

**An evaluation of the Essential Skills
Change Fund Initiative Project in the six
colleges of further education in
Northern Ireland**

June 2016

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

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The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing Inspection Services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
Department for Communities



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1. Introduction

In September 2015 the Department for Employment and Learning¹ (Department) engaged the six colleges of further education in Northern Ireland to deliver the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative. The Department's initiative had two key aims:

- to develop innovative tailor-made provision which supports pupils who are at risk of underachieving to achieve the essential skills qualification at level 2, as a stepping stone to progress towards, and achievement of, a minimum of grade C in General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English and/or mathematics; and
- to improve the delivery of education services which builds on the professional development of teachers and develops pedagogy and the sharing of best practice by further education lecturers and school teachers.

The Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative was scheduled initially to finish in March 2016 but an extension until April 2016 was granted by the Department.

The Department requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to carry out an evaluation of the arrangements across the six colleges of further education for the implementation of the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative, and to evaluate its impact on the learning and progression of those pupils participating in the programme.

2. Context

The Department asked the six colleges of further education to each engage with six post-primary schools wherein pupils who are at risk of underachieving at grade C in GCSE English and mathematics could be supported to develop and strengthen their skills, through the achievement of the essential skills of literacy and numeracy at level 2.

The colleges were required by the Department to submit monthly reports on the implementation of the initiative and to monitor progress through the Essential Skills Cross College Working Group, which representatives from the Department and the Department of Education (DE) were invited to attend.

The six colleges of further education did not meet the original target number of engagement with thirty six schools but did, however, secure the engagement of eighteen schools (Table 1).

All of the schools listed in Table 1 have identified English and mathematics at GCSE level, as areas for development and improvement within the school. All of the schools involved have participated in the other improvement initiatives, including the Delivering Social Change: Improving Literacy and Numeracy Signature programme (DSCILN) and some of the schools have also participated in the Promoting Improvement in English and mathematics (PIEM) project.

¹ The functions and services delivered by DEL transferred to the Department for the Economy on 9 May 2016.

Table 1 - List of schools engaging with each college of further education

College	School	Numeracy	No of pupils	Literacy	No of pupils
Belfast Metropolitan College	St Rose's Dominican College	1	13	2	10
	Mercy College, Belfast	1	11	1	12
	TOTAL BMC	2	24	3	22
Northern Regional College	St Patrick's College, Ballymena	1	9	1	9
	Dunclug College, Ballymena	2	20	2	16
	St Patrick's College, Maghera	2	22		0
	TOTAL NRC	5	51	3	25
North West Regional College	Oakgorve Integrated	2	19	1	11
	Limavady High School	1	11	1	6
	TOTAL NWRC	3	30	2	17
South Eastern Regional College	Shimna Integrated	1	12	1	10
	Bangor Academy & Sixth Form Centre	1	14	1	13
	St Columbanus' College	1	12	1	12
	TOTAL SERC	3	38	3	35
Southern Regional College	St Mary's High School, Newry	1	10	1	10
	St Joseph's High School	1	9	1	11
	Newry High School	1	11	0	
	Brownlow Integrated College	2	20	1	10
	TOTAL SRC	5	50	3	31
South West College	St Mary's College, Irvinestown	1	11	0	
	St Patrick's College, Dungannon	2	9	1	11
	Drumragh College, Omagh	1	13	0	
	Integrated College, Dungannon	1	6	0	
	TOTAL SWC	5	39	1	11

Overall	Classes	Students
Literacy	15	141
Numeracy	23	232
Total	38	373

Note – The data in table 1 was provided by Southern Regional College, on behalf of the Department. The table records the numbers of pupils engaged at first registration.

3. Summary of overall main findings

- Management and staff across the six colleges of further education are highly committed to the management and delivery of the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative.

- Most of the pupils participating in the initiative have predicted grades of below grade D in either English or mathematics or in both, and consequently the cohorts of pupils selected do not match well the intended target group of pupils, at or close to, the GCSE C/D boundary. The colleges had limited control over the cohorts selected.
- The existing links between the schools and the colleges have been strengthened through the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative and almost all of the schools report positively on the work of the colleges in supporting the development of the pupils' skills and capabilities in English and mathematics across the wide ability range of the pupils participating in the initiative.
- All of the colleges of further education have facilitated well the needs of all of the schools and have offered flexible timetabling arrangements, both during and after the school day, as required. Some college lecturers have also offered additional provision outside of the scheduled delivery arrangement, when requested to do so by a minority of the pupils.
- In the more effective practice, the colleges selected key staff, who have experience of planning, teaching, and assessment in literacy and numeracy, and in GCSE provision, to deliver the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative.
- There have been very few opportunities for the essential skills staff from the college to meet with the Heads of English and mathematics, and the respective class teachers in the participating schools. Consequently, there has been minimal formalised tracking of the impact of the learning and teaching in the essential skills sessions on the pupils' progress and achievements in GCSE English and mathematics.
- There has been limited collaborative planning and sharing of resources, and very limited sharing of pedagogic practices between the schools and the colleges. There have been very few opportunities for teachers and lecturers to observe, and to support, each other's practice. In the small minority of cases where there were opportunities to plan collaboratively and to observe each other's practice both the teachers and the lecturers reported it was mutually beneficial.
- The initial and diagnostic assessment procedures employed by the colleges, and the subsequent outcomes, are not well enough aligned to the processes used by the participating schools to predict the grades in GCSE English and mathematics. There is work to be done to help teachers, other relevant staff, such as the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), and lecturers to plan more effectively for improvement at individual pupil level and to track progress against the individual targets set within the project.
- The quality of almost all of the learning and teaching observed in the essential skills sessions during the evaluation was mostly good or better. There were no opportunities, however, to observe the same pupils in their GCSE classes to evaluate the impact on the pupils' progression in GCSE English and mathematics.
- There was limited evidence of the sharing of information between teachers and lecturers on the additional support needs or the second language learning needs of the pupils participating in the project.

- Almost all of the pupils engaged well in the initiative which is reflected in the good or better attendance by almost all of the participating pupils across the schools. The pupils respond well to the less formal learning environments and they like particularly the opportunity to develop and apply their new learning and their skills through relevant and meaningful contexts. The pupils interviewed report that they appreciate particularly the one-to-one support, the small group teaching, the opportunity to ask questions and to build on the lecturer's responses, all of which characterise the essential skills sessions.
- For those pupils who face significant learning challenges in English and mathematics, the essential skills sessions provide good opportunities for them to achieve incremental gains in their confidence, learning and progression in a supportive environment.
- Despite the relatively short duration of the pilot there is evidence from a minority of participating schools, of incremental improvements, and consolidation in learning for a minority of the pupils, as reflected in their GCSE mock examination grades. These improvements now need to be sustained to final GCSE assessment.
- There is planning in place, in almost all of the colleges, to disseminate practice at the end of the project, and to share resources. In some cases this is being planned through the appropriate Area Learning Community.
- Most of the schools involved appreciated the additional support for pupils to help them to develop their skills in English and mathematics and to raise standards in both. As a result of the short lead in time, however, there was limited evidence to indicate that the initiative had been embedded in school development and improvement processes alongside the work of other similar improvement initiatives². Going forward, there is a need for more cohesive planning in schools to maximise the impact of the range of supportive interventions and to build the capacity, of the middle leadership in the English and mathematics departments, to embed the outcomes of all of the improvement initiatives in order to raise standards in a sustained manner.
- The college lecturers have worked hard to develop a wide range of resources for both the essential skills and GCSE provision, including online resources, to support English and mathematics. However, effective sharing of these resources is currently inhibited by the lack of linkage between the C2K systems in schools and the colleges' systems and platforms.

4. Examples of effective practice

- The selection of lecturers with a breadth of experience in teaching English or mathematics at both GCSE and essential skills levels.
- The good levels of engagement with the pupils, supported by the lecturers, across the participating schools and the incremental gains reported by most of the target schools in relation to the pupils' learning in English and mathematics.

² Such as the DSCILN and PIEM projects.

- The opportunities for the pupils to extend their knowledge and understanding in English and mathematics by applying their skills and learning to a range of relevant and meaningful tasks and engaging contexts in the essential skills sessions.
- The opportunities for the pupils to experience the teaching of the essential skills in small group settings and the opportunities to have one-to-one support for the development of English and mathematics.

5. Key priorities for development

As the pilot programmes develop further, it will be important that the colleges and the schools:

- link the work of the Essential Skills Change Fund Initiative more effectively to other key improvement initiatives in the school setting, for example, the DSCILN and PIEM projects. There is a need to develop further the capacity of middle leadership in the schools and middle management in the colleges, and to evaluate effectively the impact of these initiatives on raising pupils' standards and achievements in English and mathematics;
- develop a shared understanding with the participating schools of the aims of the project in order to select pupils more effectively using better aligned diagnostic procedures to maximise the impact of the work of the project and to inform decisions on planning for pupils progression; and
- provide structured and regular opportunities for Heads of English and mathematics, teachers, lecturers and relevant staff, such as the SENCO, to meet in order to plan for improvement at the level of each individual pupil, and to provide coherent feedback to help them improve their skills, through the use of a wider range of pedagogical approaches, including the better use of technology enhanced learning.

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