

# IMPACT REPORT

2020-2025



**RECONNECT  
LONDON**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This final impact report highlights the positive difference Reconnect London has made over five years of collective effort to improve the lives of young Londoners. Our work has strengthened practice across schools, deepened relationships between partners and helped shape thinking about addressing socio-economic disadvantage, the impact of poverty and the importance of collaboration between schools. The principles we have championed have had a direct influence on policy development, contributing to a wider shift towards an emphasis on accountable partnership and collaboration as the foundations of effective school improvement.**

Founded by school leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic, Reconnect London is a practitioner-led organisation which has grown in reach and influence while remaining firmly rooted in the values and commitments that shaped it at the start. Throughout the last five years, our approach has always been characterised by collaboration, cooperation and co-creation. We have retained as our overriding focus that all children and young people have access to the best possible educational opportunities, regardless of background or circumstances.

Our core values of trust, humility, collegial ambition, professional skill and reciprocity have underpinned all our work. We have drawn on the expertise of experienced school, trust and local authority leaders, along with the knowledge and insight of the third sector and other partners who share our commitment to London's children and young people.

Our work is guided by an asset-based approach, which recognises the strengths and resources that exist within communities across London, while acknowledging the material challenges which many continue to face. We have sought to create space for a wide range of stakeholders, including children and young people, to participate meaningfully in our work.

This report reflects on what has been achieved, what has been learned, and how our shared commitment will continue to shape the next phase of development for London's schools and communities. We are extremely grateful for all the support provided for Reconnect London over the last five years by the wide range of partners with whom we have worked during this time.

We are particularly appreciative for the initial seed funding provided by Zing and Treebeard, along with the collective commitment of Mulberry Schools Trust, Dunraven Educational Trust and the members of our Advisory Group.



# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2020 – 2025

## 2020

- Mar 2020** Start of COVID-19 pandemic; London schools face unprecedented disruption.
- Apr 2020** London school leaders start to collaborate to support each other through the crisis.
- Jun 2020** Ministerial roundtable on the pandemic's impact on attendance and engagement.
- Nov 2020** Reconnect London core leadership and steering groups established.

## 2021

- Mar 2021** Twitter account launched; Director recruitment advertised; first school engagement materials and website created.
- Apr 2021** First Director appointed; seed funding secured (Zing and Treebeard).
- May 2021** Sky News feature on work supporting attendance of vulnerable pupils.
- Jun 2021** Online launch conference; 'Butterflies' booklets created.

## 2022

- Feb 2022** Evidence submitted to Commons Select Committee about supporting young people during the pandemic.
- Mar 2022** Monthly newsletter starts; mental health roundtable
- Apr 2022** London attendance data shows strong post-pandemic recovery.
- May 2022** Roundtable on attendance.
- Jun 2022** Summer conference; publication of London Learners, London Lives report.
- Sept 2022** Featured in FEA bulletin on collaboration & partnership.
- Nov 2022** Meeting with DfE London Regional Director about the model for school-to-school support.

**2023**

- Jan 2023** Second report published: London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom.
- Feb 2023** Evidence submitted to Education Select Committee about persistent absence.
- Mar 2023** Evidence to Select Committee on teacher recruitment & retention; successful funding bid with UCL IOE for Leading Into The Future.
- Apr 2023** Supported GLA preparations for Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM).
- May 2023** Launch of on-the-ground pilot for School-to-School Support Steering Group, providing support for schools facing significant challenges.
- Jun 2023** Third report published: London Schools: Beyond the Pandemic.
- Jul 2023** Partnership with Child Poverty Action Group on UPFSM evaluation.
- Sept 2023** Provision of targeted support for schools with acute challenges.
- Nov 2023** Evidence given at the London Assembly on benefits of universal free school meals.

**2024**

- Feb 2024** London Assembly child poverty & FSM report published, drawing on RL evidence.
- Jul 2024** Labour government elected with commitment to create Regional Improvement Teams.
- Sept 2024** RL featured in TES article: "Could this be the model for the DfE's regional improvement teams?"
- Oct 2024** Letter to DfE Director General setting out principles for Regional Improvement Teams.
- Nov 2024** More than a Meal evaluation report on UPFSM published.
- Dec 2024** Leading Into The Future policy roundtable.

**2025**

- Spring 2025** Co-founders Vanessa Ogden & David Boyle appointed RISE Advisers by DfE.
- March and June 2025** Roundtables shaping development of RISE.
- Sept 2025** Tim Coulson (member of Reconnect London School-to-School Support Advisory Group) appointed Director General, Regions Group, DfE.
- Dec 2025** Decision made to merge RL with RISE Universal Offer.

# RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

**Between 2021 and 2023, Reconnect London undertook a programme of practitioner-led research and knowledge exchange across London schools. The work focused on three interlinked areas: understanding the nature and impact of educational disadvantage, examining how school leadership mediates that disadvantage in different contexts, and capturing how schools have adapted teaching, learning and curriculum design in response to post-pandemic challenges.**

Working collaboratively with school leaders across the capital, the research combined a review of relevant research literature with contextual analysis and in-depth case studies. Schools were active participants, contributing their professional expertise and reflecting on the strategies they were using to respond to educational disadvantage and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This enabled the generation of insights that were both analytically robust and grounded in the realities of practice, ensuring relevance for policymakers, school leaders and practitioners across the capital.

The findings were disseminated through a series of open-access publications designed to support knowledge transfer across London's school system. These reports have been shared widely within the Reconnect London network and beyond. Together, they provide an evidence-informed account of how London schools are responding to educational disadvantage and re-shaping their leadership practice in the wake of the pandemic.

## **London Learners, London Lives: The impact of disadvantage on young Londoners and the role of schools in overcoming barriers to success (2022)**

An analysis of the scale and nature of educational disadvantage in London, examining its impact on young people and the role of schools in mitigating barriers to learning.

## **London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom (2023)**

A series of leadership case studies exploring how school leaders respond to contextual challenges, work beyond the classroom and develop inclusive, place-based approaches to improving outcomes.

## **London Schools: Beyond the Pandemic (2023)**

Case studies documenting how London schools have adapted teaching, learning and curriculum design in response to the ongoing educational and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic.

## Extract from London Learners, London Lives report (published June 2021)

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LONDON LIVES

### INTRODUCTION

**This report aims to provide better understanding of disadvantage in education, how it affects children and young people in London and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted this. Through examining existing literature and research, the report attempts to answer the question – how can we best support children and young people in London schools to achieve their full potential?**



Our focus is on London because that is where Reconnect London is based. While we are aware that significant levels of poverty, inequality and disadvantage exist elsewhere in the UK, we are specifically interested in the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in the capital.

London has the largest school system in the UK, with over 3,000 schools educating more than one and a half million children. It is a vibrant capital city where it should be possible for all children to thrive, but it is also a divided city, with significant levels of disadvantage and inequality. In 2020, London had the highest rate of child poverty in England, with 700,000 children, about 37%, living in poverty. This is predicted to rise rapidly during 2022-23, owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and increases in the cost of living.

Despite high levels of deprivation, children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in London schools achieve better than those in similar circumstances elsewhere in the country. There is no clear consensus about exactly what causes this 'London effect', though it is thought to be a combination of policy and demographic factors.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the lives of children and young people in London have changed in ways that were unexpected but will have lasting impact. Families who were already living in relative poverty were adversely affected by further economic insecurity, as well as disproportionate levels of illness and bereavement. The school closure periods of summer 2020 and spring 2021 had a devastating impact on children from low-income families, who were much less likely to have access to the resources needed to support effective home learning.

The aftermath of the pandemic is therefore an opportune time to revisit what we know about how disadvantage manifests itself in education, how this impacts on children and young people in London and how this has been affected by the pandemic. This report seeks to provide London's school leaders with the background and context they need, to inform their work to support children and young people. It also sets out recommendations for the steps we believe are needed to support this generation of young people, following the worst educational crisis of modern times.

**Dr Katharine Vincent**, Director of Reconnect London  
**Sarah Bibi**, Academic Researcher

## Extract from 'Butterflies for Transition' booklet (October 2021)

### Reconnect London

Against this backdrop, in 2021, Reconnect London was born: a collaborative group of London school system-leaders working together to help tackle the impact of Covid-19 in education, including learning loss for disadvantaged and vulnerable students. Building on the work of London Challenge, Reconnect London is all about leading in an age of networks, where the power of the group to make a collective difference leads to increased collective efficacy.

The network spans the system - local authority and Trust schools, single academies and large MATs as well as third sector organisations, driven by a common desire to improve the life chances of the most vulnerable. Our challenge is to bridge the gap between lost learning for those pupils most disadvantaged by events of the past year whilst at the same time writing a new narrative for both deep learning and what continuous school improvement could be like. In times of uncertainty, it is reciprocal accountability to both communities and each other which is needed more than ever.

If the unprecedented events of the past year have taught us anything, surely, it is that a world class education gives status to what education should be as much as what education should do. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have come to realise that schools are communities who serve. A misplaced emphasis on the product of learning being most important takes us away from tackling the real needs of students.



## Extract from 'London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom' report (published February 2023)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This report examines the ways in which London schools respond to the unique opportunities and challenges that exist in their local settings, with a focus on the transformational impact of context-responsive school leadership.**

This type of leadership involves school leaders:

- understanding the needs of pupils and their families;
- determining which strategies and approaches are most appropriate in a particular context;
- taking action to address key issues and evaluating the impact;
- working in partnership with families, community groups, local authorities and other organisations, to maximise their ability to address disadvantage together.

Through this approach, schools are able to achieve excellence, overcome disadvantage and transform life chances for children and young people.

Previous research, including Reconnect London's report 'London Learners, London Lives,' has emphasised the need for collaboration between schools, families and communities to address the underlying causes of disadvantage. This report, 'London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom,' examines how schools are using context-responsive leadership to mitigate the impact of disadvantage. The report includes nine case studies of London schools that are succeeding in their particular contexts and explores some of the strategies they have put into place to make this possible.

The report identifies four key features of context-responsive leadership:



# ATTENDANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT IN LONDON SCHOOLS

**Despite the widespread disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, London's schools have sustained strong educational outcomes in relation to both attendance and achievement.**

While pupil attendance across the UK has not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels, London schools have been comparatively successful in reducing absence rates. Attendance in the capital remains among the strongest nationally, helping to mitigate the longer-term effects of pandemic-related disruption. Continuing to reduce rates of severe and persistent absence, particularly for pupils experiencing disadvantage and those with special educational needs and disabilities, remains a key priority for all schools.

The established pattern of relatively strong achievement in London schools, known as the 'London effect', also appears to have endured following the pandemic. Analysis of attainment data indicates that London pupils have continued to perform well on key outcome measures at both primary and secondary level. This suggests that the factors underpinning London's educational performance, including strong school leadership capacity and system-level collaboration, are continuing to have a positive impact.

Further analysis of the London effect and how it has been sustained post-pandemic is available in research published by Reconnect London:

**Hayes, S. and Vincent, K. (2023)**

**The 'London effect': has it survived the Covid-19 pandemic?**

An analysis and a reflection on a response to the crisis from within the London education system. London Review of Education.

<https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/lre/article/pubid/LRE-23-25/>

## Extract from evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee's enquiry into teacher recruitment, training and retention (April 2023)

TTR0085

### Written evidence submitted by Reconnect London

#### Introduction to Reconnect London

Reconnect London is a practitioner-led network of school leaders who are working together to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the capital. The network was started in December 2020, after a ministerial round table about the impact of the pandemic on young people's attendance and engagement at school. Following this, a core leadership group and steering group were established and a wide range of London school and system leaders were invited to join the network.

Since that time, a regular series of network meetings has taken place, as well as discussions with ministerial, local government and Department for Education leaders. The Reconnect London network includes academies and local authority schools, as well as a wide range of partner organisations. We are driven by a shared commitment: to bring about positive change for disadvantaged and vulnerable young Londoners in the wake of the pandemic.

The responses below reflect the views of headteachers within our network and those with whom we have had discussion about the relevant issues.

#### The current situation regarding teacher recruitment and retention

According to a survey conducted by leadership union ASCL, in summer 2022, the vast majority (95%) of headteachers across the country were experiencing difficulties with teacher recruitment (ASCL 2022). Like school leaders across the country, recruitment and retention are key concerns for London headteachers and trust leaders. The issue affects schools in different ways, owing to variations in school contexts, but there are concerns in every part of the London school system. Headteachers and trust leaders across the capital tell us that they are facing challenges with recruitment and retention, not only in relation to the recruitment of teaching staff but also school leadership and other crucial roles within the school workforce, including teaching assistants and administrative staff.

#### What are the main factors leading to difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified teachers?

Headteachers and trust leaders in London tell us that key issues include:

- A shortage of high-quality graduates in key subjects who want to go into teaching (e.g. maths, physics, computing, modern languages).
- Perceptions and/or reality of a heavy workload, high stress levels and poor well-being.
- A perception that teachers are not highly valued by society and/or by policy-makers.
- The ability to earn more in other industries (e.g. for those with maths and science degrees).
- The inflexibility of teaching, which almost always requires daily in-person presence by employees at the workplace, compared with other roles where remote and hybrid working are more feasible.
- The high cost of housing in London, which leads experienced teachers to leave the capital and even sometimes to leave the country, e.g. to teach in international schools overseas.
- The high cost and/or lack of availability of childcare, including wrap-around care for school age children, which is significant because more than half of teachers have children under the age of 18.
- For some teachers and leaders, feelings of exhaustion and/or burnout following the pandemic.
- A sense of frustration about the levels of challenge which teachers are facing in schools at the present time, e.g. as a result of increased wellbeing and mental health issues amongst pupils, a decline in pupil attendance and increased numbers of children and families experiencing poverty.
- For some teachers in some schools, challenging pupil behaviour including classroom disruption.
- Perceptions and/or reality of pressure from Ofsted and other external sources of accountability.

#### Which subjects are most affected?

The recruitment and retention of high quality teachers in key subjects has been challenging for a number of years. The Department for Education's data shows that recruitment targets for postgraduate initial teacher training are

## Extract from the London Assembly's report into child poverty and free school meals (published February 2024)

Child Poverty and Free School Meals - Economy Committee

February 2024

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### Free school meals

#### The benefits of free school meals

**There are wide-ranging benefits of providing children with free school meals. They are particularly important for children living in poverty, ensuring that these children receive a nutritious meal at school every day, and alleviating pressure on household budgets. They have also been found to have health and educational benefits, as well as a wider economic benefit.**

Free school meals (FSM) play a critical role in alleviating the impact of child poverty. Katharine Vincent, Director of Reconnect London, told the Committee that “for many lower-income households, the cost of preparing a hot, healthy, nutritious evening meal is extremely difficult, particularly for families with several young children, making provision of FSM even more important”.<sup>81</sup> Barbara Crowther, Campaign Coordinator for the Children's Food Campaign at Sustain, highlighted research from the University of Essex on universal FSM, which found that families save approximately £37 per month in total on food spending, based on a household with two adults and two primary-aged children.<sup>82</sup> Barbara Crowther noted that this can result in “freeing up budget to buy better-quality food, therefore better school food can lead to better-quality food at home.”<sup>83</sup>

*“I will start by saying that FSM has significant and wide-ranging benefits for young Londoners and their families. They help ensure that all children can flourish and thrive, regardless of the circumstances in which they or their families are living. They also have long-lasting benefits into adulthood in relation to educational outcomes as well as social, financial, and health benefits, both for individuals and for wider society.”<sup>84</sup>*

**Katharine Vincent**  
Director, Reconnect London

Free school meals have also been shown to have health benefits for children. The research from the University of Essex found that universal free primary school meals have been associated

<sup>81</sup> London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

<sup>82</sup> Holford, Angus and Rabe, Birgitta, [Impacts of local authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on child obesity and household food expenditure](#), September 2022

<sup>83</sup> London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

<sup>84</sup> London Assembly Economy Committee, [Transcript of Agenda Item 5 - Free School Meals in London – Panel 1](#), 9 November 2023

## Extract from ‘More than a meal’ report (published November 2024)

**More than a meal:** An independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London

### Explaining the context and policy evaluation

This report’s introduction sets out the wider context of school food policy and funding in the UK. It then looks in more detail at the differences in governance and delivery of school food across London boroughs and some of the demographic characteristics specific to the capital. The variation and fragmentation in education policy and school food implementation across boroughs made the design, communication and implementation of this policy particularly complex. There was no ‘one size fits all’ approach to get this policy up and running in every school.

Acknowledging there would be much to learn from the roll-out of a regional school food policy, Impact on Urban Health commissioned two evaluations:

- a **lived experience evaluation**, carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in partnership with Reconnect London. This study gathered the reflections and experiences of children, families and schools. It focused on how the policy affects household finances, food security, family health and wellbeing outcomes and school life, from family and school perspectives.
- an **implementation evaluation**, conducted by ICF in partnership with Public Health Nutrition Research. This study collected data from schools, local authorities and caterers to identify and understand what helped them to implement the policy effectively and the barriers they faced.

The evaluations were guided by a theory of change, carried out by Bremner & Co, to steer evaluation priorities and help to make sure the evaluation built on the existing evidence-base for universal free school meals. The theory of change supported coordination of the evaluation projects and was used to help generate useful insights for key audiences.

The following chapters share the key findings from these evaluations, which have informed the recommendations for national policymakers that conclude the report. Significant policies like this one take time to bed in. The evaluations focused on the first year of the policy only and highlight initial outcomes for children, families and schools, alongside some of the challenges that come with implementing a major new policy within a demanding timeframe in a school system that was already under stress. As the policy continues into its second year, there will be further insights to be gathered.

### Evaluation findings

#### Reactions to the policy

Our findings show that the policy was popular with families and children. It can be seen in high levels of take-up – the Greater London Authority (GLA) collected data in a sample of 259 schools (13% of London primary schools) that show that take-up was between 88% and 90% across the three school terms, with an average take-up of 89.1% across the 2023/2024 academic year. The data also show that take-up among pupils eligible for a means-tested FSM increased from 88% in 2022/23 to 94% in 2023/24. When surveyed, most parents<sup>1</sup> said their child was eating school lunches every day or most days.

Parents, whatever their household income, welcomed the policy and wanted it to continue. They felt it countered the effects of the rising cost of living and, in many cases, had a positive impact on family life.

Our evaluations found that it was also valued highly by those working in schools. Senior leaders said the policy had helped to address the problems of hidden hunger and food insecurity<sup>2</sup>. It alleviated the financial hardship they now see many more families experiencing. They also noted that it improved access to nutritious school food.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this report, references to parents’ views also include feedback gathered from carers and legal guardians.

<sup>2</sup>Not having reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious, healthy food affecting many pupils.

# SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL SUPPORT

**Reconnect London developed and delivered a structured school-to-school support model designed to provide targeted help to London schools facing challenging circumstances. Building on approaches that were developed during the London Challenge, the model involved the rapid deployment of highly experienced school leaders with a strong track record to support schools facing significant challenges.**

Central to the success of this model was the creation of a systematic approach, starting with an initial needs assessment that was carried out with each school before the start of the deployment. This enabled deployed leaders to develop a clear, evidence-based understanding of the specific challenges, priorities and capacity for change in each context. As part of this diagnostic phase, leaders worked collaboratively with schools to co-create focused action plans, setting out clear priorities, planned actions and agreed success criteria tailored to the school's individual circumstances.

Once deployed, leaders worked intensively alongside headteachers, governing bodies and Trust leaders to share expertise and strengthen leadership capacity, working alongside school leaders to implement improvements in provision. This hands-on support was underpinned by ongoing monitoring and evaluation, with progress in relation to the action plan regularly reviewed so that adjustments could be made in response to emerging needs.

Reconnect London worked closely with schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities and the Department for Education to deliver a series of deployments using this model to support schools that needed urgent intervention. The model proved highly effective, both in terms of addressing immediate challenges and enabling long-term, sustainable improvement. Through this work, Reconnect London helped to improve resilience across London's school system, ensuring that pupils in some of the capital's most disadvantaged communities continued to receive a high-quality education.

In addition, Reconnect London developed a model for governance support, deploying experienced trustees to schools and trusts requiring urgent guidance and strengthened oversight. This governance work further supported school improvement by enhancing strategic leadership, accountability and decision-making at board level.

## Case study 1: Stabilising leadership and securing the school's future

### Context

An 11-16 maintained secondary school experienced a period of acute instability following the sudden departure of the headteacher. This was compounded by ongoing industrial action and a history of performance concerns, including Ofsted 'requires improvement' judgements. The local authority (LA) requested urgent external support to stabilise the senior leadership team and secure the future of the school.

### Support provided

We responded rapidly to the LA's request for help, working with them to undertake initial fact-finding to understand risks and priorities. Within a week of the request, an experienced Trust CEO from our Advisory Group was deployed to work with the school's senior leadership team and the governing body. The support they provided focused initially on stabilising leadership arrangements and providing guidance to the joint acting heads of school, as well as supporting dialogue with staff and trade unions, and brokering additional senior leadership capacity. A series of targeted reviews focused on safeguarding, behaviour, SEND and teaching and learning helped clarify priorities.

### Impact

Following this deployment, leadership stability was restored, further strike action was averted and governance was strengthened through the establishment of an Interim Executive Board. The school subsequently undertook a consultation process about joining a multi-academy trust, which they have now completed. This case highlighted the importance of acting with urgency, ensuring deployments include early assessment of needs and priorities, and the value of collaborative support provided by experienced practitioners.

## Case study 2: Strengthening leadership and governance

### Context

An 11–16 secondary school faced challenges relating to leadership capacity, governance effectiveness and financial oversight. These pressures created risks to stability and confidence at a critical point for the school community, particularly given the limited capacity available to them as a single academy trust.

### Our support

An experienced Executive Headteacher from the Reconnect London Advisory Group was deployed to provide hands-on leadership support, working closely with senior leaders and trustees. The initial focus was on strengthening strategic planning, clarifying lines of accountability and improving financial management. Alongside this, the deployment highlighted the importance of access to specialist governance expertise in crisis situations, and the constraints that can be faced by single academy trusts in securing this capacity.

As circumstances evolved, the substantive headteacher departed shortly after the start of the initial deployment. Recognising the risks associated with leadership transition, the support was extended to provide continuity and stability. The deputy head was supported to step into the acting headteacher role, and subsequently took on the substantive headship. During the final stage of the deployment, an ongoing partnership with a local multi academy trust was brokered, to provide longer term support to the leadership team and governing board. This reflects a commitment to long-term improvement and recognition of the importance of ongoing partnership and collaboration.

### Impact and learning

Leadership and governance arrangements became more stable and effective, with clearer strategic direction and improved financial oversight. The extended deployment ensured that new systems and structures were embedded over a full academic year, reducing risk during a further leadership transition. An ongoing partnership with a larger multi-academy trust was brokered, providing additional capacity and longer-term support.

## Case study 3: Financial stabilisation in a specialist Trust

### Context

A small multi-academy trust including an all-through special school and associated provision faced significant financial challenges, creating risks to sustainability and placing considerable pressure on trust leadership. The complexity of the organisation and its multiple strands of provision increased the level of risk. A request for urgent support was received by Reconnect London via the Department for Education.

### Our support

We responded quickly, undertaking initial fact-finding to understand the scale and drivers of the financial issues within the Trust. An experienced school leader from the Reconnect London Advisory Group was deployed to work alongside the Trust CEO. Crucially, they had in-depth knowledge of the SEND system, owing to having a special school with residential provision within their own trust. They provided peer support focused on securing financial stability, working alongside the CEO and board of trustees. The work included detailed analysis of the trust's finances, as well as discussions with about funding with local authorities and health partners. Practical proposals were developed to support financial stabilisation, including a review of the Trust's current operating model and senior leadership structure.

### Impact and learning

By the end of the deployment, a robust analysis of the Trust's financial situation and a set of clear proposals to support longer-term sustainability had been created. During this time, the Trust was in ongoing discussion about joining a larger multi-academy trust. This case highlighted the structural financial challenges faced by special schools, and the importance of providing support that is grounded in relevant expert knowledge and experience, as well as moral purpose and commitment to vulnerable learners.

## Case study 4: Preventative leadership intervention

### Context

An 11-18 secondary school within a large national multi-academy trust faced significant pressure. Following a fall in pupil outcomes, the Trust identified a number of indicators that suggested the school was vulnerable to future decline. They sought additional external capacity to strengthen leadership and build the capacity for future improvement.

### Our support

Through Reconnect London, an experienced headteacher from a neighbouring Trust was deployed to work alongside the school's senior leadership team. The first stage of support involved rapid diagnostic work to identify the key priorities for improvement. This was followed by targeted leadership coaching and support, to complement existing trust improvement activity. Careful attention was given to ensuring the intervention addressed the right issues without adding an unnecessary additional burden of work for the school's senior leadership team. Progress was reviewed regularly and support adapted as circumstances evolved.

### Impact and learning

The school avoided an anticipated poor inspection outcome, with Ofsted inspectors recognising improved leadership coherence and stability. The deployment helped the school to secure immediate improvements in pupil outcomes. The two schools established an ongoing partnership to provide additional professional development and leadership capacity. This case reinforced the importance of preventative intervention, and the benefit of close collaboration between Trust leaders to deploy support in response to emerging needs.

## Extract from School to School Support Steering Group Impact Report (2023-24)



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S2S SUPPORT STEERING GROUP - IMPACT REPORT 2023-24

### School to School Support Steering Group

#### Impact Report – Year 1 (2023-24)

##### Executive Summary

The School to School Support Steering Group was established to provide urgent support to schools in London, enhancing both leadership and governance across the school system. This report outlines the achievements and impact of the initiative in its first year, highlighting the successes, challenges and areas for future development

##### Objectives and Scope

We set out to achieve the following:

1. **Provision of urgent support:** Deliver immediate assistance with both leadership and governance to schools identified as requiring urgent help.
2. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Assess the impact of the support provided, to evaluate the process and ensure continuous improvement.
3. **Collaborative approach:** Work in a way that builds capacity across the system, engaging with a diverse range of schools and other partners including the Department for Education (DfE).
4. **Neutral and non-political:** Maintain independence and impartiality in all activities.
5. **Intelligence sharing:** Promote the exchange of knowledge and the sharing of good practice across the school system.

##### Steering Group activities

The Steering Group was successfully established and includes established system leaders from across London with the credibility and expertise needed to successfully undertake this work. The group met four times during this academic year, in line with the planned schedule.

Key actions from these meetings included:

- **Kick-off meeting** (Sept 2023): Agreed the framework and way of working for the group; discussed current deployments; started to establish relationships between members of the group.
- **Autumn term meeting** (Nov 2023): Reviewed early progress and discussed how to refine the approach; discussed the development of a separate group for governance support.
- **Spring term meeting** (Feb 2024): Discussed the progress of ongoing projects; welcomed the DfE Regional Director to the meeting and shared with her the work of the group to date.
- **Summer term meeting** (May 2024): Reflected on the impact of the group's activities to date and started to plan for the future.

##### Key achievements

###### 1. Leadership Support

- *Successfully established School to School Support Steering Group.*



## Extract from letter to John Edwards, DfE Director General, about Regional Improvement Teams (October 2024)



**John Edwards**  
Director General, Regions Group  
Department for Education

Dear John,

**Subject: The development of Regional Improvement Teams**

We are writing on behalf of Reconnect London's School to School Support Steering Group, to share our perspectives on the key considerations for the development of Regional Improvement Teams (RITs).

As a group, we are focused on both policy and practice, and as such, here are some of the points we would like to feed into the development of RITs. We believe that well-structured and thoughtfully implemented RITs can significantly strengthen the support available to schools, fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaboration.

**Key considerations for Regional Improvement Teams:**

**1. Reflecting current strengths within the system**

It is important that the way RITs are set up reflects the strengths and areas of development within the existing system. There must be a balance between drawing on local expertise and adding capacity in areas where existing structures are less developed. As you know, the London school system has a relatively well-developed system for school improvement via school to school support. In other areas, where the school improvement system is not as well established, there may be a need for more preparatory work.

**2. Sustainable school-to-school collaboration**

RITs should focus on creating sustainable structures for school-to-school collaboration that go beyond short-term interventions. Effective peer to peer support must be built in a way that fosters deep trust and long-term partnerships. Encouraging ongoing professional relationships between schools is, we believe, an important way in which RITs could help to cultivate a system where continuous improvement is embedded at all levels.

**3. Practitioner-led improvement**

The school improvement work carried out on behalf of RITs must be led by experienced practitioners with proven and credible experience in running successful schools and supporting other schools. Careful thought needs to be given to how this is done without drawing much-needed leadership capacity away from the existing system. One consideration is how to draw on the expertise of those who have recently stepped away from full time school leadership, e.g. through retirement or sabbatical. A further area, which we have started to develop, is training the next generation of school leaders with the skills needed to provide effective school to school support.

# RECONNECT LONDON ADVISORY GROUP

**We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the Reconnect London Advisory Group, which is comprised of experienced colleagues from schools, trusts, local authorities, and partner organisations from across London and beyond.**

Your insight, expertise, and dedication have been invaluable in informing and shaping our work. Through your thoughtful and sensitive guidance, we have been able to navigate complex challenges and ensured that our work is relevant, inclusive and impactful.

The time, care, and professional knowledge you have generously shared have strengthened our approach and enabled us to make more considered and effective decisions. We are truly grateful for the wisdom and perspective you have brought to this initiative. You have made a significant contribution to the ongoing success of the London school system, and we know that this legacy will continue.

The following sections of this report provide an overview of the achievements of Reconnect London over the last five years. The timeline sets out key events, publications and strategic developments during this time. This demonstrates the impact we have made in supporting schools, communities and partner organisations across London.

We also include extracts from key publications, alongside testimonials from Advisory Group members. These perspectives reflect the expertise, insight, and collaborative spirit that have shaped our work and contributed to the ongoing success of the London school system.



# RECONNECT LONDON ADVISORY GROUP

**Our Advisory Group brings together experienced school and system leaders from across London and beyond. They play a vital role in guiding the work of Reconnect London, ensuring that our priorities remain closely aligned with the realities facing schools and the communities they serve. Through their expertise and insight, the group helps us respond to emerging challenges, strengthen collaboration and maintain a clear focus on improving outcomes for children and young people.**

## Advisory Group Members

Name	Role / Organisation
<b>David Boyle</b>	CEO, Dunraven Educational Trust
<b>CJ Burge</b>	Senior Manager (Education and Parenting), London's Violence Reduction Unit
<b>Georgina Burt</b>	Senior Education Policy Advisor, Child Poverty Action Group
<b>Jo Dibb</b>	Former Headteacher, Islington Futures
<b>Jane Fernandes</b>	Collective Action and Advocacy Manager, Fair Education Alliance
<b>Professor Qing Gu</b>	Director, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership
<b>Clare Harrisson</b>	Senior Manager Strategic Communications, Children & Young Londoners and Social Policy, GLA
<b>Sean Hayes</b>	Education Data Expert
<b>Ruth Holden</b>	Executive Principal, Mulberry Schools Trust
<b>Dr Vanessa Ogden</b>	CEO, Mulberry Schools Trust
<b>James Page</b>	CEO, Haringey Education Partnership
<b>Gail Tolley</b>	Director, Children's Services – Sector-led Improvement, Local Government Association
<b>Dave Thomson</b>	Chief Statistician, FFT Education Datalab
<b>Jackie Valin</b>	CEO, Southfields Trust
<b>Dr Katharine Vincent</b>	Director, Reconnect London
<b>Julia Waters</b>	Former Headteacher

## Extract from Leading Into the Future roundtable event (December 2024)

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## CONTEXT

**London's school system has a strong record of success. Over the past 20 years, school leaders in London have become experts at improving schools and achieving positive outcomes. London schools excel at closing disadvantage gaps, ensuring all young people have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. We are also skilled at building cohesive communities, viewing diversity as a strength and placing inclusion and belonging at the core of our work.**

These achievements are rooted in a deep sense of moral purpose, a commitment to equity, and a belief in social justice. The positive changes in London's schools have been driven by the dedication of staff at all levels, who work tirelessly to provide the high-quality education that enables so many young people to achieve and succeed. In partnership with families and communities, schools have done a huge amount to ensure that all children and young people can flourish and thrive.

Despite these achievements, the London school system—and the communities we serve—are currently facing significant challenges. This includes staff recruitment and retention, rising child poverty, and ongoing concerns around mental health and wellbeing. We have increasing numbers of children with special educational needs and disabilities, along with limited financial resources. Exclusions have risen, attendance has fallen, and many London schools are now also contending with falling pupil rolls.

Amidst these challenges, new policy initiatives on the horizon include the proposed school report card, the Child Poverty Taskforce, the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and the introduction of RISE (Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence) teams.

Within this context, we ask:

- What opportunities and challenges are presented by the current external environment, and how should we respond?
- Where, within the current system, is effective school improvement work already taking place - and how can we share this more widely?
- What further actions we can take, individually and collectively, to ensure that our schools continue to flourish and thrive?



## RISE and Reconnect London roundtable (May 2025)



### Discussion Paper – May 2025

#### How will we evaluate the impact of RISE?

The RISE initiative, introduced in early 2025, represents a significant investment in education by the UK government. It has the potential to lead to positive change, both for individual schools and for the system as a whole. As this new policy is still in its early stages of development, now is the right time to consider how we will know whether or not it has been successful.

There are some mechanisms already in place to evaluate the impact of the RISE teams. This includes evaluation plans for schools receiving targeted support, and a process evaluation focused on the implementation of RISE across the country. Meanwhile, the DfE are in the process of creating a regional plan, which will be framed around the four key priorities for education set out by the Secretary of State – attendance, attainment, early years and inclusion.

We believe there is also an important role for school system leaders, on a regional basis, to determine what we want the RISE initiative to achieve and how we will know if it has been successful.

#### The London context

We are proud of the success which London schools have achieved over the past 20 years, consistently raising standards, improving outcomes and delivering high-quality education to students. Our school system also showed remarkable resilience in withstanding the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. As we look to the future, there are significant challenges ahead, particularly in relation to improving attendance, addressing the impact of socio-economic inequality, supporting well-being and further strengthening our commitment to inclusive practice.

A key indicator of the success of RISE will be whether it has helped schools to address these challenges. Ultimately, the success of the policy will be determined by the extent to which it has contributed to creating a thriving, strengthened school system that is well-equipped to meet current and future challenges.

Identifying appropriate criteria to measure this is not straightforward. Some of the outcomes which are most important are less tangible, including those relating to moral purpose, pride, belonging, identity and community cohesion. Others are already heavily weighted within the accountability system, including KS2 and KS4 outcomes. It would not be appropriate for RISE to introduce additional metrics. We can, however, use existing data to evaluate the impact of the RISE teams, particularly in relation to the universal offer, the success of which will be reflected in the overall improvement of the school system.

#### Proposed areas for the evaluation of the impact of RISE

Since RISE was introduced in early 2025, it seems reasonable to suggest that we should see significant impact by 2030. We know the London school system is already strong; over the next five years, we will want to see this success sustained, while also looking for evidence of improvement in areas where challenges remain.

We have identified four specific areas that could be used to evaluate the success of London schools during this time period, and therefore the impact of RISE. These align with the four priorities set out by the Secretary of State, and have the advantage of being supported by comprehensive, comparable data.

1. Exam outcomes (KS2 and KS4) - particularly in English and Maths
2. Attendance
3. Suspensions and permanent exclusions
4. Ofsted outcomes

## REFLECTIONS FROM ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER

**In 2020 I was invited to become part of Reconnect London, a newly formed group that was responding to growing concern for London's disadvantaged students amid the impact of Covid-19 on their achievement.**

I have always firmly believed that 'Every Child Matters', not only in the institutions I lead but in every institution. It is our moral purpose to support the most disadvantaged young people in our schools and the Reconnect London agenda ticked all the boxes for me.

This network of school leaders from across London was set up to share knowledge, information and expertise, building on the success of London Challenge, which I was a part of as a Keys to Success School and National Leader of Education.

I have worked in London schools for 50 years and am the Headteacher and CEO of Southfields Academy Trust, which includes Southfields Academy, a highly diverse school with 50% FSM, over 80 EHCPs, a base for SLCN, a base for the hearing impaired and a Study Support Centre for those young people who find school a challenge. Southfields is also the Lead school for the Mental Health Trailblazer project in Wandsworth. The trust also includes Linden Lodge, a special school for students from early years to post 16 who are blind, deaf and have complex medical needs.

As part of Reconnect London's work, I was asked to support the CEO of another Trust who was facing some particularly challenging circumstances. The work required to move the school forward took a great deal of sensitivity and skill, and the ability to quickly establish mutual trust, as well as a deep of the specialist sector, including the financial model. Over time this work achieved the outcome that was sought, which was positive for all concerned.

Reconnect London provided a platform for school and trust leaders to discuss the current challenges facing London schools. This includes recruitment of high-quality teachers, the impact of child poverty, ongoing concerns around mental health and rising SEND needs. As experienced professionals, we were able to challenge ourselves and each other, strategically deciding what we could achieve as individuals and collectively.

We know that effective school improvement work, with the right support, allows schools to challenge themselves so that they can flourish and thrive and do the best for all students in their communities. I am pleased to have been part of Reconnect London and am proud of its ongoing legacy.

**Jackie Valin**

Headteacher and CEO, Southfields Academy Trust

## REFLECTIONS FROM ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER

**I know that I wasn't alone in finding the role of headteacher during lockdowns and school closures one of the most challenging in all my years of headship. Yes, we were in school but we lost physical contact not just with most of our staff and students but also the colleagues outside the school who provided invaluable mutual support and development opportunities.**

As schools began to return to some sort of normality, we found that many of our networks no longer existed and that schools were becoming increasingly polarised and isolated.

As a serving head, it was very important to me to connect with colleagues and be part of wider school improvement across the capital. We lost this during the years of the pandemic, and Reconnect London was instrumental in addressing this, enabling heads to come together and rediscover the power of working together across a wider community. What started as a group of colleagues working on challenges we all faced, grew into something much bigger and quickly developed the credibility to take on a wider role.

On leaving full time headship, I remained connected through membership of the Steering Group and was delighted to see Reconnect London go from strength to strength. The quality of the relationships and the integrity of everyone involved were key factors. We were able to move quickly when issues arose and we were asked to help.

This was how I found myself working to support a school in north east London for what we initially believed was a short period to support the relatively new head who was facing a particular challenge. As in many of these situations, the problem which manifests itself is not necessarily the key issue. A few weeks later, the head left suddenly, the deputy stepped up as an interim head and the scope of the work changed overnight.

Two terms later, the school had a substantive head and ongoing support which was brokered through Reconnect London. I was able to step back knowing that the school was now in a much more secure and stable position.

### **Jo Dibb**

Retired headteacher

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

**There are many reasons to be proud of the way in which the London school system has emerged from the Covid 19 pandemic. At the same time, there are significant ongoing challenges, making it essential that we continue our collective efforts to further strengthen the system. The pandemic reinforced the value of schools working together, supporting each other and sharing effective practice. The next step is to embed this collaborative ethos into future improvement strategies across the capital.**

The Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) programme provides a coherent mechanism for sustaining and scaling this collaborative approach. The RISE London team will lead on the provision of school-to-school support and the strategic development of networks and partnerships across the capital. In this way, they will build on, and further develop, the foundations established by London Challenge and Reconnect London.

Our commitment to achieving excellence for all young Londoners can be further strengthened by a strategic approach that enables shared problem-solving and rapid dissemination of effective practice. Continuing to bring senior leaders together to reflect on practice and connect research with professional knowledge will be essential. Future work should prioritise opportunities for leaders to learn with and from each other as part of a long-term strategy for system-wide improvement.

Embedding these collaborative models across the system will help ensure that London's school system can withstand future risks. At the heart of this work is a shared moral commitment to doing everything within our power to ensure that all young Londoners have access to a high-quality education which gives them the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

# CONCLUSION

**As Reconnect London comes to the end of its five-year journey, we extend our deepest thanks to everyone who has contributed to this work. School and trust leaders, teachers, local authority colleagues, third-sector partners, researchers and corporate supporters have all played a vital role in shaping what Reconnect London has become. Your commitment, generosity of spirit and willingness to contribute have been the driving forces behind all of the achievements outlined in this report.**

Together, we have demonstrated what is possible when schools and other partners work together in a cooperative, collaborative way – supporting each other, sharing expertise and placing children and young people at the heart of decision-making. The progress made across London’s schools, the strengthening of cross-sector relationships and the influence on policy and practice are a testament to the power of our shared values and moral purpose.

This moment represents not an end but a continuation of our collective endeavours. The principles that have guided our work - trust, humility, collegial ambition, professional skill and reciprocity - will continue to shape the next phase of support for schools and communities across the capital.

To everyone who has been part of Reconnect London: thank you. Your leadership, insight, and unwavering belief in the potential of young Londoners have made a lasting difference. It has been a privilege to work alongside you. We are extremely proud of everything you have achieved and look forward with renewed confidence to what comes next.



