

# **An exploration of the drivers and potential barriers for schools in England embedding youth social action in their culture and practice**

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## High-level summary of MBA research findings:

1. What are the drivers for and barriers to youth social action engagement in schools?
2. Is there a process for helping schools to embed more youth social action in their practice?

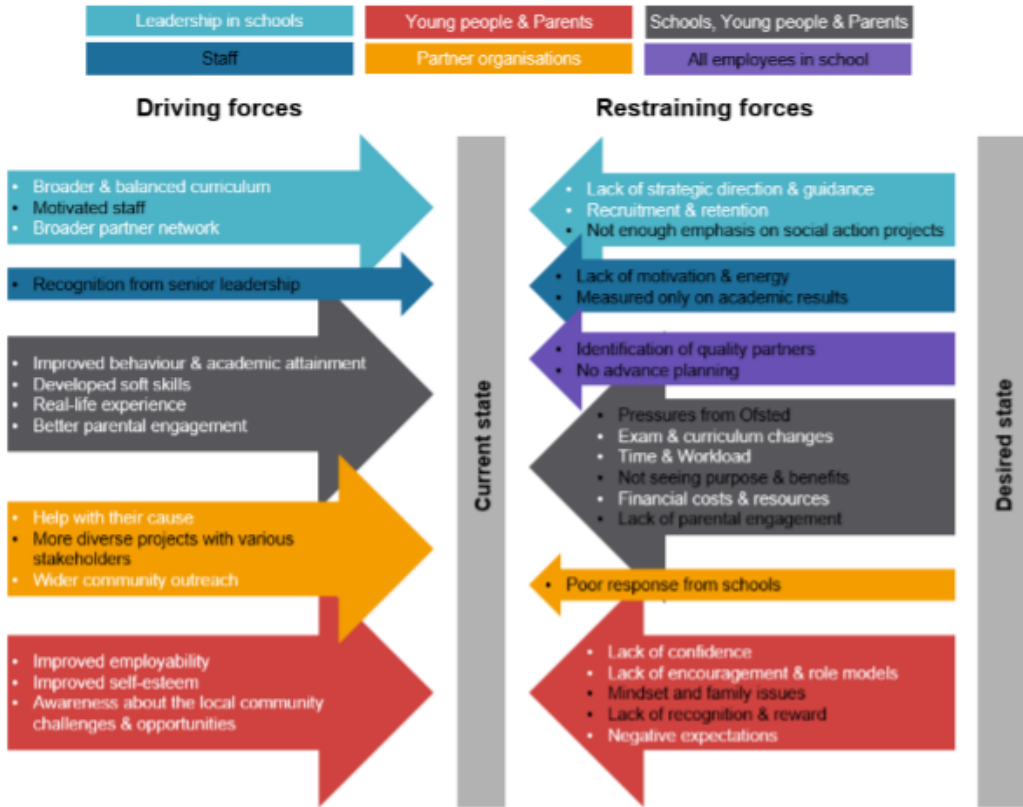
## Common perceptions and trends:

- 'social action' is not commonly used in schools although most schools will be doing some form of social action by another name.
- Yet most social action activities, in both the schools who were embedding and those that weren't, showed that few schools were facilitating genuine youth-led social action; building in time for reflection and there was an absence of measurement and celebration of young people's contributions.
- When school leaders were asked about their personal perception of the purpose of education in their school, the most common answers were 'enabling young people to be successful and happy in life', and 'equipping young people with the skills and knowledge for the future'.
- Yet very few of the interviewees agreed that the current education system support delivering on the purpose of education they believe in.
- Significant cultural and economic diversity in the local community areas and parental disengagement were recognised as the biggest challenges for the schools.

## What are the drivers for and barriers to youth social action engagement?

The research identified the forces acting on different key school stakeholder groups and grouped them into driving and restraining forces which affect whether a school embeds social action in its culture and practice or not.

The below figure summarises this work.



The research also suggested the some of the restraining forces appeared to be causing the others.

Causes		Consequences
Not seeing purpose & benefits		Lack of strategic direction and emphasis on social action projects
Measured only on academic results		Lack of motivation & energy
Time & workload		Poor response from schools
No advanced planning		
Identification of quality partners		

Some of the senior leaders in schools chose to make a quick fix of academic performance first and then develop extra-curricular activities, while the others, understanding the potential, concentrated on both areas at the same time. This type of leader tends to more acutely recognise a direct relationship between social action and young people’s academic attainment and have social action embedded in their practice and culture.

**In schools who embed social action, it is seen as a way to achieve important outcomes,** such as academic attainment, wellbeing of students, Ofsted requirements, as well as employee motivation and engagement.

**In schools who were not embedding social action, it is seen as something ‘nice to have’ or extra that could diminish effort from achieving these outcomes.**

The government, and especially Ofsted play a significant role in influencing a school’s decision to embed social action in their school or not by putting a lot of pressure on schools, and consequently students, to achieve good academic results.

**Three out of five schools noted that being measured solely on the exam results demotes the effort they put into a more broad and balanced curriculum.**

There is no universal solution to driving more schools who are not currently embedding social action to do so. The most effective way to address the restraining forces and to achieve positive outcomes is to;

- ensure that the benefits of social action are promoted
- social action activities are developed in consideration of the unique needs and demands of the particular school, young people and parents, and their local community.

## Four key themes emerged:

1. **Communication.** Here it is defined as an in-school communication flow between senior leaders, staff, young people and parents.

- a. **Key finding:** Headteachers, senior leaders, staff, and young people and their partners do not communicate enough with each other about the benefits, opportunities, and each other's achievements related to social action.
- b. The most commonly shared communications issues in schools are:
  - i. Lack of senior leadership direction and guidance
  - ii. Decentralised information about existing social action opportunities
  - iii. Lack of promotion of the double benefit of social action
  - iv. Lack of post-engagement feedback and measurement of social action outcomes

2. **Motivation.** This explores the questions of why some schools are willing to encourage students more than the others and why students do not always engage.

- a. **Key finding (schools):** Teachers in schools that allow more ownership and flexibility in terms of incorporating social action projects in their curriculum or timetable are often happier, more motivated and engaged.
- b. Due to perceived over-emphasis from schools that DfE and Ofsted's priorities are focussed more on academic results over delivering a 'broad and balanced curriculum', social action is often deprioritised in schools' agendas.
- c. Schools who do understand the positive impacts of social action (specifically linked to improved performance, wellbeing, and staff motivation and engagement) give greater weighting to social action and greater ownership and flexibility to teachers as to how to facilitate it.
- d. Supporting teachers and schools to incorporate social action projects into their standard timetable reduced the additional time and workload pressures that many perceive to come along with social action.
- e. **Students:** three trends:
  - i. Communication about the benefits to the student of social action
  - ii. Student-led vs. Student-fed
  - iii. Making social action exciting and fun

**3. Opportunities and mindset.** This looks at points concerning inequality of opportunities for young people to engage in social action and how this interplays with differences in mindset between affluent and disadvantaged families.

- a. Key finding:** Some families have negative perceptions of social action, which, in turn, influence how young people see it.  
To develop the most effective communication strategy, schools need to understand the needs, mindset, and attitudes towards social action of young people and their families.
- b.** Affluent families understand the concept of social action and its links to personal development and employment and therefore encourage their children to get involved.
- c.** Less affluent families either have more pressing concerns (e.g. financial issues); do not see the benefits of social action, or; have a negative perception of it. "Why should my child work for free?"
- d.** Parental engagement is key to involvement in social action & inviting them to school-led presentations, awards and celebrations of young people's social action achievements was identified as a big motivational factor for students getting involved.

**4. Local Partners.** This looks at the challenges of local providers of social action and schools have in the process of building their relationships and about their perceptions of each other.

- a. Key finding:** Creating mutually beneficial relationships with local organisations will give not only more capabilities to schools, but also skills and real-life experiences to young people.
- b.** Schools should actively develop their networks and work with local communities to achieve better outcomes for their school & high-quality opportunities for their students to make a difference.
- c.** Schools are often overwhelmed by the number of offers they receive on a regular basis and find it challenging to identify what is worthwhile.
- d.** Local partners struggle to get through to the right person within the school and may never get past reception. They also sometimes struggle to emphasise the 'What's in it for my school' element of their work.

## Recommendations:

### For Government and local authorities (long term):

1. Put more emphasis on social action in its guidance documents and communications
2. Develop and incorporate a measurement mechanism of social action performance in Ofsted's inspection framework
3. Talk to a broader range of staff during Ofsted's inspections
4. Local authorities to provide guidance on reliable youth social action providers and help connecting schools and local organisations with each other

### For schools (medium and short-term):

1. Headteachers to give clear direction and explain the benefits of social action to staff

2. Headteachers to allow more curriculum flexibility and appraise teachers' performance not only based on academic results, but also on community engagement
3. Develop local networks with businesses, charities and schools
4. Lead by example and nominate social action ambassadors among teachers, parents, young people and local partners and local authority representatives
5. Plan social action activities in advance and involve young people in the process
6. Set realistic goals, create small wins, and produce tangible outcomes at the end of the project
7. Communicate effectively with key stakeholders
8. Recognise, reward and celebrate
9. Collect feedback from teachers, young people, and parents at the end of each social action activity.

## Is there a process for helping schools to embed more social action in their practice?

Six key process recommendations were identified for organisations to consider when speaking with senior leaders in schools.

1. **Listen to the agenda of the school**  
Listen to the agenda of the school and then offer practical examples of how social action has helped other schools meet mandated targets or improve their performance. Emphasis the energy between social action and achieving tangible, hard outcomes, for example Ofsted criteria, academic attainment, and parental engagement.
2. **Social action closer to home is often most effective**  
Social action is not a one-size-fits-all and is often most effective when it is developed by and aimed at the unique needs of the local community – essentially, when it is closer to home.
3. **Plan in advance together with young people**  
Allow time for planning and do it together with young people, giving them responsibility and keeping them interested and aware of the aims and purpose of the project.
4. **Link social action to learning goals**  
Encourage teachers to link social action projects to learning goals from the National Curriculum Standards. This will ensure teachers understand how social action will aim them reaching their individual teaching targets.
5. **Measure success and deliver tangible outcomes**  
Develop a clear measure of success and produce practical materials at the end of each project.
6. **Communicate and celebrate**  
Ensure the achievements of young people, teachers, and organisation employees are communicated and celebrated, for example, through establishing yearly awards, perhaps hosted by the organisation rather than the school. Heavily incentivise parents' attendance.