

‘Breakthrough Schools’ and Early Literacy:

How England can close the disadvantage gap



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Foreword

At Fischer Family Trust (FFT), our work is rooted in helping schools, trusts, local authorities and policymakers use education data to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Day to day we know that understanding data is important as it helps us see where pupils are thriving, where they are falling behind, and where action can make the greatest difference. This is absolutely paramount in early literacy as learning to read fluently is the foundation to helping pupils access the curriculum and enjoy their time at school.

This report asks an important question: ***what can we learn from schools that are achieving exceptional outcomes for disadvantaged pupils?***

Through visits to seven schools across England, the report shows that there is no single approach. What these schools share is a coherent, relentless and highly practical focus on reading from the earliest stages and we have organised these into 5 lessons for schools.

First, early years and nursery provision matter profoundly. The schools in this report understand that the foundations for literacy are built long before children sit the Phonics Screening Check.

Second, phonics is taught with consistency, urgency and care in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, with pupils' progress tracked closely and support provided quickly when children are at risk of falling behind.

Third, phonics is necessary but not sufficient as children also need reading practice, fluency, language development, comprehension and access to rich texts if they are to become confident, independent readers.

Fourth, success depends on the whole-school system. These schools do not rely on isolated individual teachers; they build shared routines, shared expectations and shared responsibility for reading.

Fifth, this work is driven by leadership. In every school, the focus on reading was not incidental. It was a moral commitment, sustained over time, and rooted in the belief that nearly every child can learn to read well.

This is also a timely moment as new opportunities now exist for low-cost, continuous tracking of measures such as reading fluency. Through the Reading Assessment Programme, more than one million fluency assessments have already been completed, showing the potential for data to support earlier identification, better teaching and more effective remediation.

Teachers are already working hard every day to support their pupils. The purpose of this report is not to talk down to them, but to learn from schools that are making a measurable difference in some of the most challenging contexts.

The schools featured here show that the disadvantage gap is not inevitable and that a forensic focus on early literacy is the key.

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Executive Summary

In this report we case study seven schools which appear to consistently achieve outcomes for pupils that are better than national averages for non-disadvantaged pupils. We identified these schools and visited them to ask them what their 'system' was, as relates to reading, and how they see reading as part of their overall success. After several visits we developed a detailed case study format and shared notes with the schools for them to add and amend. From this we have drawn together generalisable themes and learning.

We have grouped the findings into five learning areas for schools:

1. There was agreement across all school leaders about how pivotal early years and nurseries were for literacy development.

When asked how they achieved their success, all the schools wanted to speak about nursery, and the importance of a well-planned and coordinated start in education. We probed how much formal teaching they did in nursery, as well as structural resourcing issues, and impact as they saw it.

2. School leaders identified the importance of and how they prioritised teaching reading skills through phonics in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

All of the leads and heads were intimately involved in the training and delivery of different phonics schemes, and all were very committed to implementing their chosen scheme with high fidelity. We wanted to probe the use of data and management structures for supporting children who were behind in Reception and Year 1, i.e. the implementation of the phonics programme, rather than the phonics programme itself (all are DFE-validated SSPs).

3. No school identified phonics as alone enough, instead this must be coupled with reading practice and literacy lessons to develop reading fluency, comprehension and oracy to support independent reading.

All schools time-tabled literacy, reading practice and phonics separately. Schools spoke about how they built language foundations and love of books from the beginning, and maximised the parent relationship. Fluency came up again and again, as an important goal of the early years of schools with Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) measured and used as a bench-mark, and reading support for fluency extended into Key Stage 2.

4. The whole school system is absolutely vital to ensuring success, not just individual teachers.

No school relied on individual practitioners, but had all built strong school systems, sometimes over many years. We wanted to understand the management and implementation structure of support. We have added additional findings on whole school consistency, and social and emotional and behaviour support in these highly effective school cultures as they were seen to be so critical by the school leaders.

5. Each schools' conviction to focus on reading was driven from the school leadership.

Finally, what came out in all the seven schools was a 'mission-driven' leadership. Phrases like 'backward planning', 'moral purpose' and 'keeping the main thing the main thing' were notable in conversations in all the schools. Nearly all the schools felt that all children could learn to read but that this was something that they had had to convince themselves and their teams in a relentless way. We wanted to understand the conviction and journeys of different schools.

1. Introduction

The recent Schools' White Paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, sets an objective to halve the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers by the end of secondary school.[1] Such efforts to reduce educational inequality are longstanding across Governments and political parties, but the gap remains stubbornly entrenched, currently running at 19 months or so.[2]

At FFT, we have focused on supporting early literacy - sufficient reading and writing ability to access the curriculum by age 8 - as the key to unlocking the curriculum for a very large proportion of disadvantaged pupils. While there has rightly been a focus on reading for pleasure across the education sector, it should not detract from the fact that 40% of the disadvantage gap is visible at age 5, and that changes and interventions later in the system will be too late to really swing the largest part of the disadvantage pendulum.

As a part of this work, we have used longitudinal analyses to show the importance of early literacy for later attainment. [3]

We have also spent the last six years working with a with a set of partner schools in areas of high deprivation, the Apex schools, iterating a development project to see what the feasibility, costs and impact of delivering reading tutoring in Key Stage 1 would be. We showed it was possible to close the attainment gap by reducing the number of struggling readers by half.[4] We also argued that a very structured 'inclusion track' on early reading would be the best way to support most SEND learners.[5]

In this report, in order to build on this work and to help offer schools a template for how to effectively improve early literacy among disadvantaged pupils, FFT have traveled to schools up and down the country who perform over the odds in performance measures at Key Stage 2, to see if what we find chimes with what we have learned so far from our data analysis and our Apex project.

We are defining these schools as 'breakthrough schools' as shown by their attainment, including that of disadvantaged pupils. We wanted to understand whether their success in early literacy is grounded in the rigorous and granular tracking and remediation we helped develop in our Apex schools, and to support generalisable lessons that educators and policy-makers can learn and apply.

What we found was striking similarities in the breakthrough schools. This research pamphlet, therefore, summarises the effective strategies required to improve early literacy - and argues that this is the single most effective and achievable endeavour to help eliminate the attainment gap.

[1] Department for Education, (2026) 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving.' Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving>

[2] See Education Policy Institute (2026), '2026 Annual report'.

[3] See Thomson (2022), 'The Importance of Early Literacy, Thomson (2024), 'How attainment gaps in literacy change over time', Treadaway et. al. (2020), 'The Relationship between Early Literacy and GCSE English Attainment' and Beynon (2023), 'Early literacy skills and long(er) term outcomes: Part 1 and 2' all available at <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/>

[4] Fischer Family Foundation (2025), 'Closing the disadvantage gap by halving the number of children behind in reading'.

[5] Fischer Family Foundation (2025), 'Reading Inclusion track: A paradigm shift for children with SEND.'

2. Methodology

When defining the cohort of breakthrough schools, we wanted to move beyond just looking at simple attainment data and raw percentages. We wanted to ground our criteria in a couple of carefully defined parameters that would tell us that 'this is a school that appears to have achieved in an obvious and visible breakthrough in addressing the needs of disadvantaged children'.

After some internal discussion we used the following methodology to search for potential schools:

- We took the percentage of pupils who attained Age related expectations in their Key Stage 2 National Assessments across the board in Reading, Writing and Maths, (RWM 'at expected') as the core metric in our initial search, as this is the most commonly looked at, and widely understood, measure of attainment and is data published on the DFE website.
- We looked at an average effect over three years - 2023, 2024 and 2025 - rather than a single year, to mitigate for cohort effects and see schools that are consistently successful.
- We then compared their RWM 'at expected' percentage with the percentage of those three cohorts that were FSM, judging whether schools performed highly or not compared to the number of pupils eligible for FSM in those cohorts. This is a simplistic (and indeed unfair) single contextual measure as it misses a lot of importance context such as pupil mobility or SEND needs. However, we felt it was an effective filter when hunting for breakthroughs rather than judging schools per se .

From an initial list we excluded:

- Schools which had less than 30% of their cohort eligible for FSM.
- Small schools where cohort variations have a much larger impact.
- Any schools where there could be selection on basis of faith - such as Catholic or Islamic schools. Selection may make it difficult to assess the impact of the school as opposed to the parent community.

Thereafter, we established seven schools, which are listed below:

- Bonneville Primary School, Clapham
- Mansel Park Primary & Nursery School, Southampton
- Reach Academy Feltham, Hounslow
- Front Lawn Primary Academy, Plymouth
- Orchard Fields Community School, Banbury
- Bridge Learning Campus Primary School, Bristol
- Applegarth Academy, Croydon

Our first visits started in Summer 2025, and extended to February 2026. Our visits focused on conversations with school leaders to help understand how members of staff at these schools viewed and taught reading, but also how they achieved such high attainment in general. This allowed us to build case studies of these schools, which were then iteratively worked on in partnership with the schools. These seven schools have shown that a focus on early literacy and reading success has been a mammoth task, but one that all school felt has been the main ingredient of outstanding attainment.

We believe these are schools that all educators can all learn from without judgement. That being said, there were some common general factors, that made them unusual:

- All the seven schools had strong leadership and school culture that either came from being part of a Multi-Academy Trust, a learning federation, or from a longstanding and outstanding head teacher. These strong leaders and school cultures have led to good staff retention, distributed leadership, and staff also being willing to submit to school systems, and to be part of a project 'larger than self'.

- The schools were the beneficiaries of their own success. They were part of many projects and initiatives such as being an EEF Research school, or selling the services of their Headteacher to the Trust. This meant that overall resourcing is therefore slightly better than an average school. Moreover, their success means that they are more confident in implementing their beliefs, less worried about accountability measures, and had more authority with parents.
- All the schools have relatively stable cohorts as they are successful and not, therefore, affected by falling pupil rolls or small cohorts that can cause high mobility and mid-year joiners. This also means that they can work with a child for seven years and see the long-term effect of slow, systematic reading intervention.

Table 1. Published attainment in Breakthrough Schools Compared to the England Average.

Table 1 shows how extraordinarily high attainment in the breakthrough schools is. The top row indicates the England Average as a comparator. The first column indicates the percentage in the school eligible for free school meals. The columns show overall attainment for different years. The final column shows that in 2025 the pupils eligible for FSM in breakthrough schools attained at a minimum 27% percentage points higher than the English average for this group, thereby removing the disadvantage gap.

	Percentage FSM	% Age-related expectations RWM 2023	% Age-related expectations RWM 2024	% Age-related expectations RWM 2025	% FSM pupils age-related expectations RWM 2025
England Average	26%	59%	61%	62%	46%
Bonneville Primary	42%	65%	84%	89%	94%
Mansel Park	53%	76%	88%	83%	84%
Reach Academy	43%	70%	92%	90%	83%
Front Lawn Primary	70%	78%	85%	82%	78%
Orchard Fields	40%	79%	86%	82%	75%
Bridge Learning Campus	51%	71%	77%	81%	73%
Applegarth Academy	42%	85%	85%	88%	82%

3. Findings

3.1. There was agreement across all school leaders about how pivotal early years and nurseries were for literacy development.

Key points:

- There was very strong agreement about the importance of early years. All schools had made efforts to improve access to high quality early years education for the pupils arriving in their Reception classes, and all spoke about the challenge of supporting children who had not had good nursery foundations.
- Critical importance to 'get basics' such as toileting and playing in place, and assess and address language needs systematically.
- Schools targeted interventions at children with poor language and tried to resource SEND needs in nursery.
- All schools started elements of formal phonics teaching (i.e. initial sounds) in nursery although when this started in the year varied quite a lot.

In all seven schools, school leaders spoke about nursery as critical time for literacy development: from building the pupil's expressive language through stories and book-talk, checking and working on speech and language skills, and intervening where necessary for pupils with SEND, as well as preparatory work on all other areas of child development. The difference between those disadvantaged pupils who had accessed nurseries and those who hadn't was noted, and the positive difference that nursery education made, in the minds of the school leaders, cannot be overstated. All the schools started some aspect of phonics (initial letter sounds) at some point in the final nursery year although this varied quite a lot between schools.

For Reach Academy, having children from age two is central to its 'all-through' philosophy, especially for disadvantaged pupils: they ensure that nearly all pupils who will go on to be eligible for the pupil premium, have had at least two years in the Reach Nursery. Formal letters and sounds teaching begins in the summer term before Reception, but the nursery prioritises The Primes': language and communication, physical development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development, recognising that later reading difficulties often stem from needs in these areas.

Bridge Learning Campus takes around 60% of pupils from its own Nursery. It introduces initial sounds in the nursery summer term, while using the year to identify and support likely struggling readers, particularly summer-born Pupil Premium boys.

At Front Lawn Primary Academy, Head Teacher Kate Couldwell described creating an onsite school Nursery as her first priority when she joined in 2014. She values starting phonemic awareness, letters and sounds in nursery alongside play-based learning and storytelling through the scheme 'Talk for Writing'. The school also works with local private Nurseries to support phonics and pre-phonics before Reception.

At Applegarth nearly all children start in the school Nursery. Gerard Brown and Rachel Carr described nursery practice as 'intense'. Over time, practitioners have moved towards more direct instruction, despite initial reservations. Nursery is critical for beginning phonics and addressing speech and language needs, including a daily 'bucket time' for pupils needing language development and SEND support.

At Orchard Fields, Dawn Shilston emphasised the first nursery term as a period for building foundations: helping children play, interact, look after things and manage toilet training. Phonics begins as early as possible after December. Reading difficulty is anticipated through close EYFS assessment linked to Development Matters and Early Learning Goals, with above-minimum staffing to meet intervention needs early.

Mansel Park has an onsite nursery and has developed a nursery phase within its Pip and Pap Phonics Programme. Built around 20 wordless picture books, it supports early years teaching, including phonemic awareness, and has been shared with more than 41 Local settings. The school also offers outreach to private nurseries and a six-week summer transition programme for children without nursery experience, supporting school-readiness and assessing need.

Specific Questions Addressed in Case Studies:

- *What do you do in nursery? Skillsets developed in nursery specific to reading.*
- *When does that start? When is it done in earnest?*
- *To what extent do you anticipate pupils who are likely to have reading difficulties in the future?*
- *Do struggling pupils get more support?*
- *How much additional adult resource is applied above the minimum?*

3.2. School leaders identified the importance of, and how they prioritised, teaching reading skills through phonics in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

Key findings:

- Teaching phonics is critical, and school leaders spoke about how they prioritise this. All schools were highly consistent in their use of their chosen phonics scheme.
- Phonics knowledge was tracked individually for children at least every half term.
- Schools also had systems for ensuring an escalating level of support for pupils who are falling off track.
- In three schools there was a qualified and specialist reading teacher running interventions for the least able readers.
- All children are expected to pass the phonics check in Year 1, except for a very small number of pupils with high level of SEND. The pass rate for the Phonics Screening Check was mostly above 90%, and in some schools between 95% and 100%.

We asked schools about their teaching of reading, and all the schools spoke about their consistent use of their chosen phonics scheme. The schools used a range of programmes.[7] Our case study assumes quite a lot about the formal teaching of phonics represented in the practice embedded in the major phonics schemes, but we wanted to ask more about how schools manage systems, group children, and ensure remediation where needed, through the 'learning to read' years.

All the schools talked about high quality first teaching element of phonics as absolutely critical, alongside individualised and frequent tracking of the core elements of the reading scheme, as advised by the providers. There were many examples of schools strengthening phonics through leadership, monitoring and staff development. At Bonneville, Andrea Parker described the teaching of phonics as strong, highlighting the quality of current practice. She explained that robust monitoring, combined with tailored support for teachers to continually strengthen and refine delivery, is embedded across the three schools working in the BJS Federation. This Federation-wide approach supports consistency, enables effective practice to be shared and ensures that teaching continues to develop in response to the needs of pupils and staff.

At Applegarth, Rachel Carr and Gerard Brown reflected on their journey towards stronger delivery. They described breaking successive 'glass ceilings' in attainment, moving first beyond 80% in the Phonics Screening Check, and later to 95% plus.

At Mansel Park, leaders have created and accredited their own phonics scheme, including decodable books and assessment materials. It is used across the five schools in their federation and shared with other settings. As author of the scheme, Ellie Prince can monitor, support and develop a stable, skilled and empowered staff team. The scheme is built around children's needs, and continues until every child has secured the 44 sounds and can segment and blend them, even into Year 3 or 4.

School leaders emphasised 'closed loop' assessment, using weekly or half-termly checks to revisit sounds and common exception words not yet secured by children at risk. Repetition was central. At Bridge Learning Campus, Vourneen explained that each GPC needs to be taught at least 60 times. Every child's GPC knowledge is updated weekly on a table on the back of the door, maintaining focus on GPCs as the core reading skill. At Front Lawn, TAs carry GPCs and common exception words on lanyards to practise with children, describing repetition as 'relentless'.

[7] DFE-approved phonics schemes included FFT phonics, SoundsWrite, Pip and Pap Phonics, Essential Letters and Sounds and Read Write Inc.

Grouping approaches varied. Some schools used small stage-not-age groups, with assessments to move children on; others used larger upper and lower groups, while Applegarth kept the cohort together. However, all schools had remediation from nursery or Reception onwards: small group and one-to-one interventions, skilled educators, afternoon phonics session focused on tricky areas, and short 'drip feeds' throughout the day. Front Lawn, Orchard Fields and Bonneville used qualified specialist reading teachers. Senior leaders were directly involved with the weakest early readers.

Results were strong: most schools achieved 90%+ in the Phonics Screening Check year on year, with some reaching 100%. All pupils, except some with EHCPs, were expected to pass in Year 1.

Specific Questions Addressed in Case Studies:

- *What are the elements that you track i.e. segmenting and blending (decoding), GPCs, CEWs, fluency?*
- *What are the measures used, how and when are they tracking?*
- *Who can see the progress / who can measure the progress?*
- *If a reading skill is missing, how do you remediate? How is this structured / resourced?*
- *How does this system change between Reception, Year 1 and Year 2?*
- *What fraction of pupils in Reception have come from their own nursery? What specific actions do you take with children who come from outside the nursery?*

3.3. No school identified phonics as alone enough, instead this must be coupled with literacy teaching and fluency practice to develop independent reading.

Key findings:

- All schools believed in the research around the science of reading, including achieving oral language foundations, phonics, fluency and comprehension.
- This meant that they do not believe phonics alone was enough, but instead believed it must be coupled with high quality literacy lessons and reading fluency practise.
- Ensuring 'reading miles' through one-to-one reading was seen as critical in the first years of school. Parent and community partnerships were maxed-out in all kinds of creative ways to ensure this.
- In all cases, in all schools, all children who were behind in reading were read with either in a small group, or one-to-one, every single day in Year 1 and Year 2.
- Fluency was tracked specifically, and most of the schools had explicit fluency targets.
- If children did not meet fluency targets by Year 3, remediation is escalated and becomes automatic.

No school thought phonics was enough to create a reader.

Kate Couldwell at Front Lawn described, 'a reading diet that promotes comprehension from the earliest point.' In fact, all schools had daily reading practice separate from writing or phonics. Typically, Reception to Year 2 timetabled phonics, reading for fluency/practice, and a literacy lesson for knowledge, vocabulary, oracy, enjoyment and writing. Apart from at Front Lawn, the class reading practice lesson used decodable books from the phonics provider, until pupils moved beyond phonics. Front Lawn used a whole-class weekly "talk through" high quality 'real' text for this purpose. In Years 3-6, all schools timetabled a daily 30-minute reading lesson focused on fluency and comprehension of whole canonical texts, alongside and separate to one hour of literacy.

All schools valued real books, stories and story language as routes into independent reading, and promoted reading for pleasure through books sent home, author visits, fairs and libraries. Ellie Prince at Mansel Park supports Southampton's library programme, with family library visits core to the curriculum.

Leaders consistently linked educational disadvantage to reading at home. Children read to at home tend to have stronger early language and access early reading faster, so schools worked to strengthen parent partnerships and home literacy activities. Approaches varied widely and were shaped by their communities. Reach Academy begins school life with structured home visit, involving a senior leader and another member of staff. These establish a reciprocal relationship: the school supports families, while parents commit to helping their child learn, including through a reading pledge. Where parents' own reading is weak, this is discussed openly so barriers can be addressed.

Other schools focused on persistent engagement and trust. Orchard Fields described getting parents into events 'with food' and introducing reading 'by the back door', eventually attracting nearly all parents. Front Lawn's 'Winter Warmers' involve parents and children sharing hot chocolate in pyjamas, while teachers model storytelling to encourage these activities at home.

Schools also followed through on routines assiduously. At the start of term, Front Lawn dedicate TA time to ring parents daily when book bags were not returned. Bridge Learning Campus emphasises a "strong start": after week four in Reception, parents are shown which GPCs their child knows, what is missing, and where they should be. Six-weekly assessments then go home with support.

Where home support was limited, schools ensure reading happens in school. Front Lawn keeps spare book bags by the office. Bonneville reads one-to-one daily with every child below age-related expectation; Andrea Parker recruits volunteers, including parents after drop-off, alongside teaching assistants and a dedicated reading recovery teacher. At Orchard Fields, the lowest 20% of pupils read to an adult daily; others who are behind expectations receive support at least three times a week.

All schools mentioned the importance of reading fluency and had benchmarks of 60 or 90 Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) by end end of Key Stage One. Five out of the seven schools tracked a child's WCPM every half term throughout Key Stage 1 and into Key Stage 2.

Critically, schools escalated support when pupils continue to struggle toward the end of Year 2. Reach Academy reduces the size of their stage-not-age reading groups to intensify adult support until some pupils receive one-to-one senior leader intervention, aiming for 90 WCPM by the end of Year 2, or at least 60 WCPM. Applegarth cited reading fluency assessments as a powerful tool in school improvement, and now work to ensure around 90% of pupils reach 90 WCPM by the end of Year 2. Those who do not automatically receive Year 3 and 4 support, including one-to-one work, and the Nessy Dyslexia Screen.

Specific Questions Addressed in Case Studies:

- *Do you have a reading lesson separate from phonics - if so, what and when?*
- *How do you structure 1-2-1 reading / home reading?*
- *What action do you take when a struggling reader is identified?*
- *What knowledge of a child's reading fluency do you have at each stage - Year 1, Year 2?*
- *Do you have an explicit / implicit fluency expectation - i.e. by the beginning of Year 3? Are there different threshold of risk?*
- *To what extent are you tracking fluency development for those who didn't meet the expectation in Year 3 - which activities continue?*
- *How do you structure reading in Key Stage 2? Explicit / implicit fluency expectations?*
- *Is there a group of pupils who are struggling where you decide to do something significantly different from phonics? How do you identify, when, what do you do and how many pupils?*

3.4. The whole school system is absolutely vital to ensuring success, not just individual teachers.

Key findings:

- Breakthroughs are achieved at school level and not by individual teachers.
- Teachers have overall responsibility and accountability for the pupils' reading, but data is constantly reviewed by senior leaders and other staff so that support can be escalated appropriately.
- Approaches to curriculum are all highly consistent across the school.
- The reading curriculum is centrally organised across the whole school.

We were interested and asked about the journey of the school, and how people saw that, and how they ensured that the system of getting kids to read well was robust and continuously improving. This is inextricably linked to consistency, included in another section in the case study template.

In all the schools, teachers remained accountable for all the pupils in their class. This was whether or not the pupils were in stage-not-age groups. Indeed, at Mansel Park, children do phonics, in their smaller stage-not-age group, but then return to class for the Reading lesson so that teachers can oversee and monitor their reading level. Some schools noted how they had changed and evolved practice. At Bonneville this meant improving phonics first teaching by weekly reviews by the Head Teacher, and at Applegarth they had moved from a stage-not-age approach to keeping all the pupils together, raising 'keep up' support. In all the schools though, senior leaders and specialist reading teachers reviewed the data on pupils' attainment almost weekly and were responsible for grouping and interventions.

As described in other sections, all the schools had a highly centralised and planned curriculum and a whole school reading approach. While, at first, we focused on literacy, after a few visits, we added a section about social emotional and behaviour systems in the case study schools. The insight was led from the conversations revealing that reading gains were very much embedded within other strong practice, and that strong social and emotional and behaviour resourcing and consistency across the school went hand in hand with high attainment.

At Applegarth, for instance, they deploy three members of staff dedicated to supporting pupils with social and emotional needs, within a whole school Thrive programme. Front Lawn also used Thrive and deployed ACEs tutors. Every day starts with a Circle Time to ensure children are ready to start the day, and a whole school 'meet and greet' policy. Reach Academy had extremely consistent behaviour policies, including merits and demerits running throughout the school to ensure focus and behaviour in lessons. In other schools, long term school leadership and staff teams had built rock solid behaviour policies, positive relationships and learning behaviours everywhere with very little disruption to lessons.

Specific Questions Addressed in Case Studies:

- *Role of teachers, Year / phase leaders, managers, support staff?*
- *What meetings (above teacher and TA) and how often and how involved is Teacher, TA in reviewing data?*
- *To what extent does the school have a reading approach and structure that has a strongly constant element from Reception to Year 6?*
- *What is the school's SEMH approach? How does it support literacy development?*

3.5. Each schools' conviction to focus on reading was driven from the school leadership.

Key findings:

- Leaders talked about a 'journey' over many years, with continuous improvement processes in place to ensure successful outcomes for pupils.
- Schools talked about acting on reading research.
- Schools prioritised reading, after safeguarding, as a top priority of the school, and tried to stay focused and not be distracted.
- All schools saw rigorous explicit teaching of reading skills going hand-in-hand with supporting reading for pleasure, autonomy and choice, and love of reading.

It's very striking how all the schools felt that reading, in particular was a moral purpose and how they drove this relentlessly. This belief that they 'could do it' and 'must do it' was overwhelming. Andrea Parker at Bonneville said that at the beginning of every Inset meeting they listed all the 'children at risk of leaving Bonneville not able to read' to remind staff of the absolute priority of reading. At Reach Academy they spoke about 'backward planning' to ensure successful outcomes their pupils at age eighteen, and consider what that means at each stage. At Applegarth they talked about a 'glass ceiling' on their expectations and how they had had to build their own conviction gradually that they could get nearly all pupils to attain at Key Stage 2, with their results due to a decade of leadership focus and teamwork. The success of Mansel Park is clearly a product of five schools that work together, meaning savings have been made on curriculum and on senior leadership team, building a weekly non-teaching day for staff that can focus on improving practice and allowing staff to consider and raise their ambitions for the pupils.

School leaders all accessed research about reading and spoke about it. In reading, Chris Such's book, 'The Art and Science of Primary Reading' was mentioned in nearly all schools. Leaders talked about using research to convince staff, and Front Lawn is also part of the EEF Research Network.

One of the features of success that is reinforcing was mentioned by quite a few head teachers was just the priority to maintain school systems and keep a focus on reading. Leaders mentioned that school improvement plans can sometimes act as a disincentive as new objectives need to be added, when they want to 'keep the main thing the main thing'. As Andrea Parker said, 'pupils who don't learn to read at school, probably can't read as adults.' They all felt that leadership focus should remain on reading as critical to any pupil's future life choices. This was presented in moral terms in all schools.

In a few schools, head teachers felt that there was sometimes a focus on reading for pleasure that appeared to downgrade the rigorous approaches that they took to ensuring reading competence. In the case study schools leaders were all clear on the relative values of oral language, book talk, early reading skills and then choice, autonomy, provision of books to the home and library work. They saw no need for reading wars.

Specific Questions Addressed in Case Studies:

- *Why does the school concentrate so much on reading?*
- *How did this focus / passion originate and by whom? (Head, Head of Literacy supported by Head?)*
- *To what extent is the system dependent on individuals (Head or the Head of Literacy)*

4. Conclusion

In every single one of the schools discussed in this report, pupils eligible for Free School Meals attained better than the national average for those who were not nationally at KS2. If that was replicated across all schools in the country, we would have actually closed the disadvantage gap.

The story is not simple but these lessons for school leaders can be drawn out into lessons for policy makers, too:

- The findings very much endorse the current policy of expanding school-based nurseries and improving access to nursery education for disadvantaged pupils.
- All the schools had a flipped approach to seeing the first years of schooling as inherently more powerful in changing trajectories than the final years of Key Stage 2. Achieving this as a management focus was often a journey that had taken years.
- All the schools saw the implementation of phonics phase as absolutely critical. They thought the phonics check was something that nearly all children could achieve, but felt the phonics check was 'not enough'.
- Schools targeted pupils in Reception and Year 1 who were not read with at home and sought, above all, to fill this gap. This was very congruent with what we found in the Apex project and the benefits of daily reading tuition.
- All the schools had a reading lesson throughout Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. None of the schools left the practice of reading the words on the page to home, silent reading or reading intervention. Whole class reading fluency lessons were a core part. Mostly reading fluency was tracked, with minimum targets of 60 – 90 Words Correct Per Minute by Year 3.
- Leadership prioritised reading above everything else as without reading they felt their children would leave unable to enjoy and thrive at secondary. This was universally described as a moral choice.

Initial Visit Schedule:

Applegarth Academy – December 2025: Eliza Hilton, Mike Fischer met Gerrard Brown, Rachel Carr

Bridge Academy – June 2025: Mike Fischer, Tim Perkin met Vourneen Carter

Mansel Park – February 2026: Eliza Hilton, Tim Perkin, Professor Kathy Rastle met Ellie Prince

Orchard Fields – June 2025: Mike Fischer, Louise Parkinson met Dawn Shilston and other staff

Reach Academy – 2025: Eliza Hilton attended open day and presentation, met Tilly Browne and discussed literacy systems

Bonneville Primary – October 2025: Eliza Hilton, Mike Fischer met Andrea Parker

Front Lawn Primary – October 2025: Eliza Hilton, Mike Fischer met Kate Couldwell and team



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