PUTTING EVIDENCE TO WORK: A SCHOOL’S GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTATION
Gathering and interpreting data to identify priorities

1 Confidently identify a priority

Often, the decision to act begins with an instinct, a feeling or a hunch. Existing beliefs about problems in school can be powerful and useful, but they can also reflect biases (which we all have). We need to check and challenge our initial thinking until we are confident that the identified problem is both important and real i.e. a priority. Such confidence relies on two factors:

a. Gathering relevant and rigorous data
b. Generating plausible and credible interpretations of that data

Remember that any data you use are simply representations of the effects of a problem—one of the “multiple inadequate glances” that you can take at the perceived issue. Be careful not to mistake the cause(s) of a problem with the outcome of a problem. For example, low attainment at Key Stage 2 will be an outcome of underlying issues (see the figure in section 4).

To generate evidence and insights on the problem we have to interpret data and use judgement, and that begins by questioning the quality of your data.

2 Gather data that is fit-for-purpose

We sometimes use data that we have to hand rather than what we need. Examine information from a range of sources to build a rich picture of the issue, recognising the strengths and weaknesses of different sources. Find the quiet trends in the data. Go beyond the headlines and explore the variation.

Ask yourself: ‘What cause of a problem does the data represent?’; ‘What are the trends in the data over time?’; ‘What are the underlying issues?’.

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3 Recognise weaknesses in the data

There are always weaknesses in the data schools use—everything from the wording of questions, to how tired the person conducting the survey is. Being aware of these weaknesses helps you to be more confident in the data interpretation process.

- Are your biases, and those of colleagues, skewing your interpretations of the data?
- Are there significant gaps in your data? If so, are you filling these gaps with your own assumptions and generalisations?
- Is the most relevant and rigorous data—that which is most fit-for-purpose—being prioritised, while data of less relevance and rigour are being dismissively ignored?

4 Provide credible and plausible interpretations

To generate evidence of a problem we have to provide credible and plausible interpretations of the data—this requires triangulating data from different sources and using judgement to draw accurate conclusions.

Here are some things to bear in mind:

- Describe how each piece of data provides evidence for the problem e.g. behavioural issues, captured through lesson observations, suggest that pupils A and B are struggling to access the curriculum, identify for whom the problem exists, when it happens and how it manifests.
- Avoid fitting the data to your preconceptions—while you and the data may end up in agreement, this is not automatically the case. Sit aside preconceptions of problems and solutions and let the data reveal the nature of the issue.
- Create a strong argument that is credible and acceptable. It will never be definitive rather than compelling. Rather than trying to convince yourself and your colleagues that you are right, focus on demonstrating an issue with evidence.
- Share your interpretation with people who might disagree with you, to test your thinking and identify weaknesses in it. Encourage them to challenge any assumptions and see if they can disprove the existence of the problem.

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This resource supports the Putting Evidence to Work: A School’s Guide to Implementation guidance report.