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The right headteacher for your school or trust?



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By [Jo Phillips - GovernorHub](#) | 8 minute read



Should you focus on recruiting a headteacher who's the right 'fit' for your school or trust?

New research from The Education Policy Institute (EPI) has found no evidence that headteachers' effectiveness depends on the 'match' between a leader and a school - rather that good headteachers are equally effective in all school types.



Its new report explores the influence of headteachers on their schools using national data on all pupils and headteachers in England between 2004 and 2019.

We spoke to one of the report authors, James Zuccollo, to learn more about the findings and what they might mean - if anything - for school and trust governing boards.

Firstly James, can I ask you to explain how you measured headteacher effectiveness?

We looked at pupil progress in English and Maths starting from when the National Pupil Database began in the early 2000s up until 2019. We used a statistical model to calculate the school's contribution to the pupil's progress - adjusted for those schools with higher numbers of special needs or disadvantaged pupils because for the same quality teaching you might expect these pupils to make less progress.

This adjustment allowed us to get an idea of how good the teaching and the environment at a school is and how much progress it's causing pupils to make in their grades from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4.

We then asked - of the school's contribution to that contextual, value-added measure, how much is due to the headteacher? How much pupil progress can we attribute to the headteacher and if you've got a better headteacher - how much more progress would pupils at the school make?

We used another statistical model to figure out how much impact headteachers have on this contextual, value-added measure and then

ranked headteachers on how much impact they have on pupil progress from 'effective' at the 84th percentile to 'average' at the median point and 'less-effective' at the 16th percentile.

Are you able to tell us in a bit more detail how you picked apart the school effect from the headteacher effect?

The way we did that is to look at headteachers who've been in lots of different schools, and each of those schools has had lots of different headteachers.

And because you've got multiple headteachers and headteachers who've been at multiple schools - then you can find out what is the consistent bit for each of those headteachers across all of the schools they've been at and what is the consistent bit for those schools across all of the headteachers they've had. In this way you can pull apart the effect of the headteacher and the persistent effect of the school.

Were the headteachers moving between schools that were different in terms of how challenging they were?

This was harder to pull out in the data and we'll do a proper quantitative investigation of this next but what we did look at is whether, on average, effective headteachers tend to be in very high attaining schools. Slightly surprisingly, the answer is not really for the effective headteachers. If you're an effective headteacher, you're not likely to be in a much higher attaining school than an average headteacher. There's not really a big difference there. The difference is at the other end. The headteachers who're less

effective and have less impact on their pupils' grades tend to be in very low performing schools.

The data shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that experienced headteachers tend to be more effective.

Yes, so I suppose there are three parts to this - one is how long does it take a headteacher to have an impact in a school? Do they have more impact over time? And then do they improve over time in a school or just improve over time as a headteacher? And I think the answer is yes, they seem to get better on all three of those measures on average. Of course, all of these are broad averages across thousands of headteachers.

Certainly what we find is that headteachers seem to have more impact on their school if they've been there for longer than a few years. It may actually be that they are having all of that impact immediately, but then you only see it in the grades after a few years because it's the grades that we're measuring. They might be making changes straight away but we don't see the impact on grades until two or three years later.

What we do see is that headteachers who have a longer tenure in a school do seem to have a much more positive impact and headteachers who are more experienced have a much more positive impact.

The research also identifies a link between teacher turnover and staff absenteeism?

Yes teacher turnover falls with more effective headteachers - also teacher absenteeism. Having said that, it's quite a small effect and so I don't think it explains most of the impact of an effective headteacher.

What do these findings mean, if anything, for school or trust boards trying to appoint a headteacher?

The problem with this sort of research is that to get these answers that are generalisable - you average over a huge number of people over a lot of different types of school over time.

But it's fair to say that past performance predicts future performance so if a headteacher is making a big difference to a previous school, they're likely to make a big difference to your school or trust too. Having said that, what was interesting in our research was perhaps this finding about 'matching'.

There's an idea that you have to get the right headteacher for your school. And so we tried to look at this and ask, well, does headteachers' performance differ between different schools? So for one headteacher, do they do very differently at one school from another school? And the answer is not really. More important seems to be their average impact - and that's really similar across all the schools they're at. So does that mean that matching the right headteacher to your school doesn't matter? Well no, not necessarily unfortunately - that would be too easy.

But it could be that heads and boards struggle to figure out the match when they're at the recruitment stage or it could be that matching is really important but you can't see how good that is before you appoint the headteacher and you only find out afterwards. So either matching doesn't really matter - you just need to find someone effective. Or if it does really

matter, but maybe it's very hard to tell if someone's going to match anyway and you shouldn't worry about it too much.

The report also looks at the impact of gender and ethnicity of headteachers on the composition of the student body and workforce, or student attainment.

Yes, when looking at headteachers' gender or ethnicity and whether that matters for the staffing or for the pupils, we couldn't really find any effect. I think that's quite surprising.

Although the evidence on this from overseas is quite mixed as well. There's famous evidence that black boys in the US do better with black male teachers but other studies have struggled to replicate that with asian students or with girls - so the evidence is mixed and emerging. But we didn't find any of those effects with headteachers although if you think that the impact may be through role modelling, then headteachers are quite distant from students in many schools, particularly secondary schools. This could be down to the small sample sizes for some matches as there aren't a lot of black male headteachers or asian male headteachers in schools across the country.

One of the report recommendations is to try to persuade effective leaders into the more challenging schools.

Yes, if you go back to the pupil premium which was introduced over a decade ago - the idea was then schools with a lot of pupils in disadvantaged

circumstances will be able to spend more money to attract better headteachers to their schools, so those pupils would make better progress. And I don't think that's really happened. We don't really see schools deviate from the national pay policies to try to attract better headteachers.

We didn't find effective headteachers in more disadvantaged areas, which you might have hoped to see because those schools have quite a lot more funding through the pupil premium.

So perhaps there should be some effort into getting effective headteachers into the most disadvantaged schools.

Would you say the research has an implication for boards who're recruiting or perhaps promoting a headteacher with very little prior experience?

We didn't look specifically at if a headteacher struggles early on then how might they end up performing five years later in the same school. It would be good to know something like that. We do know that headteachers in the first three years have less impact than later on, so boards should support headteachers new in post as improvements will take time.

Despite all this information on headteachers effectiveness - it can be pretty hard to find candidates in these tough times, post-pandemic?

Yes, I definitely think that's a concern. Fewer middle leaders and senior leaders are aspiring to headship these days and the job is becoming harder and harder. There's less support from local authorities or other support

services so schools are increasingly having to take on this pastoral burden of supporting children facing wider societal issues.

So there's a huge burden on headteachers and it's not a surprise that fewer aspire as it's such a tough job but having said that, senior leaders are essential for the recruitment and retention of younger teachers and younger teachers are much more likely to quit than senior leaders.

Most teachers who quit are quitting in their first few years as they don't feel adequately supported and that really comes down to the quality of leadership.

People like to point to the government but if you have great leadership, you feel supported. If you feel like you're succeeding in a career that is very rewarding then you're more likely to stay on even if the pay isn't fantastic - which it's not any more in teaching.

The most important thing for whether someone quits their job is their relationship with their manager and the leadership - and that's the same in schools as anywhere else. We don't want to tolerate poor leadership in schools which is likely to worsen retention problems so being ruthless about ensuring leaders are effective at their jobs is a good way to try to retain more people in the profession to make sure they're not quitting.

The [Education Policy Institute](#) is an independent, evidence-based research institute that aims to promote high quality education outcomes for young people.

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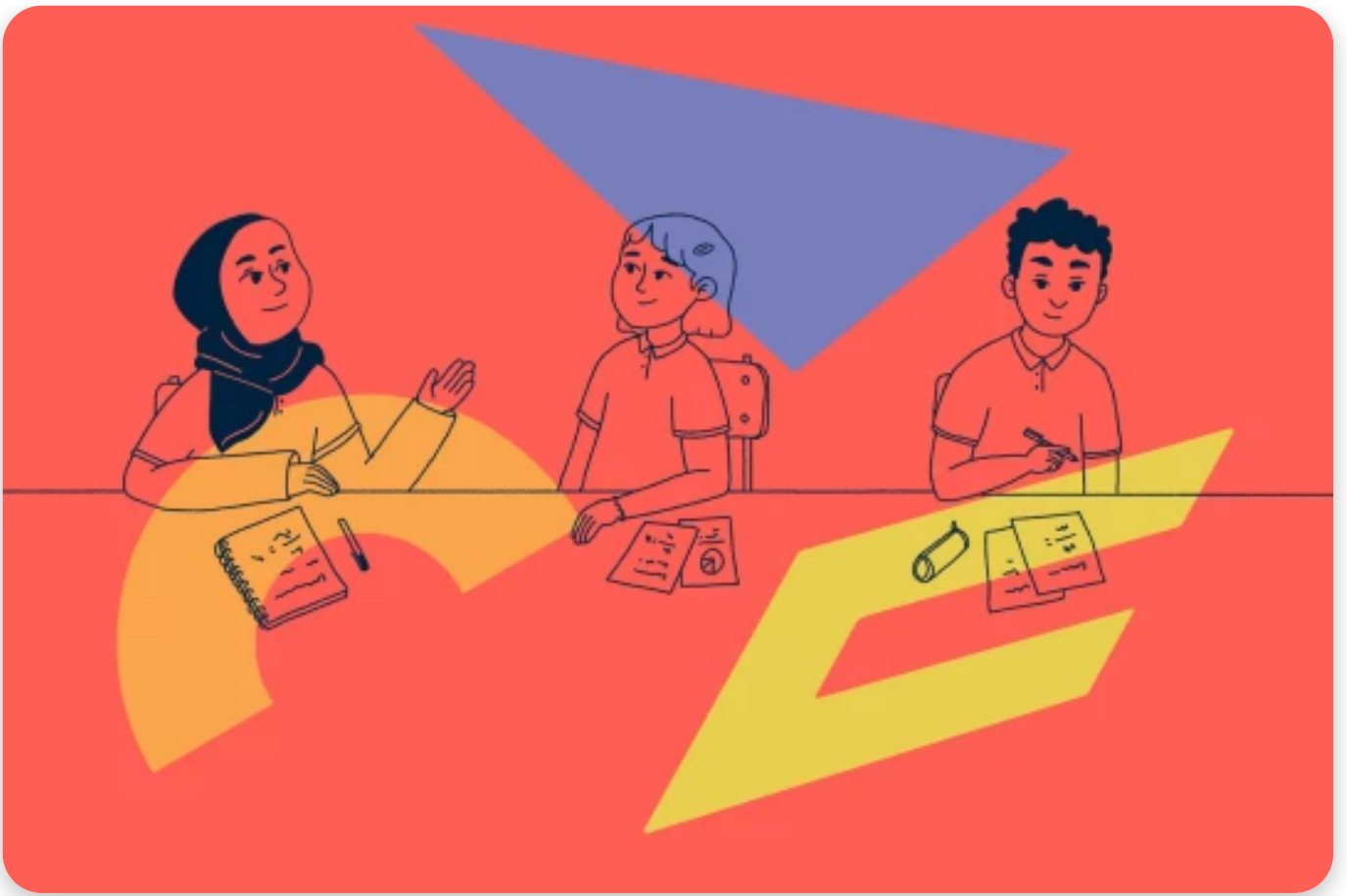
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