

Excellence in English: What School Leaders Need to Know

Having spent more than two decades working alongside primary leadership teams, we know that excellence in English is rarely the result of a single programme or initiative. Instead, it is secured through thoughtful leadership: leaders who understand their staff, know their pupils well, engage critically with research and hold a clear, shared vision for what high-quality English teaching and learning looks like in their school.

English leadership plays a significant role in shaping pupils' academic success, cultural literacy and confidence as communicators. We have found that the following indicators consistently feature in schools where English provision is both inspiring and impactful.

1. Know Your Staff

Staff expertise is the most powerful driver of pupil outcomes. Effective English leaders regularly audit subject knowledge, pedagogical strengths and CPD needs. For example, leaders might ask:

- Who is passionate and knowledgeable about teaching vocabulary and is keen to share good practice?
- Who needs support with a specific area such as phonics, fluency or Guided Writing?
- Who has moved year groups and requires grammar subject knowledge support?

Depth of subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge remains one of the strongest predictors of pupil success. A sharp focus on ongoing professional development ensures the best outcomes for pupils. English leaders need to be experts in the field and if not, are clear about how and where to access high-quality guidance.

2. Know Your Pupils

Pupil voice is a powerful and often underused leadership tool. Structured pupil conferencing provides leaders with rich insights into curriculum experience, attitudes to reading and writing, and the lived reality of classroom practice.

Successful Pupil Conferencing:

- When evaluating writing provision, inviting pupils to share a piece they feel proud of can open meaningful conversations about motivation, challenge and support.
- Selecting pupils from a range of backgrounds and attainment levels ensures a more accurate picture.
- Holding discussions in familiar, relaxed spaces such as the library or reading corner often encourages openness.

Used thoughtfully, pupil conferencing sharpens curriculum design and keeps decision-making grounded in pupils' experience.

3. Know Your Data

Data should inform reflection, not dominate it. A nuanced understanding of outcomes enables leaders to celebrate success, identify patterns and ask the right questions. In high-performing schools, leaders focus on the essential question: *so, what does this tell us about teaching, learning and curriculum design?*

4. Know the Research

The world of education is ever evolving, and we are constantly learning about the most effective and innovative practices. The research evidence is vast, and leaders need reliable and manageable sources to rely upon.

- Where are your 'go to' sources for reliable, evidence based, inspirational teaching approaches?
- Dandelion Learning offer free termly English briefings designed specifically to save leaders time by sharing current research and vitally, practical implications for schools.

5. Know What Really Matters

In successful schools, certain principles are securely embedded across classrooms. Consider our checklist below:

- **Oracy** is taught explicitly with designated lesson time. Teachers are confident in teaching The Four Strands of Oracy effectively through active strategies.
- **Reading for Pleasure** is actively cultivated through high-quality texts, reading aloud and strong reading communities.
- **Systematic, synthetic phonics** is taught rigorously, supported by well-matched texts and timely intervention.
- **Catch- Up phonics** is prioritised and targeted. Intervention is taught by experts in addition to the whole class teaching of reading.
- **There is a focus on fluency** as the bridge between decoding and comprehension.
- **The Science of Reading** underpins classroom practice. All teachers understand the building blocks which represent the foundations for reading, as well as the interplay between the elements which make up the 'reading jigsaw'.
- **Teaching of comprehension** relies on active, dialogic approaches, deepening engagement in text and is not focused solely on questioning.
- **Transcription (handwriting and spelling)** is taught discretely and explicitly.
- **Vocabulary** is taught through direct instruction and active games to ensure mastery of language.
- **Grammar** is taught explicitly through games and spoken language activities and contextualised within Shared Writing.

- **Authentic purpose and audience** drive writing and concrete, inspirational content and choice ensure pupils are motivated and enthusiastic writers.
- **Time is dedicated to redrafting and editing** to improve writing outcomes.
- **There is accuracy in assessment** through celebration and collaboration.
- **Robust assessment systems** ensure pupils who need additional support are identified early and provide granular diagnosis of need so that intervention is precisely focused on learning gaps.
- **Growth Mindset** beats at the heart of the school. The immense power of mindset, resilience and self-belief is understood by all as pivotal to success.

6. Know How to Secure Progress for All Pupils

- **Quality first teaching** makes *all* the difference. Adaptive and responsive teaching using explicit instruction (e.g. Shared and Guided Writing), scaffolding, flexible grouping and targeted use of technology impacts directly on pupil progress.
- **Formative assessment** is used to identify specific needs for pupils at risk of falling behind and those with SEND.
- **Reducing cognitive load** is prioritised within planning.
- **Intervention** takes place in addition to the whole class teaching of Literacy. It is imperative that pupils who require phonics/fluency catch up are also exposed to high-quality, age-related texts to ensure that they have ample opportunity to engage with more complex characters, themes and language within whole class sessions.

7. Know How to Manage Change

- Keep English high on the agenda. Staff meeting time is a prized commodity but ensuring priorities are kept top of the list and fresh in colleagues' minds can make all the difference. For example:
 - Providing time for teachers to report back on the impact of using Discussion Stems during a focus on explicit oracy teaching can support deep reflection and motivate teachers to be the change they wish to see!
- Small actions can have big consequences. For example:
 - Asking teachers to organise a 'Book Tasting' as part of the Reading for Pleasure agenda can deepen teachers and pupils' knowledge of texts and create excitement around book selection.

8. Know How to Drive Improvement Through Vision

Ultimately, effective English leadership is rooted in clarity of vision. Communicate this vision clearly to all staff...and keep retuning to it. Mobilising others to want to strive for shared

aspirations is an art! If class based, build trust by leading by example, share your learning and lead with kindness, compassion and courage!

A Reflective Closing Thought

In an educational landscape where time is limited and expectations are high, the most successful English leaders are those who resist the urge to do *more* and instead focus on doing *what matters most*—well, consistently and with purpose. By holding a clear vision of excellence, leaders ensure that English remains a source of joy, challenge and opportunity for every child.

Contact Dandelion Learning for a free consultancy call to ensure excellence in English in your school: info@dandelionlearning.org or call Tre on 07792349188

Author Bio

Pet Henshaw and Tre Christopher from Dandelion Learning have over 20 years' experience working with primary leadership teams to improve outcomes in English. They have supported schools both in the UK and internationally providing English CPD, curriculum development and leadership coaching, with a particular focus on evidence-informed practice and sustainable improvement.

