

# Coming back stronger: a contribution to a conversation about Camden's education strategy

## Introduction

There is much to admire about schools in Camden. Ofsted has judged all the schools to be good or better. They perform well, measured against the public accountability framework, and their results are above national averages. Their leaders are inspiring and the people working in them are committed and passionate. Nevertheless, children from poorer families in Camden – in common with those elsewhere – continue to perform less well than those from homes with more obvious advantages. Last year, a report from the Education Policy Institute found that, on current trends, it would take 560 years to close the gap between children from poorer homes and their peers<sup>1</sup>. The current crisis will only have widened that gap.

The nature and scale of the pandemic mean its impact is already profound. No one can be sure what any further changes will be or how permanent they will prove. Education leaders in Camden are rightly focusing on managing schools' immediate problems and planning heroically for a return to at least a form of pre-pandemic normality. They have to deal not only with learning issues but also with concerns about the health and well-being of children, young people and their families– as well as increasing support for teachers and other staff. To sustain and adapt responses and initiatives will be a challenge, particularly those that represent longer-term improvements in how schools work. But whatever the current demands, thinking about the future has to be a priority. We must continue to capture best practice within our schools and beyond and share knowledge across the system to develop a long-term education strategy for Camden. This thinkpiece is intended to contribute to that goal.

Waiting for solutions is a luxury our children, especially the most disadvantaged, cannot afford. That is why the Council has invited Camden Learning to work with them from September in developing a new education strategy. We need to think radically about the sort of education system we want locally and why. We need to have that conversation with everyone who is invested in building a better future for education in Camden; we need to create a strategy that works for all. The pandemic has shown us some of the opportunities we have to 'build back better'.<sup>2</sup>

How do we do that? I suggest improvement rests on five essential building blocks. We must:

1. Anchor development in a place-based model of change.
2. Provide more resources for children at risk.
3. Harness the power of technology.
4. Reinvent a broad, inclusive and more relevant education for all.
5. Strengthen capacity through collaboration.

If we are to establish a firm foundation for these, it's important to define exactly what the purposes of education are. The section below offers a proposal for debate.

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1. Education Policy Institute (EPI) in partnership with the Fair Education Alliance (FEA), 2019, *Education in England: Annual Report 2019*, [www.epi.org.uk](http://www.epi.org.uk)

2. World Bank Group, 2020, *The Covid-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses*, [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

## The purposes of education

Education has the power to transform lives. It nurtures and develops individuals and allows them to thrive. But it also has an important role in helping individuals grow as good citizens, ambitious for change, and able to contribute positively to their communities and society. Education can shape the values of future generations to create a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable society. The Black Lives Matters movement shows just how much that is needed. Recent protests give voice to deep inequalities and raise issues about human rights. The demand is for safety, equal respect and dignity, equal participation and freedom from racism. Education should be at the forefront of breaking down the barriers established by racism.

We all want our young people to leave school as knowledgeable, confident learners, but they also need to be equipped and empowered to become 'champions of peace and justice'.<sup>3</sup> We want them to be socially responsible change-makers. This means making sure not just that they have greater knowledge and understanding but a greater propensity for action, too.

Could we do more in schools to harness children's energy and creativity so they are better prepared to become agents of generational change? Without adding to an already overcrowded timetable, how can we prepare them more fully to manage a complex and uncertain future and build a better one? Could the current crisis spur us on to re-imagine our education system and create the changes needed, both locally and nationally?

### 1. Anchor development in a place-based model of change

Over the last few years, Camden Learning has developed a place-based, school-led partnership. Schools have taken responsibility for their collective performance, supporting each other and helping to improve outcomes for children and young people. This is not traditional top-down accountability but lateral, shared responsibility, rooted in an ambitious local vision and professional networks.

Camden Council acted as 'midwife'<sup>4</sup> to Camden Learning and commissioned it to address local issues of quality and equity that could not be tackled by autonomous schools working alone.<sup>5</sup> The council understood the needs of the area and built on what it knew worked. It knew, for instance, that Camden schools engaged well with local communities, understood their needs and were skilled at getting things done. This blend of democratic accountability, as represented by the Council, and the professional and moral accountabilities of schools underpins the work of Camden Learning and gives powerful legitimacy to its work.

Schools chose to join Camden Learning because they shared an overriding commitment to place and community. They feel a sense of belonging to and pride in the area. They see the partnership as a way of helping them bring about the ambitious difference they want to make to the lives of children and young people. And by promoting equity, fostering well-being and nurturing the educational growth of the community, the schools make an important contribution to the civic leadership of Camden.

Collaboration is a key element of this place-based system. Big issues confront us locally, whether it be the condition of the planet or community cohesion. They require us to think holistically as we care for our 'common home' and the communities within it. A joined-up, collaborative response is essential if we are to create a system that supports children and families to lead better lives.

There is universal agreement that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are likely to struggle the most with the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. The last few months have seen increasing levels of poverty and stress for these families. They include those on benefits, those living in inadequate housing and those who experience a range of problems, from poor mental health to domestic violence. But we have also witnessed a great deal of community support and solidarity. We should not forget that. Our response to this crisis has opened up the possibility of a more place-based approach to integrating access, support and services for those most in need.

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3. UNODC (2019), *Empowering students for just societies: a new resource for teachers*, [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)

4. Kershaw, C. (2016), 'Schools are not islands' in R. Blatchford & R. Clark (eds), *Self-improving Schools: The Journey to Excellence*, Melton: John Catt Educational Ltd

5. Gilbert, C (in press), 'Place-based leadership in autonomous school systems' in P. Earley and T. Greany (eds), in *School leadership and education system reform*, London: Bloomsbury

In developing our strategy, what more might we do to ensure every school plays its part in making our local eco-system more agile and resilient? What can we do to ensure that it serves children and families better, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable? And how can we create the opportunities – in school and beyond – to build a generation of change-makers, with impact in their local communities?

## 2. Provide more resources for children at risk

The crisis has exposed the many inequities in our education system and has underlined the fragility of children struggling with a concentration of disadvantages. Children who are vulnerable for economic or other reasons often need a range of support. It is right that our expectations for disadvantaged children are as high as they are for their better-off peers. But the pandemic has made it clear that expectations can be realised only if more resources are provided by the state. This is made all the more urgent by the real possibility of a global economic slowdown that will affect the poorest in society most. Better-off families will invariably find ways to support their children to learn.

Societies with large gaps between rich and poor are bad for almost everyone. There is a high degree of correlation between countries with wide income inequalities, such as the UK, and a range of social and environmental problems. These include ill-health, obesity, mental illness, drug abuse, low life expectancy, child well-being, educational performance, teenage pregnancies, imprisonment rates, social mobility, violence, trust and lack of community life.<sup>6</sup>

In considering the more vulnerable, it's instructive to compare the investment devoted to them and that assigned to other 'priority' areas. For example, Nesta highlights the disparity between the resources for technological research and development directed at the commercial and military applications of artificial intelligence (AI) compared to 'AI solutions to solve some of our biggest societal challenges'.<sup>7</sup> If we are to empower all our citizens in any meaningful sense, particularly the youngest and most disadvantaged, this disparity in investment has to change. Locally, could we do more to analyse the impact of key initiatives? For example, it is clear that schools have engaged positively and imaginatively with the STEAM initiative.

Without doubt, it has changed practice in many schools. We now need to ensure that change translates into less advantaged students having the confidence, skills and motivation to take up more prestigious STEAM subjects at GCSE and beyond.

Targeting resources at the poorest children and their families isn't an unaffordable luxury. It should be seen as investing in social justice and creating a fairer society that benefits all. Capturing the key elements of what a good education for all looks like in a Camden charter or pledge could provide a focus for debate about what resources all children, but particularly those most at risk, should rightfully be entitled to. This debate might usefully also encompass consideration of how resources for those children most at risk, should be provided. Of course, some would go straight to schools, but should some be given directly to families to enable an element of choice about what resources might be spent on? For parents, this might create a greater sense of agency and investment in their children's education.

## 3. Harness the power of technology

The pandemic exposed another glaring inequality. Once schools closed, the digital divide between families came into stark relief. Unequal access to devices, broadband connectivity, space to study at home and access to adults with the time and skills to support children in their learning have all continued to widened inequalities. A survey from the Institute for Fiscal Studies in May 2020 found that:

- pupils from better-off families were spending longer on home learning
- their parents were much more likely than the less well-off to report that their child's school was providing online classes, access to online video-conferencing and chats with teachers
- pupils from better-off families had access to more individualised resources, such as private tutoring
- such families had a better home set-up for distance learning, including space to study
- their parents reported feeling more able to support them.<sup>8</sup>

A consequence of school closure was an almost inevitable increase in inequality.

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6. Wilkinson, R, and Pickett, K. (2010), *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, London: Bloomsbury

7. [www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk)

8. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 18 May 2020 *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*, Briefing Note BN28, [ifs.org.uk](http://ifs.org.uk)

At the same time, there was growing and widespread acceptance during the pandemic of the need for devices and free broadband as an educational lifeline for all children. This need will last beyond it. As a result of the experiences of the last few months, a secondary head in Camden has budgeted to buy devices for all her new Year 7 intake. The school intends to pay for these outright for children in receipt of free school meals or entitled to the pupil premium. For the others, the school has established a scheme for parents to pay £10 a month until the device has been paid for and then belongs to them. The crisis has shown clearly how essential our digital infrastructure is as a prerequisite for learning. As such, it should be funded by the state.

We live in a digital world. The pandemic has only underscored how we depend on the internet to deliver so much that we deem essential. If we are to close the education gap in any meaningful sense, poorer children must be entitled to the digital resources they need to support their learning. To deny them the opportunity and the skills to access that learning would only entrench inequality. For the least well-off, a device and decent wi-fi, post pandemic, are therefore essential.

Until now, discussion about the potential of technology to reshape education, often illustrated with all sorts of differing scenarios about artificial intelligence and automation, has not resulted, for the most part, in changes to teaching and learning in schools. However, the crisis has generated huge changes in teachers' skills and confidence in using it. This is likely to continue to have a major impact on how they approach teaching and learning. Interestingly, the OECD's 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>9</sup> survey showed England scoring highly on the availability of devices, software and the internet but ranking lower than other countries on 'regular discussions with teaching staff about the use of digital devices for pedagogical purposes'.<sup>10</sup> The pandemic has changed all that.

At the beginning of lockdown, many teachers lacked training, confidence and expertise in remote learning for pupils. Nor did many know how to engage parents in supporting home learning. But teachers' skills and confidence in planning and providing distance learning have grown week by week with Google Classroom, for example, now a familiar tool for many. There is no reason why their new knowledge cannot be put to long-term use. Indeed, many schools in Camden seem convinced that blended learning will become a feature of school life over the next few years.

They see the possibilities that digital learning creates, both complementing and enriching more traditional teaching. This might well generate opportunities for children learning together across schools in Camden and beyond. This sort of approach offers the potential for greater efficiency but also more opportunities for students in terms of enrichment, giving some of them access to learning and collaborative networks they might not otherwise have had. It is a short step to providing some programmes or courses online across a group of schools, perhaps in a shortage or minority subject. If these were arranged across schools in an area, 'real' meetings could form part of the overall course. It might extend also to students working in groups with the universities or businesses we have in Camden.

Schools report that online learning has really worked for some students in ways teachers had not anticipated: the quiet student, the shy student who's reluctant to speak in class but happy to use a chat line, the easily distracted student who may have proved disruptive in class but is now focused and enthusiastic about learning, and many others. A number of students, described by schools as challenging, have produced more work and made better progress by working online than when they were in school. This is already generating discussion about different models of inclusion. Several school refusers are now engaging and enjoying online learning, in some instances with their peers as well with teachers. One boy, who had not been in school for a year, started to 'attend' the school's online provision and to engage well. Rather than always trying to bring children back to school, should we be thinking more imaginatively about individual needs, what constitutes 'school' and build social interactions around a different model? And how might that influence our education strategy?

At its best, technology can provide access to a huge range of resources; it can support new ways of teaching that encourage learners' more active participation, individually and in small or larger groups. It has enormous potential to support, in particular, disadvantaged students beyond the school day. Teachers report that their role shifts in this technological context more to that of coach, mentor and assessor. Yet, however education develops, it will always rely on that essential connection between the teacher and the learner. The quality of teaching remains as important as ever.

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9. The international study of 15-year-olds undertaken every three years,

10. DfE (2019). *Achievement of 15-year-olds in England: PISA 2018 results*, [www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk)

This growth in teachers' technological skills and expertise could well enable schools to build their capacity to innovate so young people learn better. Andreas Schleicher says: 'The opportunities that digital technologies offer go well beyond a stop-gap solution during the crisis. Digital technology allows us to find entirely new answers to what people learn, how people learn, where people learn and when they learn.'<sup>11</sup> It will be important for the new education strategy to build on this increased expertise to enhance students' opportunities for learning.

The experience of recent months has shown remote learning has significant benefits in other ways, too. Multi-agency meetings focusing on individual children and families have been easier to organise and better attended. The numbers of parents attending a range of parents' meetings have been higher than would have been expected normally. Joining staff and governors' meetings from home has also resulted in strong attendance with many schools indicating some form of remote participation will be a feature that continues into the future.

The last few months have also generated numerous examples of teachers participating in or, indeed, leading professional development or training online. Most training programmes for autumn 2020 have been planned on this basis, with many incorporating virtual professional networks and online collaboration. In the longer term, professional development is likely to see major and lasting change. Considerable research shows teachers' job satisfaction is significantly related to the support they receive for their continuing professional development.<sup>12</sup> How might Camden Learning work with schools to build on what's been learned and lead the changes?

High-performing education systems prepare children for the future in terms of universal digital access, a focus on 'student and teacher digital competence and a balance between a knowledge-rich curriculum and the development of twenty-first century skills'.<sup>13</sup> There is much to draw on from the examples of recent months. Using technology successfully for learning depends upon developing children and young people's independent learning skills, critical thinking and metacognition. Teachers remain crucial in ensuring these skills are well developed in learners.

How should our experience and learning about the use of technology over recent months be built into our education strategy for Camden?

#### 4. Reinvent a broad, inclusive and relevant education for all

A major concern throughout the pandemic has been its impact on GCSE and A-level examinations. Important though academic results are, they are neither the core purpose of education nor, indeed, the chief reason for a young person's success in life after school.

Almost all countries have some form of examination system as young people come to the end of their statutory schooling. But few have the sort of intensive testing regime we have twice – at 16 and then again at 18. Testing and examinations have a grip on education, particularly in secondary schools, that is not mirrored in other parts of the world. It is a legacy from the time when most young people left full-time education and moved directly into the labour market at 16. The current crisis gives us the opportunity to think about what is tested and how, although we would need to influence the government to bring about significant change. The seeds have already been sown.

Last year, Robert Halfon, the Education Select Committee Chair, called for a radical rethink of the current education system, including scrapping GCSEs.<sup>14</sup> His is not a lone voice. A YouGov poll at the same time indicated 73% of parents said that there was too much emphasis on examination grades in secondary schools.<sup>15</sup> That same poll also found that 82% of parents believe that the pressure to perform well in GCSE exams is bad for children's health and well-being.

PISA reported last year: 'Pupils in England were, on average, less satisfied with their lives than pupils across the OECD countries. They were also more likely to feel miserable and worried and less likely to agree that their life has a clear meaning'.<sup>16</sup> Most worryingly, in the three years since the previous PISA study in 2015, the measurement of life satisfaction of 15-year-olds in England had fallen faster than in any other country with comparable data.<sup>17</sup>

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11. Schleicher, A. (2020) *Education disrupted – education rebuilt: Some insights from PISA on the availability and use digital tools for learning*, [www.oecdutoday.com](http://www.oecdutoday.com)

12. OECD (2019), *TALIS 2018 Volume 1-Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

13. Cousin, S. (2020), *Developing a new locality model for English schools Phase 1: unpublished literature review*

14. Robert Halfon (2019), *Towards a 21st century education system*, Speech, Cabinet War Room, 11 February 2019, [www.edge.co.uk](http://www.edge.co.uk)

15. YouGov poll (2019) commissioned by the Edge Foundation,

16. OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, 2018, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

17. OECD, Programme for international Student Assessment, PISA, 2015, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

The pandemic will only have heightened concerns about children's well-being. After many months at home, many will have lost the habits schools would have inculcated – how to listen, how to study well, how to work and talk with others, for example. Children will have lost the face-to-face support they would have had from their teachers. The poorest will have been stuck inside poor housing with little scope for outside play. They will have experienced the pressures of increasing poverty and stress, with some seeing family members become ill or die. The learning gaps between most disadvantaged and other children will have widened. That's why the importance of well-being is so crucial. But it would be a mistake to think that a good well-being programme would suffice and that children could then get on with the real business of schools. Well-being needs to be built into the ethos, curriculum and practices of school life.

Many schools in Camden have built a strong focus on equalities and human rights into all aspects of school life. Following the recent protests about racist violence, they were among the first schools to challenge themselves harder about their approach to anti-racism and involved young people in those discussions. However, the racial disparities in the pandemic have raised fundamental questions for schools. An early focus has been on the curriculum. This needs to ensure it has strong roots in Black and global histories, achievements and cultures. Autonomous schools remain responsible for their own curriculum, although, for maintained schools, that has to be rooted in the national curriculum. Does the latter allow schools to make the changes that need to be made? How can schools find time to tackle the vital issues of stereotyping and discrimination that need to be dealt with at all levels if change is to happen? But how can they afford not to?

It is important that Camden's new strategy is rooted in the determination to create a more inclusive education system. This is a system that removes the barriers limiting participation and achievement, respects diverse needs, abilities and characteristics, and eliminates all forms of discrimination in the learning environment.<sup>18</sup> This feels a huge task but the question of how to ensure all children and young people receive a high-quality educational experience has to be at the heart of everything we do.

Immense changes to the world of work, mainly as a result of technological change and innovation, have been predicted for a long time. And while we cannot be certain exactly what those changes will be, we do know that the future won't be like the past. Academic achievement is important but, on its own, it is not enough for what will be needed. How can all learners best be prepared for this level of uncertainty? Particularly pressing is the drive, already underway, to improve the quality, breadth and take-up of post-16 education in Camden so it better meets the needs of all young people.

As the CBI/Pearson annual education and skills surveys show, employers value qualifications as indicators of achievement and ability but they identify attitudes, behaviours and skills as the biggest drivers of success in work.<sup>19</sup> Employers prize creativity, originality, team-working, problem-solving and the ability to learn – skills that no machine can replicate.

Last year, the CBI published a report showing nearly half of all employers found most young people are not ready for the world of work.<sup>20</sup> Employers want 'character' and broader skills to be embedded in the school timetable. They argued that the government should rethink GCSEs and reform the Ebacc to ensure it encompasses a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, especially in relation to creativity.

There is growing evidence that it is our most disadvantaged young people who do not develop the broader skills that employers need. A report from the Sutton Trust found those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend schools with less extra-curricular provision and are therefore less likely to receive the broader benefit these activities confer.<sup>21</sup>

We need a local and a national conversation about what we want from our education system. What knowledge, skills and attitudes are essential if we are to fulfil the purposes of education set out above and how could they developed? Many of these can be tackled in classrooms but they need social action and volunteering activities, too. Can we persuade the local community to provide community or work-based experiences for all young people?

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18. UNESCO, *Inclusion in education*, [en.unesco.org](http://en.unesco.org)

19. CBI/Pearson (2018; 2019) *Education and Skills Survey Report 2019: Education and learning for the modern world* and *CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Annual Report 2018: Educating for the modern world*, [www.cbi.org.uk](http://www.cbi.org.uk)

20. CBI, 2019, *Getting young people 'work ready'*, [www.cbi.org.uk](http://www.cbi.org.uk)

21. Sutton Trust (2017), *Life Lessons: Improving essential skills for young people*, [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)

There are many steps to be taken to develop a broad, inclusive and relevant education for all. As part of our engagement on Camden's strategy for education, we need to create some consensus about what a good education for the future should look like and then set out clearly each child's entitlement to it. We need to scrutinise the extent to which the system is truly inclusive and consider how a new strategy can help to overcome the many barriers to learning that continue to damage the lives of young people and society.

## 5. Strengthen capacity through collaboration

Partnership working and collaboration within and across schools are essential elements of Camden Learning's approach. School leaders are at the heart of this but, if we are to grow the capacity we need for a thriving education system, we should create more opportunities for collaboration.

Collaboration underpinned the way in which Camden Learning and the council worked with schools, including governors, parents, young people and local communities, during the pandemic. Camden Learning supported schools individually and collectively in managing the challenges of the crisis. But it also connected, on their behalf, with other agencies and stakeholders, both internally and externally. Using the leadership expertise in local schools, Camden Learning led the design of initiatives to support 'recovery and renewal' in schools, particularly for the most disadvantaged children and young people. The collaboration evident within and across schools during the pandemic, including mobilising strong ties with parents and communities, should be built on systematically as part of the new strategy.

Through all the difficulties of the crisis, it has been inspiring to see how collaboration has improved the lives of children and their families. We saw many examples of schools working closely and practically with families as pressures mounted at home. Leaders understood there was no point in focusing on home learning if children were hungry, for example, or subject to the stresses of domestic violence. They became much more socially involved in their families' problems and issues. As we shape a new strategy, we need to reflect on whether and how this collaboration between families and schools could influence the local system we are building.

Many schools have given considerable support to parents in supporting home learning. Where schools had already set up good systems of online communication, they were able to use these not just to communicate well with parents but also to enable parents to engage well with each other. In some school communities, parents found peer support invaluable and a powerful support for their own learning. Online video parents' evenings proved successful, with some schools indicating that they are likely to adopt this approach permanently. More parents attended and the discussion was longer and more personal.

Given their involvement in home learning, parents may well be keen now to engage more with schools to foster the education of their children. How might our strategy build on this and also develop more opportunities for parents to learn together?

The pandemic has underlined the importance of teaching as a skill and profession. Most parents have found it much harder than they initially thought to teach their children at home and anecdotes indicate that their respect for teachers has grown. At the beginning of the pandemic, the OECD published the second set of results relating to the 2018 international TALIS survey.<sup>22</sup> This volume provides an analysis of teachers and school leaders' perceptions of the value of their profession. Twice as many teachers in England report that their work causes them stress compared with the international average. Higher numbers of teachers than the OECD average report that they want to leave the profession within 5 years and this was more marked with those under 50, a quarter of whom wanted to leave. The loss of teachers to the profession is a serious risk to the quality of education that we want in all schools. Is there more we could do to support, develop and retain teachers in Camden schools? Teachers who report participating in impactful professional development tend to display higher levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction.<sup>23</sup> This needs to be a focus for consideration during our conversations about the new education strategy. We want our school leaders and teachers to enjoy their jobs, have the skills to do them well and feel appreciated for all they do for children in our schools.

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22. OECD, (2020), *TALIS 2018 Volume 2 - Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

23. OECD (2019), *TALIS 2018 Volume 1 - Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

High-performing systems value their teachers.<sup>24</sup> They ensure they are well supported professionally throughout their career. Greater collaboration between schools, particularly involving teachers, has the obvious value of increasing collective capacity. It also has the benefit of enhancing the quality of teachers' own learning. One of Camden's many strengths is the diversity of its schools. It is important that all feel valued members of Camden Learning. Our strong focus on children most at risk should not prevent us recognising -and indeed, learning from- the excellent work going on in schools with more advantaged intakes. In particular, they help us lift expectations and ambitions. Teachers in Camden have spoken with enthusiasm about the opportunities afforded by co-designing improvement initiatives created by Camden Learning. They have enjoyed the creativity of working collaboratively to establish better practice, building social and professional capital. How might we extend collaborative approaches across schools?

Research shows that the impact of collaborative approaches is consistently positive.<sup>25</sup> Camden Learning has long recognised, however, that collaborative practice requires organisational investment. Over the last few years, therefore, inventive ways have been found of resourcing opportunities for teachers to work together on key issues and priorities. Growing confidence and expertise in using video calls and participating in virtual meetings during the pandemic may well have helped. It has generated interesting examples of teachers thinking and planning together across schools, flexibly and without much cost. Investing in teachers to work together on key issues, for example, developing a stronger approach to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter debate, must remain a core part of Camden Learning's approach. There would also be considerable value in setting up more small-scale initiatives or research – perhaps just two teachers working at classroom level across schools – most of which could be done remotely. Improvement and even innovation can stem from small scale initiatives focused forensically on classrooms, As Pasi Sahlberg argues, a focus on details can uncover important relationships between teaching and learning.<sup>26</sup> Collaboration solves problems but it also stimulates teachers' motivation. It gives them confidence and pride in their work, with the potential added bonus that they stay longer in Camden and, indeed, the profession.

The pandemic has underlined the need for leaders and teachers to connect with each other both within and across schools. Collaborative professional learning is strong in Camden and central to our work. In developing our new education strategy, we should look beyond Camden to find ways of improving it further. For example, in Shanghai, each teacher's appraisal focuses not only on how well children have been taught and what they have achieved but on the contribution the teacher has made to the teaching profession or the wider education system. This approach to accountability recognises the importance of individual professional responsibilities in driving change and innovation at system level.<sup>27</sup>

We have seen examples of collaboration across schools and between parents but Camden Learning is also well placed to support the broader aspects of children and young people's social, emotional and cultural development. Camden Music Festival is inspirational for all involved, but are there other ways in which Camden Learning can initiate greater collaboration between children and young people? For example, could a focus on engaging students in a range of creative or sporting activities be positive not only for the individuals involved but also support community cohesion more generally?

Camden Learning provides a strong foundation for a collaborative, school-led system for improvement. It makes connections across schools and communities which support learning for both adults and children. What more could it do to establish effective forms of collaboration and peer development that support the more equitable system we all want?

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24. OECD, (2020), *TALIS 2018 Volume 2 - Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

25. Education Endowment Foundation, (2018), 'Collaborative Learning' in *EEF Teaching & Learning Toolkit*, [www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk](http://www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

26. Sahlberg, P. (2017) *Small data for big change: What does it mean for teachers?* ATA Magazine, Summer 2017. Available online: [www.pasisahlberg.com](http://www.pasisahlberg.com)

27. Schleicher, A. (2020), *How can teachers and school systems respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? Some lessons from TALIS*, [www.oecdeditoday.com](http://www.oecdeditoday.com)



## In conclusion

In September, Camden Council and Camden Learning will begin the process of creating a new strategy for schools focused on continuing to build both excellence and equity in our education system. The strategy needs to take account of a changing local demography, specifically declining pupil numbers, reductions in school funding and the impact of the pandemic.

Camden has a strong and inclusive education system but we should take this opportunity to think creatively about what more could be done to ensure all children thrive and leave school as knowledgeable, successful learners with the confidence and skills to face a complex and uncertain future. At the same time, we should consider what more might be done to equip young people to be good citizens and socially responsible change-makers. This thinkpiece is intended to contribute to the conversation about how we might create a strategy that does that. It has focused very much on developments in schools but our strategy needs to recognise the importance of early learning as the foundation for success. It also needs to take account of the importance of learning as an essential lifetime activity.

Taking account of recent Covid-19 experience, this thinkpiece suggests improvement rests on five essential building blocks:

- Anchoring development in a place-based model of change.
- Providing more resources for children at risk.
- Harnessing the power of technology.
- Reinventing a broad, inclusive and more relevant education for all.
- Strengthening capacity through collaboration.

As the conversation about the strategy gets underway in September, we look forward to engaging you in discussions about these so we can begin to build a consensus for change. There will also be opportunities for you to contribute to the conversation more broadly, either individually or in groups, to ensure that we build back better than ever and create a strategy that works for all.

***Christine Gilbert***

*June 2020*

*Chair, Camden Learning*