

Evaluation of the GLA Stepping Stones pilot Executive Summary

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1. Introduction

The Stepping Stones programme was funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA) as a proof-of-concept pilot in the academic year 2016/17. Its key aim was to ease the transition from primary to secondary school for vulnerable young people.

The Stepping Stones pilot programme was aimed at young people considered at risk during the transition from primary (Year 6) to secondary school (Year 7). The programme was designed to secure improvement across three outcomes: attainment; behaviour; and attendance.

Stepping Stones was split into the following main elements:

- **Engagement days** with primary school students and liaison with primary teachers and parents during Year 6.
- **Summer School** for incoming Year 7 students prior to the start of term with tailored Stepping Stones sessions.
- **Stepping Stones lessons** throughout Year 7 to help students to deal positively with a range of social and academic situations.
- **Peer mentoring** for Stepping Stones students from older students in Year 10.
- **Adult community mentors** through Gangs Unite providing support with the peer mentoring and Stepping Stones lessons aspects of the programme.
- **Aspiration events** towards the end of Year 7, including trips to help Stepping Stones students broaden their perceptions about what is possible for their futures.

Schools with free school meal rates above 60% in wards of socio-economic deprivation were invited by the GLA to apply to participate and receive funding to deliver the pilot programme. Gladesmore Community School was selected to lead the project and then identified two further secondary schools to take part: Heathcote School and Science College and The Urswick School. Combined, they received GLA funding of £430,000 and they contributed a further £24,000 to set up and run the Stepping Stones programme activities.

OPM Group was commissioned to evaluate the pilot in terms of the impact on attainment, behaviour and attendance for the Stepping Stones students; the impact on peer mentors and other stakeholders; and the economic impact of the programme on the education system and wider public finances. Alongside the evaluation report, a free online toolkit of resources and learning points is available for schools to help them implement the programme, or elements of it, in the future: www.london.gov.uk/stepping-stones.

Project Oracle validated the evaluation methodology as being in line with their standards of evidence¹.



¹ <https://project-oracle.com/>

2. Impact on Stepping Stones students

Overall, the evaluation demonstrates that the Stepping Stones programme activities can have a substantial positive impact on the attainment, behaviour and attendance of vulnerable young people in their first year at secondary school. Should these positive changes be sustained as the young people progress through secondary school, they could result in longer term benefits such as reduced likelihood of becoming NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and increasing the number who achieve qualifications.

Attainment

- Two of the pilot schools saw a strong improvement in the proportion of students making satisfactory progress in Maths and English.
- In Maths, for these two schools, an average of 74% of Stepping Stones students made satisfactory progress, compared to 54% of a comparative historical cohort.
- In English, for these two schools, an average of 83% of Stepping Stones students made satisfactory progress, compared to 67% of the historical cohort.

Key reasons for this improvement include:

- Multiple, complementary layers of support through elements of the Stepping Stones programme and other aspects of school support.
- The role of peer mentors in encouraging Stepping Stones students to do well in their school work.
- Meeting individual learning needs in tailored ways.

“I believe that Stepping Stones has brought the confidence out in my child. It has helped him in a lot of ways. School work. Confidence. [...] he’s got so many friends now [...] Now he’s getting the help that he needed.” – Parent

Behaviour

- Shy, quiet students improved their confidence in classroom and social settings:
 - The Summer School enabled students to become familiar with their peers and teachers before the start of the year
 - Peer mentors provided encouragement, guidance, and wider social networks.
- Students with behavioural issues improved their self-awareness and maturity:
 - Stepping Stones lessons provided strategies for managing emotions and behaviour.
 - Peer mentors provided positive role models.
- Despite an overall decline in PASS (Pupil Attitudes to School and Self) scores as the year progressed, a large proportion of students maintained consistent scores in the PASS assessments throughout the year.

- Two out of three schools saw a strong improvement in commitment scores for Stepping Stones students compared to the historical cohort.
- In one school, positive commitment scores increased from 46% to 74% compared to the historical cohort.

“I learnt how to control my anger, because I was a very angry person. [...] My mentor said if I get angry I should go to the toilets and wash my face and that will take out the anger” – Stepping Stones student

Attendance

- Two out of the three schools saw a strong improvement in attendance rates among Stepping Stones students compared to the historical cohorts.
- At one school the proportion of those achieving 95% attendance or higher increased from 54% for the historical cohort to 70% for the Stepping Stones students.
- Stepping Stones students feel happier about going to school.
 - The Summer School was particularly effective at easing anxiety about secondary school that could have otherwise led to increased absence.

3. Impact on peer mentors

Although they were not the direct beneficiaries of the programme, the significant positive impact of Stepping Stones on Year 10 peer mentors is important to recognise, especially as they are soon to make a transition themselves, into key stage 5 or life beyond education. These key impacts are summarised below.

Impact	Description
Leadership and maturity	Recognising the need to role-model leadership and maturity. Taking responsibility to attend mentoring sessions consistently.
Listening skills and empathy	Listening to their mentees experiences and worries. Increased empathy with teachers, leading mentors to improve their own behaviour and encourage Year 7s to do the same.
Confidence and communication	Improved ability to socialise with people of different ages and backgrounds. Improved interaction and collaboration with teachers when problems arise.
Future aspirations	Most peer mentors wanted to take on another leadership role after 2016/17 e.g. becoming prefects, or continuing to help with the new Year 7 cohort. Increased sense of positivity about their future beyond secondary school.

“I have changed my behaviour positively because that is what you have to do when you are influencing a young person’s life. You have to show them the right way” – Peer mentor

4. Delivering each element of the Stepping Stones programme

Schools may choose to run the Stepping Stones programme in full, or to run certain activities in isolation. To help them make decisions about what will work best for them, the cost of each element of the programme, as well as key benefits and learning points, are summarised below. Please note, however, our impact assessment is based on the delivery of all elements and therefore the benefits associated with each element are indicative only. Furthermore, all costs are based on delivering the pilot year of the programme. These are likely to be reduced for schools implementing the programme now and we hope that resources available in the programme Toolkit will support this.

Programme element	Cost per student	Key benefits	Learning points
Liaison with primary schools and parents	None assigned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informing decisions about who would benefit from additional support in Year 7. Building awareness of Stepping Stones among primary school teachers and parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a bank of follow-up questions to ask primary schools in addition to standard information about the incoming students. Purposeful positive messaging can encourage parents to be supportive of their children taking part.
Summer School	£382 NB: Likely to be reduced outside of the pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people gain familiarity with school layout; teachers; and fellow Year 7 students before term begins. Especially important for those who feel anxious about starting secondary school or who lack confidence and self-esteem. Teachers get to know incoming students and identify any further individuals who may benefit from additional support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who are unable to attend Summer School may need additional support at the beginning of Year 7 to settle into the school environment. This can be addressed through other aspects of the programme such as one-to-one peer mentoring.
Stepping Stones lessons	£600 NB: Likely to be reduced outside of the pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing norms of positive behaviour among Year 7 students and addressing behavioural issues in a targeted way. Especially effective for those displaying disruptive behaviour. Students develop strategies for managing emotions and behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using the Stepping Stones lesson resources flexibly can enable schools to adapt the lessons to the needs of their students. Schools can choose how to target these lessons, for example, by delivering them to all Stepping Stones students, or to specific groups.
Peer mentoring	£305 NB: Likely to be reduced outside of the pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people gain confidence, self-esteem, advice, social networks, positive role models, and homework support. Mentors develop in maturity, contributing to a wider school community culture of responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is helpful to have a mix of different qualities and experiences in the appointed mentors. Training should be thorough and engaging and adequate support should be provided from adults throughout the year.
Community mentoring	£846	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a relatable adult role model for both Stepping Stones students and peer mentors. Take a strengths-based approach to develop soft skills and positive behaviours, and free up teaching staff capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The community mentoring role works best when there is a balance between structure and flexibility in how they work within the school.
Aspiration days	£100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broadening horizons about what futures are possible. Enjoyable trips that sow seeds of thought about their futures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In future, schools will run a wider variety of options that meet different interests and abilities, including traditional routes such as further education as well as practical activities delivered during the pilot.

5. Economic assessment

The economic assessment aimed to identify the costs associated with delivering the programme, the benefits that could be monetised, and the overall budget impact for both the education providers and wider public finances.

The Stepping Stones programme cost an average of £151,393 per school and £2,282 per student. The cost per element of the programme ranges from £100 per student for the Aspiration Days to £846 for the Community Mentoring (Gangs Unite).

Overall, there is a return on investment of 220% when the impact on public finances is taken into consideration, indicating that the Stepping Stones programme more than pays for itself.

When considering the economic impact on education providers alone, the return on investment is 75%, indicating that the programme does not pay for itself in this context. However, given this is a pilot, subsequent years are likely to cost less. A reduction in costs of 22% would see a positive budget impact to education alone.

In addition, there are other benefits which have not been costed in our analysis, such as the impact on peer mentors and other Year 7 students. The evaluation findings indicate that these impacts could be significant, so our economic assessment provides a conservative estimate of the return on investment.

6. Summary

Overall, the pilot has demonstrated that delivering the Stepping Stones programme can have substantial positive impacts on vulnerable young people as they transition to, and settle into secondary school.

Although improvements in attainment, behaviour and attendance were not observed consistently at each school, this proof-of-concept evaluation provides compelling evidence of the positive impacts that can be realised. In addition, a conservative economic assessment indicates that the programme more than pays for itself when the impact on public finances is taken into consideration.

“[There is] more cross-school, cross-year cooperation between teachers, sharing information and working together to solve problems. Year 10 mentors help facilitate this by raising issues to teachers that they feel year 7s are encountering” – Teacher

The full evaluation report and online toolkit of resources can be found at:

www.london.gov.uk/stepping-stones

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