for disadvantaged pupils because 'it is the right thing to do'. This might be because the school is outward looking, inclusive, or because it sees local pupils as part of their

responsibility, irrespective of their school. One school said it works with its secondary partner in raising aspiration amongst pupils in a deprived area of the town.

Schools also participate in these partnerships because of the benefits for their own students. It gives them a chance to learn valuable skills that they might not develop in other ways.

‘We create effective learners, caring individuals and confident individuals.’

Participating in partnership working helps independent school students avoid the insularity that can come from only spending time with similar students.

Two partnerships referred to sharing their resources. One was committed to sharing resources with the local community, including these partner schools and their pupils. Another uses its resources to bring economies of scale to partner schools, and to extend educational opportunity for all children.

Other points

One of the schools emphasised that partnership working is one of its key areas of focus. It involves all staff and all students. The resource that is committed to this partnership work is considerable. Through a positive reputation in this space, the school has fostered strong relationships with industry partners, extending its provision further. The use of the school’s extended network (including parents and alumni) brings educational opportunity to those that do not have these links.

For one school, it introduced a Saturday programme specifically to help pupils prepare for competitive entry examinations at eleven. This included online learning support for the pupils, and also sessions for parents to help them support their children.

Discussion

This study of partnership programmes that reach disadvantaged pupils has found that the independent schools involved offer a variety of activities and events to pupils from a range of state-maintained schools. Half of the partnerships in this study involve a single independent secondary school working with a number of state partners. There is no uniform structure for a partnership, nor is there a common approach to the schools involved sharing a memorandum of understanding.

Addressing disadvantage through cross-sector partnership working is not new. In its 2001 manifesto, Labour said that it wanted to ‘build on the partnerships established between the state and private sectors’ (Labour Party, 2001, n.p.). The 2002 Education Act emphasised joint working, suggesting that collaboration was a major driver for school improvement for the Labour government. The London Challenge was announced that year (Brighouse, 2015), drawing on independent schools as well as state-maintained ones ‘in the challenge of raising the standards of all pupils across the capital... breaking the correlation between economic disadvantage and achievement’ (SSLP, 2019, n.p.). More recently, the last round of cross-sector partnership funding, required each bid to include a ‘Tackling disadvantage statement’ (DfE, 2019a, p.4) to show how the project would ‘support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (ibid).

There is no longer any DfE funding for cross-sector partnerships. We hope that the benefits of these for disadvantaged pupils, highlighted in this report, will help make the case for the reintroduction of central support.

In all partnerships, identifying the pupils to participate in programmes for the disadvantaged was left to the state schools. Free school meals and pupil premium were the most commonly cited qualifying criteria. This is sensible given that pupil premium has an ‘unwavering and original focus: to give every socioeconomically disadvantaged child and young person the chance to flourish’ (EEF, 2024, n.p.).

In its guidance issued in February 2024, the Department for Education (2024) identified current priorities for Pupil Premium Grant spending as:

- High-quality teaching of English and maths
- Targeted tutoring support
- Attendance strategies

The first two of these were addressed through activities reported in our study, with core subject sessions and one-to-one mentoring.

Allowing schools to identify those who they feel would benefit most from partnership programmes is important, as it allows them to consider pupils from ‘JAMs ‘just about managing’ families’ (The Sutton Trust, 2016, p.3). PP pupils are supported through government funding, so selecting these JAM pupils for partnership activities might be a way of giving them extra support. On a pragmatic level, activities and opportunities provided through partnership work free up valuable PPG money for schools to use on further support for these pupils.

A key focus for programmes across the partnerships is academic enrichment in the core subjects – English, maths and science, partly addressing the first DfE PPG priority. Other academic subjects are also addressed in some programmes, alongside challenges such as debating and competitions. Partnerships also offer disadvantaged pupils activities that develop their skills, social and cultural capital.

For some schools, learning academic subjects such as science through partnership activities could give them access to specialist teachers that they do not have in their own schools. Green et al. (2008, p.383) found that independent sector teachers were more likely ‘to be specialists in shortage subjects’ such as physics. Furthermore, Bourne (2017, p.43) found that ‘tying [partnership] projects to known curriculum developments is... a strong hook for engagement as a clear benefit could be seen’; this might include evidencing working on the DfE’s English and maths priority.

Cultural capital is something typically associated with independent school alumni, ‘the ‘rounded individual’, the ‘confident leader’, [with] better ‘soft skills’” (Green et al., 2011, p.659). This capital is often developed through an ‘astonishing array of sporting and extra-curricular opportunities’ (Benn, 2012, p.136), ‘such as school sports teams, school orchestras or drama productions’ (Sullivan and Heath, 2003, p.97). Their resources, facilities and staffing make independent schools well placed to offer activities that develop the social and cultural capital of disadvantaged pupils, if that is what their schools feel they would benefit from.

The evaluation of impact in the reports submitted for this study was largely qualitative, with quantitative feedback in one of the six reports. This was consistent with the findings of our research for our School Partnerships for Impact Guide:

‘At present, much of the evidence of partnership success is either anecdotal (e.g. comments and notes of appreciation, letters from parents) or at output level (e.g. number of events, attendees)... Consequently, there is a lack of data on what works best, making it difficult for schools to make informed decisions.’ (S.P.A., 2022, p.19)

Significant investments, in terms of both time and money, are made in partnership programmes, but this is not always matched by investment in evaluating their effectiveness. There is scope for deeper impact evaluation given that each partnership had clear aims, and that revisiting aims at the end of a programme to review if they have been met is a standard component of project evaluations in schools in both sectors.

This study shows that partnership programmes for disadvantaged pupils are co-created by schools from both sectors. They are designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged pupils, as identified by their schools. The reports show that the context of the schools, alongside the needs of their pupils, influenced programme arrangements, from content

to timing of delivery. Most schools reported drawing up programmes each year. One, though, took a longer-term strategic approach, more in line with DfE guidance:

‘The DfE recommends that schools develop a 3-year pupil premium strategy’ (DfE, 2024, n.p.)

Taking a long-term view of programmes for the disadvantaged is a significant factor in their sustainability. This is important for both the pupils and their schools. It also allows programmes to strategically deliver age-appropriate activities, which partner schools can see from the outset.

In our School Partnerships for Impact Guide, we found that:

‘A strategic, rather than an ad hoc or purely opportunistic approach to partnering therefore becomes more important as the scope and complexity of the partnership grows. This should help to maximise impact and ensure that efforts and resources invested in partnering not only bring clear benefits, but also align with and support plans for school improvement and pupil progress.’ (S.P.A., 2022, p.28)

Recommendations

In their inspections, Ofsted defines disadvantaged pupils in this way:

‘the term ‘disadvantaged pupils’ is used to mean: pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the definition of children in need of help and protection; pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school’s pupil premium funding (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last 6 years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route)’ (Ofsted, 2024, n.p.)

This could be a useful interpretation for cross-sector partnerships. It is important to retain some flexibility, though, allowing schools to select those disadvantaged pupils who would most benefit from each programme. That said, the criteria for selection in each case must be clear to all parties. Once a strong relationship is established, a memorandum of understanding might be useful for partner schools, as it ensures that those involved are committed to the programme.

Good practice across the programmes in this study included activities to support, enrich and develop pupils’ academic progress in English in maths. The inclusion of science, especially physics, a subject with teacher shortages (House of Commons Education Committee, 2024) in all phases of the state sector, makes good use of independent schools’ capacity and meets state school needs.

Ensuring that programme design takes into account current DfE PPG priorities would help ensure that partnerships help to meet a national need. This is important if cross-

sector partnerships are to gain national recognition and support. Having flexibility within programmes to meet specific local school or individual pupil needs will optimise their potential impact.

Evaluating the impact of programmes for disadvantaged pupils could be a higher priority. As each one sets out to meet agreed aims, these must be revisited and assessed at the end of the programme. Where quantitative assessment is possible, this should be included, as objective evaluation data can make a strong case for the worth of partnership working. Where quantitative evaluation is not possible, partnerships could consider telling their stories in the most compelling ways. This might include video diaries, case studies or story boards.

Where schools work together strategically, they optimise the value of cross-sector partnership. Where practice is good, headteachers are personally involved. They do not just support partnership work, they contribute to its strategic direction. Each partner school also needs a named individual to lead on partnership initiatives. In this way, every pupil involved knows who their champion is, and every member of staff knows who to approach with new ideas.

Partnerships with positive measured impact on disadvantaged pupils:

- Use the expertise and knowledge of partner school to identify and select disadvantaged pupils
- Use a variety of appropriate means to identify the full range of disadvantaged pupils
- Develop strategies to ensure that appropriate opportunities are offered for 'difficult to reach' pupils
- Use a memorandum of understanding between partner schools to records joint aims and actions
- Build partnership aims around current DfE PPG priorities
- Build rigorous impact evaluation into the aims and objectives of the programme
- Build strategic partnerships with headteachers of all schools contributing to their strategic directions
- Appoint a named partnership champion responsible for the school's cross-sector working

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participating partnerships

Partnership	Secondary State Schools	Primary State Schools	Senior Independent Schools	State School Pupils	Independent School Pupils
P1		5	2	1400	400
P2	Open to 120+		3		Involved
P3		8	1	32 p.a.	Involved
P4	5		1	94	(18 uni mentors)
P5	1		2	25 p.a.	Involved
P6	1		1	90	Involved

Appendix 2:

Aim	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Raising aspiration	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Broadening education	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Deepening academic knowledge and understanding	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Preparation for public examinations		Y	Y			
Increasing cultural capital		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Increasing social capital		Y	Y	Y		
Wrap-round activities	Y	Y	Y			
Individual mentoring	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Increasing academic confidence	Y	Y	Y	y	Y	Y
Readiness for university (visits / UCAS application / interviewing)		Y	Y	Y		Y
Developing resilience	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
Supporting wellbeing	Y	Y	Y	Y		
Developing sporting, creative or performing skills	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y