

Policy brief: How to support the improvement of ‘stuck’ schools?¹

Introduction. Our two-year mixed-method research project “‘Stuck’ schools” funded by the Nuffield Foundation was designed to explore if receiving a series of below good Ofsted ratings can act as a barrier for improvement. We answer the research question ‘Can a series of below good Ofsted grades prevent sustainable improvement?’ by exploring the characteristics and trajectories of ‘stuck’ schools.

Context. How to solve the underperformance of around 580 schools in England that have consistently received less than good Ofsted overall effectiveness inspection grades is high on the government’s agenda. The White Paper [‘Opportunity for All: Strong schools with great teachers for your child’](#) sets out the government’s plans to address schools with successive ‘requires improvement’ (RI) grades (HM Government, 2022). Yet this not a new issue. In 2017 Ofsted highlighted schools that had been consistently judged as below good from September 2005 to August 2017. [‘Fight or flight? How “Stuck” schools are overcoming isolation’](#) reports a qualitative case study of 10 ‘stuck’ and 10 ‘unstuck’ schools. Ofsted concluded that ‘stuck’ schools needed targeted assistance and thorough inspections that are not tied to overall grades (Ofsted, 2020). Our mixed-methods study expands Ofsted work by providing a robust methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to understand patterns of change over time and stakeholders’ experiences in ‘stuck’ schools and their comparison group.

Methodology. Our study used a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design to quantitatively analyse (Propensity score matching, Cluster analysis and Path analysis) secondary administrative data from Ofsted and the DfE to identify and analyse a sample of 580 ‘stuck’ schools and a matched comparison group of 580 un-‘stuck’ schools. We use qualitative methods (document and thematic analysis) to analyse 56 interviews and focus groups in a multi-site case study in 16 ‘stuck’ and ‘un-stuck’ schools.

Findings. The 10 key findings are:

- ‘Stuck’ schools face a combination of unusually challenging circumstances characterised by: a) instability (higher teacher turnover, pupil mobility and governance change rates); b) poverty (higher pupils’ free school meals and poor neighbourhood rates); c) higher rates of children with low-level Special Educational Needs and Disability); d) challenging locations (middle-sized urban areas rather than large cities or rural; and e) slightly higher funding (a little more overall and per-pupil funding) compared to not-‘stuck’ schools.
- ‘Stuck’ schools are distinctive but not unique. Many other schools share most of ‘stuck’ schools’ challenging circumstances but have managed to avoid a continuous cycle of less than good inspection judgements.
- The presence of good or outstanding neighbourhood schools is more important in predicting whether a school will become ‘stuck’ than ‘stuck’ schools’ own performance.

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- A less than good inspection judgement is a modest contributing factor of ‘stuck’ schools’ lack of improvement or decline over time.
- ‘Stuck’ schools’ trajectories are diverse and these differences matter, as most case studies schools contested and didn’t identify with the metaphor of being ‘stuck’.
- According to Ofsted inspection reports, case study ‘stuck’ schools need primarily to improve their Outcomes/achievements/quality of education.
- Monitoring inspections and full inspections received by ‘stuck’ case study schools were arguably too frequent, variable and inconsistent.
- Many headteachers, teachers, and governors of ‘stuck’ and ‘un-stuck’ schools valued the role of Ofsted and other support received to improve.
- Some stakeholders raised concerns about the validity, reliability and fairness of inspections.
- ‘Stuck’ schools can get ‘un-stuck’ given the right time and support.

Policy recommendations

DfE should:

- Consider whether there is adequate support, including financial support, for ‘stuck’ schools, particularly ‘stuck’ secondary schools whose per-pupil funding is only marginally higher than other secondary schools. Given that funding is attached to pupil enrolment and ‘stuck’ schools are under subscribed, significantly increasing funding could help them become good.
- Help ‘stuck’ schools learn lessons from the experience of ‘un-stuck’ schools through creating networks and disseminating best practice guidance to successfully tackle similar challenging circumstances.
- Consider what more can be done to stabilize ‘stuck’ schools’ staff. Reducing excessively high teacher turnover, including loss of key staff and governance changes needs to happen before the school can improve.
- Review the positive and negative impact of academization on ‘stuck’ schools to gain insights from the experiences in primary compared to secondary schools.

Ofsted should:

- Ensure that inspectors are properly trained to understand the significance and implications of schools working in very challenging circumstances, and the positive role they can play to support schools in their improvement journey.
- Consider what other positive support can be given to ‘stuck’ schools to assist in their improvement journey, including linking them with schools that have become ‘un-stuck’ or those that have specific expertise in areas that are core challenges, such as supporting children with EAL and/or refugee backgrounds.
- Revise the cycles of full section 5 inspections and monitoring section 8 inspections to give time to implement improvements. Avoid: a) transforming monitoring into too frequent inspections and over-surveillance; b) too much variation in the number of inspections and across inspectors; and c) providing false hope in monitoring inspections.
- Consider what changes in inspection can be implemented -for example removing overall grades- to avoid the detrimental effect that a series of below good Ofsted grades is having on school improvement, especially for schools working in challenging circumstances such as ‘stuck’ schools.