EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Informed commentators both in the UK and internationally increasingly reference the remarkable improvement journey of London's schools since the turn of the century. If the claims made for educational improvement in London are true they represent an important case study in urban school reform. There is a need, therefore, for an investigation of the nature and possible causes of the changes in London's schools.

AIMS

This research seeks to investigate the claim that London schools have improved dramatically since 2000. We have reviewed the evidence of transformational change and explored possible reasons for the development in London's schools. The project was guided by three questions:

- Is the success of London's schools as real as has been suggested?
- If the success is real, in what ways have schools improved and for what reasons?
- What can we learn for the future of school improvement, for London and beyond?

The resulting report provides readers – such as teachers, school leaders and policymakers – with a detailed review of what has happened across London. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of previous evaluations of the London schools' journey and of the distinctive elements which are perceived as contributing to improvement. Most importantly, it draws conclusions intended to inform current debates on educational policy reform in a very practical sense, providing an agenda for action.

METHODS AND APPROACH

Focusing on the period between 2000 and 2014, a mixed-methods approach has been used, combining:

- a literature review of academic research, media reporting, online blogs and other website materials
- a review and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on pupil and school performance
- semi-structured interviews with 25 leading experts who have a perspective on the London story, including staff currently or previously involved in the management of key education reforms, academics, headteachers, civil servants and politicians
- focus group interviews with teachers and school leaders in five schools across four key London boroughs
- semi-structured interviews with 25 senior local authority (LA) directors, members and independent consultants.

As 'policy in action', none of the major London reforms were planned with a concurrent rigorous evaluative element or any randomised controlled trial (RCT) element. While this limits the ability of any subsequent review to make firm claims for cause and effect, our approach allows us to present the most detailed analysis to date of the London story. In-depth interviews with all the key stakeholders in this transformation provide a greater level of understanding than has previously been possible, while detailed counterfactual quantitative analysis provides compelling support for the impact of these initiatives.

KEY FINDINGS

Our research has generated five key findings:

1. London schools have improved dramatically since 2000.
2. The improvement cannot be explained in terms of the advantages that London has over the rest of England.
3. The improvement was assisted by a set of factors that we describe as 'enabling', these include issues relating to resourcing: finance, teacher recruitment and school building quality. Improvement in these areas enabled improvements to flourish but London's success was not fundamentally caused by these factors.
4. Four key school improvement interventions provided the impetus for improvement – London Challenge, Teach First, the academies programme and improved support from local authorities. Our research identifies common features that link together all of these interventions.
5. The improvement of London schools depended upon effective leadership at every level of the system.