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HeadStart in schools: **What do school staff members think?**

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Evidence Briefing #9

Executive summary

Introduction

Background

Started in 2016, HeadStart is a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. HeadStart aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. This briefing reports the findings from a study conducted as part of the national qualitative evaluation of HeadStart.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of staff members working at schools delivering and implementing HeadStart activities and support. The HeadStart partnerships were invited to identify schools that might be interested in taking part in this study. Interviews were conducted with 13 staff members (1-2 per school), representing a range of job roles, at 1-2 schools per partnership. A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted.

Findings

Perceptions of HeadStart's positive impact

School staff reported a range of positive impacts of HeadStart. These included changes to their schools' ethos, priorities, policies and curriculum; improvements in staff skills, communication and wellbeing; and improvements in young people's resilience, confidence and wellbeing.

Perceptions of facilitators to implementation

School staff identified several facilitators to implementing HeadStart in their contexts, including the degree to which

HeadStart met the needs, environment and ethos of their school; staff buy-in and enthusiasm for HeadStart; and supportive relationships with HeadStart staff teams.

Perceptions of implementation challenges

School staff also recognised challenges relating to HeadStart implementation within their settings. These included young people, parents and carers, and school staff not always engaging with HeadStart, lack of capacity among schools and staff members to implement HeadStart, and limitations in the availability and reach of HeadStart support.





Discussion

Conclusions and implications

The findings provide examples of how HeadStart support, training and practices can improve schools' provision of support for staff, young people and families. From school staff members' perspectives, the legacy and ethos of HeadStart seems likely to continue in schools beyond the funding period of the programme. However, school staff also expressed concerns about the programme funding period ending.

The findings indicate that careful consideration is needed by programme delivery teams in terms of conveying when and why support for beneficiaries is time limited. Moreover, programme delivery teams

need to be mindful of the constraints on their own capacity, including how this may affect their ability to liaise with schools in a timely manner, and how this could impact on the extent of the support that they can offer to schools.

Strengths and limitations

This briefing provides a rich description of school staff members' experiences of and perspectives on HeadStart, drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with staff representing a range of job roles and school settings across the six HeadStart partnerships. However, it is possible that additional themes could be identified with a larger sample of staff members, or with a sample including schools that are less likely to be positively predisposed to HeadStart.

Introduction

Started in 2016, HeadStart is a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. HeadStart aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local authority led HeadStart partnerships are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to design and try out new interventions that will make a difference to young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience. Each HeadStart partnership has a central staff team responsible for coordinating the HeadStart programme in their area, including delivering support and training for school staff, young people, and parents and carers. Members of this central team also work closely with school staff to provide support for young people within the school setting.



The HeadStart partnerships are in the following locations in England: Blackpool; Cornwall; Hull; Kent; Newham; Wolverhampton. While the specific types of support and activities delivered by the six partnerships differ according to the needs of their local areas, the partnerships' HeadStart programmes have some common elements. These include the following examples:

- The implementation of universal approaches to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing, for instance:
 - universal support delivered to whole school classes or year groups, such as Jigsaw, a Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE) programme, which is being delivered in HeadStart Hull;¹
 - approaches and training aiming to promote a school culture that is accepting and understanding of mental health and wellbeing, such as Trauma Informed Schools (TIS UK). This approach, which is being implemented in HeadStart Kernow, recognises that young people's mental health, wellbeing and learning can be affected by all aspects of the school community.²
- Delivering targeted support to young people (and sometimes their parents and carers) who may be struggling with their mental health, wellbeing and ability to cope with difficult situations in life. For example, schools in HeadStart Newham are delivering More than Mentors, which is a peer mentoring programme for young people.³

1. <https://www.howareyoufeeling.org.uk/>

2. <https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk/universal-/>

3. <https://www.headstartnewham.co.uk/activities/more-than-mentors/>

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and University College London (UCL) is working with The Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people now and in the future. Partners working with the EBPU on this evaluation include the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), Common Room, the London School of Economics (LSE), and the University of Manchester. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team.

This briefing reports the findings from a qualitative study conducted as part of the Learning Team's national evaluation of HeadStart. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of staff members working at schools delivering and implementing HeadStart activities and support. The Learning Team's interviews with school staff members were conducted in late 2019 and early 2020, prior to the initial coronavirus pandemic lockdown period.

By the time of publication, aspects of HeadStart delivery described in this briefing may have already been or will need to be adapted in light of coronavirus restrictions. Nonetheless, the issue of pupils' mental health and wellbeing is arguably even more pertinent in light of the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown measures. As such, the findings presented here are relevant for school staff and policymakers interested in learning how HeadStart can support schools in promoting young people's mental health and wellbeing.



Methodology

This study received approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee (ID number: 7963/002). The Learning Team invited the HeadStart partnerships to identify a range of schools with a potential interest in taking part in this study. Nine schools from across the six HeadStart partnerships responded to the Learning Team's subsequent invitation to take part, including two special schools, three primary schools, and four secondary schools. While a much larger number of schools across the partnerships to date have taken part in the HeadStart programme, this sample is representative of the types of schools that HeadStart works with.

Interviews were conducted by the Learning Team with 13 staff members (1-2 per school) at 1-2 schools per partnership. Interviewees were suggested by the HeadStart key contact at each school. Interviewees represented a range of job roles across the schools, including:

- senior leadership staff (SLT);
- pastoral care staff;
- special educational needs (SEN) support staff;
- class teachers;
- administrative staff.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone, audio-recorded and transcribed. Interview questions focused on the types of support that schools had been delivering through HeadStart, school staff members' perceptions of the impact of HeadStart at their schools, their perceptions of the barriers and facilitators to HeadStart implementation, and, given that the interviews were conducted during (at the time) the penultimate year of the programme, their perspectives on the sustainability of HeadStart at their schools.

The interviews ranged from 19.40 to 45.54 minutes in length, with an average length of 33.84 minutes. The Learning Team conducted a thematic analysis to explore themes across the interviews relating to school staff members' experiences of and perspectives on HeadStart. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that can be used to identify patterns or themes across interviewees' experiences and perspectives.⁴



4. Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101.

Findings

Perceptions of HeadStart's positive impact

Theme 1: HeadStart complements or adds to existing school provision seeking to promote young people's mental health and wellbeing

Staff described how HeadStart had enabled an improved or increased focus on mental health and wellbeing at their schools through:

- the introduction of new universal mental health and wellbeing focused initiatives (such as whole school approaches, or support programmes for whole school classes or year groups);
- changes to the school curriculum or policies;
- training for staff;
- the provision of new targeted support programmes for young people (and parents and carers) with specific needs.

Staff commented that a focus on promoting positive mental health and wellbeing had now been threaded through and embedded in their school practices and routines, rather than being a separate workstream. HeadStart frameworks and ideas had also been incorporated into school policies when renewing or reviewing them. Moreover, staff felt that whereas PSHE may have been lower on the priority list at their school before HeadStart, PSHE and the concept of 'looking after yourself' had now become an everyday focus.

"I think PSHE was largely forgotten. I think PSHE is one of those where if you've got a busy week and you've [got] things on, it's one of those that can go missing and actually now, it isn't. It's got much more of a focus."

Schools may already have been delivering lots of different types of support around mental health and wellbeing prior to HeadStart, but staff felt that HeadStart had provided structure, coherence and a foundation for their existing practice, as well as more resources for them to be able to effectively implement support. For instance, HeadStart tools had provided a clear system for identifying and referring young people in need of support, which schools had previously lacked.

"The whole ethos of [HeadStart] is what we do anyway. So, it fitted perfectly in terms of what we do. It just gave us more resources and support to do what we do."

School staff described how their connectivity with external services and organisations had improved through HeadStart. For example, school staff had been given a named contact to liaise with at child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). HeadStart staff had also introduced schools to other organisations (such as voluntary sector organisations) that could provide additional support for their pupils.

"We can almost get a daily turnaround [from CAMHS], whereas before, we would just be put on hold, or, you know, get lost in the system somewhere. And it's been invaluable just to have that second point of call just to bounce something off quickly when you need them in a crisis."

Theme 2: Perceived improvements in staff skills, communication and wellbeing

School staff described how HeadStart had provided valuable training, learning, and professional development opportunities for staff, in relation to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people and parents and carers, as well as their own mental health and wellbeing. This included training for school staff in using different approaches or techniques (such as active listening), or training to deliver HeadStart interventions themselves. School staff described enjoying the training that they had received from HeadStart and finding it useful.

"It's the best training I've had in my life, it really opened... the way it was delivered, the content of what was being delivered and the fact that it was clearly- I spent the whole time literally writing and making notes on stuff that would inform my practice."

School staff noted that as a result of HeadStart, they had experienced improvements in their understanding and awareness of concepts relating to mental health and wellbeing, and had become more attuned to young people's needs.

They attributed their increased understanding to the training that they had received from HeadStart, their communication with HeadStart staff, and their introduction through HeadStart to new types of support, resources and frameworks for mental health, wellbeing and resilience.

School staff had also noticed improvements in their own wellbeing and in their communication with one another, following the introduction of HeadStart. This included increased contact between staff members with different roles within the school, and increased communication between staff about issues affecting their own and young people's wellbeing. Interviewees described how they had made new or increased efforts to focus on school staff wellbeing, for instance by introducing new initiatives specifically geared towards helping staff to relax and celebrate their achievements.

"We've always had a really strong spirit as staff, a really good belonging of staff. But I think HeadStart has helped us to come together more and see the purpose behind why we need to come together and support each other."



Theme 3: Perceived improvements in young people's resilience, confidence and wellbeing

School staff described the improvements that they had noticed in young people's resilience, wellbeing and confidence, as a result of the support that they had received from HeadStart staff and interventions. School staff identified a number of factors to explain these improvements, including:

- the opportunities that HeadStart provided for young people to mix with new people and access new extracurricular activities;
- the provision of a space for young people to have conversations that they would not usually have;
- the ability of HeadStart staff to engage effectively with young people.

"[Pupils] are being given the opportunity to explore different views and thoughts and, you know, wishes and feelings really, that they wouldn't get within their normal working school day. So that's what's nice about it."

School staff had also noticed improvements in young people's relationships with each other as a result of HeadStart, such as young people learning to get along with classmates in HeadStart group interventions, being more accepting of differences, and receiving help from peer mentors to mitigate bullying. School staff felt that some young people were also more able to communicate with others now, including being more able to talk about their problems or speak up in class.

"I've seen children that have gone from not really putting their hands up in class or in other groups that they've done, to just having that little bit of confidence and feeling comfortable."



Perceptions of facilitators to implementation

Theme 1: School staff buy-in

School staff described how they and their colleagues could recognise the need for HeadStart, and felt that working together as a team had facilitated its implementation. School staff buy-in was influenced by:

- staff clearly seeing the benefits of HeadStart for young people and understanding how HeadStart added to existing provision within their schools;
- a general tendency among staff to seize any opportunities for extra funding, capacity and resources for their schools (which HeadStart was an example of);
- the perceived high quality of the HeadStart support offer;
- support and enthusiasm of the senior leadership team (SLT), which could be facilitated by the provision of supervision from HeadStart for headteachers.

Together, these factors meant that staff wanted to make time for HeadStart, despite their busy workloads.

"It's all the teachers being welcoming of it. So, when the children miss their lessons because they're doing a HeadStart programme, the teachers are supportive."

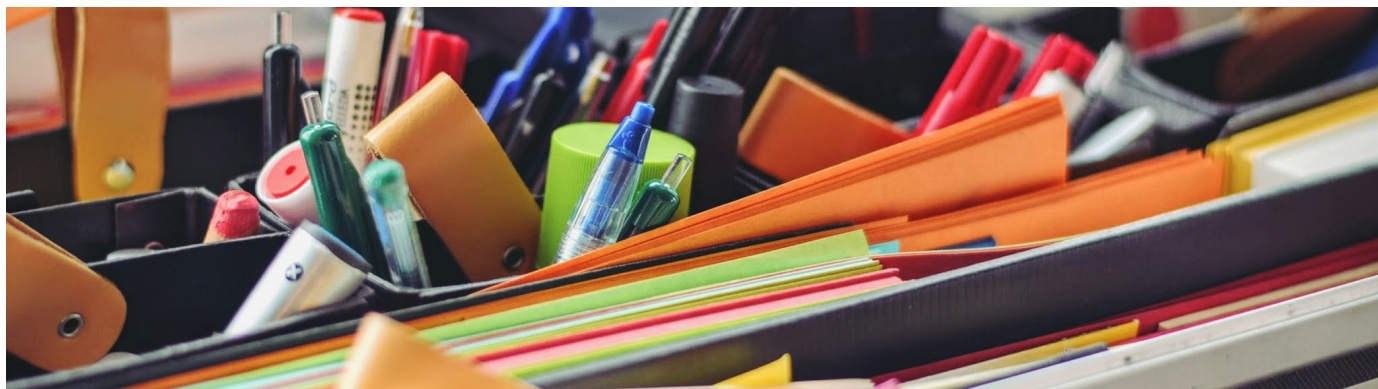
Theme 2: Fit with school needs, environment or ethos

Another factor facilitating the implementation of HeadStart (and also linked to school staff buy-in) was the perceived degree of fit that HeadStart had with schools' needs, environment or ethos. For example, staff spoke about the high levels of perceived pupil need for support within their schools, which in their view HeadStart could meet. HeadStart was also seen as being relatively easy to build into existing school support provision, and as filling a gap or being the next step in such provision.

"HeadStart was very much another cog in that wheel of, right, how do we actually get the most appropriate support to an individual child at the right time?"

Flexibility in the HeadStart offer was felt to be important to facilitate its implementation and fit with school processes, such as flexibility in the types of interventions that could be delivered, when interventions could be delivered, who interventions could be delivered by, and who could receive interventions. Staff appreciated the fact that HeadStart offered a range of different types of support to meet different pupils' needs and provided interventions or tools that could be adapted according to schools' requirements.

"The level of flexibility about how the programme is delivered is excellent. And it works really well for us, because sometimes things happen. We have mocks so that [means that] we can't involve our Year 11s in some of the programmes, so we re-schedule."



Theme 3: Supportive relationships with HeadStart staff

The supportive relationships between school staff, young people and their local HeadStart staff teams contributed to the enthusiasm that school staff had for HeadStart and therefore also aided the implementation of HeadStart in schools. The benefits of such relationships, from school staff members' perspectives, included:

- receiving helpful advice, e.g. about the types of support that could benefit specific young people;
- receiving mentoring and supervision;
- receiving relevant training, and feeling supported to implement their learning;
- observing HeadStart staff deliver support, or co-delivering support with HeadStart staff;
- receiving prompt responses to queries and referrals of young people for support;
- the presence of HeadStart staff at school meetings and events to answer questions about HeadStart support from parents and carers and young people;
- continuity of HeadStart staff members working with their schools;
- having their feedback about HeadStart taken on board, with tools and processes adapted in response, e.g. shortening lengthy referral processes;
- seeing HeadStart staff as part of the school staff team.

"The first thing that comes to my mind is the approachability of the HeadStart staff. I can't explain how... charismatic they are, and how they do care about the children. They really do. It's not, you can tell that it's not just a job for them."



School staff perceptions of challenges and issues relating to HeadStart implementation

Theme 1: Engaging all young people, parents and school staff with HeadStart

Despite providing lots of examples of positive engagement with HeadStart support, school staff also acknowledged that not all young people would engage with HeadStart. Interviewees recognised that for some children, talking about what they are feeling can be a difficult process. Staff also felt that the take-up of HeadStart support among parents and carers could be relatively low, as for instance, parents and carers may not know what HeadStart is or understand what it is for. School staff suggested that HeadStart could be advertised more clearly, and that its benefits and utility to relevant audiences could be better highlighted.

"Some families will happily engage with [HeadStart family support], others would never engage with it in a million years, because they see it as intruding."

School staff acknowledged that whole-school cultural change takes time. For instance, there can be resistance from staff to taking young people out of core subject lessons to receive HeadStart support. As such, to maximise school staff buy-in, staff suggested that more work from the SLT may be needed to really show staff how HeadStart complements existing school processes, such as how behaviour management and emotional support marry together.

"It's just really, really hard work. And I know what we are going to do and how we're going to get there, but you are talking about changing a set of beliefs, and changing a culture, and that takes a long time."

Theme 2: Lack of capacity

School staff described the logistical challenges that they had faced in implementing HeadStart, including finding space in the school timetable to deliver HeadStart interventions, and finding free classrooms or private spaces. School staff turnover could also affect schools' capacity to effectively implement HeadStart.

"We've had different members of staff deal with this, you see, so as one member of staff has left, it's then been put to somebody else. So, people lose grasp of what's been done, what hasn't been done, which way forward."

In addition, school staff mentioned aspects of HeadStart implementation that could require more capacity (in terms of time) to deliver than they had available, including administrative tasks. Interviewees suggested that having a staff member dedicated to completing HeadStart administrative tasks could help with this. Having time to implement the new skills that they had learned through HeadStart training was also seen as a challenge by staff. As such, having SLT buy-in was described as crucial so that staff could be relinquished from their existing duties as necessary to be able to implement HeadStart. Nonetheless, due to schools' busy timetables, it was not always possible for the SLT to enable every staff member to access training.

"There is a never-ending line of people that are asking, 'Could I have a go at that? Could I be trained up in that?' So, in terms of personnel and having the bodies, that's not an issue. In terms of turning it around so that the training is received in a timely fashion, that does tend to take a little bit more hassle."

Theme 3: Limitations in the availability and reach of HeadStart support

School staff reported that they had been identifying more young people for HeadStart targeted interventions than there were places available. They wanted HeadStart support to be available to more or all young people and families in need. HeadStart, as a test and learn programme, focused on supporting a specific age group (10–16 years). However, school staff also suggested that the age range for HeadStart support could be broadened to include even younger children.

"We've got a range of children with a range of emotional issues that start at a lot earlier age. So, if we had a magic wand and an unlimited pot of money, to start it even a year or two earlier for referrals would be absolutely amazing."

School staff referred to specific HeadStart interventions for young people and families that were only delivered for a finite time period, which they wished could have continued. Reasons perceived by school staff for HeadStart interventions ending included the possible high costs for HeadStart of running such interventions, possible loss of HeadStart funding, HeadStart staff cuts, lack of capacity within HeadStart staff teams, or decisions made by HeadStart staff to deliver interventions solely in particular settings, such as secondary schools rather than primary schools. School staff also commented that they, as well as young people and parents and carers, were not always sure when specific HeadStart interventions would come to an end, or why HeadStart support had ended.

"[HeadStart] had met with them once, but then they'd had no input with them over the summer holidays, and they'd never heard from them again."

School staff also expressed uncertainty about how young people could be directly referred by schools and other services (such as social care) into HeadStart, and described experiencing delays in notifications from HeadStart, such as those informing them which young people were in need of support. Others reported experiencing delays in HeadStart processes, including new tools not being ready for use as swiftly as expected,

and the need to occasionally chase HeadStart staff for responses to queries, although school staff also acknowledged that HeadStart staff may be understandably stretched in capacity.

"It would be a good, in a way, to know what [HeadStart have] got available, how do you refer into it? Who can refer into it? Having that set structure sent out to everybody [...] they could just email it out to all the schools."



School staff perspectives on the sustainability of HeadStart

Theme 1: Concerns about the loss of HeadStart funding and support

Although school staff accepted that programmes like HeadStart cannot continue indefinitely, they also expressed sadness and concerns about the HeadStart funding period ending. This was because they did not want targeted interventions for young people and support from the HeadStart staff teams to be withdrawn. School staff said that they would feel on their own without support from HeadStart and felt that they might struggle with capacity or to keep the momentum of HeadStart going. Having a named individual, whom they could seek advice from if they needed to on an ad hoc basis after the programme funding period ended, was suggested as a possible way forward.

"You'd feel more like you were on your own, but we would still implement what we do, but we wouldn't have that support and that guidance as well. So, I think it'd be quite tricky."

School staff felt that with appropriate training for themselves, specific HeadStart interventions could continue beyond the programme funding period. However, school staff also acknowledged that, ultimately, what they would be able to deliver would be a 'HeadStart lite model', as they did not have the capacity to deliver the same volume of support as HeadStart staff had. School staff wondered whether HeadStart interventions would be recommissioned by the local authority or whether schools could make a business case to fund delivery of the interventions themselves.

"We would be really hard pressed if all of a sudden we had to start paying for all of the separate things. In fact, in all honesty, we would have to look at certainly trimming back."

Theme 2: The legacy of HeadStart

Despite identifying challenges to sustaining HeadStart, school staff felt that the HeadStart legacy and ethos would likely continue after the programme funding period had ended. This was because lasting changes had already been made to the curriculum or to school policies as a result of HeadStart. Moreover, key learning, tools and resources from HeadStart could continue to be used by schools for as long as they were still available. The training that school staff had received through HeadStart was also seen by interviewees as a key element of the HeadStart legacy, as trained staff now had the skills to continue providing support for young people themselves, for as long as they remained in post.

"We've had too much investment and too much learning. It's been too effective for it to go to waste just because the funding's stopped."



Discussion

Key findings

School staff buy-in, supportive relationships with HeadStart staff, and the extent to which the programme meets the school's needs are seen as key facilitators to implementation

School staff identified several key facilitators to implementing HeadStart in their contexts. These included the degree to which HeadStart met the needs, environment and ethos of their school (with the flexibility of the support offer being an important factor driving this), school staff buy-in and enthusiasm for HeadStart, and supportive relationships with local Headstart staff teams. School staff valued the training, advice, mentoring, and supervision that they had received from HeadStart staff.

Implementation challenges can include varied engagement with the programme, lack of staff capacity, and limitations in the availability and reach of support

School staff also recognised challenges relating to HeadStart implementation within their settings and identified areas of improvement for HeadStart. Challenges included varying levels of engagement with the programme from some young people, parents and carers, and colleagues, implementation being hindered by schools' and HeadStart staff members' lack of time and capacity, and perceived limitations in the availability and reach of HeadStart support. School staff also expressed concerns about the programme funding period ending.

School staff recognise how HeadStart can have a positive impact on staff and pupil wellbeing

HeadStart was seen as adding to and refining schools' support systems through the provision of new resources, activities and structure. School staff described making changes to their schools' ethos, priorities, policies and curriculum as a result of HeadStart. School staff also perceived HeadStart as having a positive impact on staff members' and young people's wellbeing, resilience

and relationships. Staff members' perceptions of positive impact are further reflected in their desire for aspects of HeadStart delivery beyond to continue beyond the funded period of the programme.

Strengths and limitations

This briefing provides a rich description of school staff members' experiences of and perspectives on HeadStart, drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with staff representing a range of job roles and school settings across the six HeadStart partnerships. However, it is important to note that:

- Only 13 staff members were interviewed as part of this study and schools were recruited to take part by the partnerships. Thus, the findings solely illustrate the perceptions and experiences of a small purposively selected sample of school staff members.
- It may be that additional themes would be identified with a larger sample of staff members, or a sample including schools that may be less likely to already be positively pre-disposed to HeadStart.
- The findings indicate areas where Headstart support could be improved, some of which may be more feasible (e.g. more advertising of HeadStart support options for parents and carers) than others (e.g. more funding needed to be able to deliver more support and give staff more capacity).

Implications

When support is coming to an end, communication and planning with school staff, young people, and families are key

The findings provide examples of how HeadStart support, training, and practices can enhance schools' provision of support for staff, young people, and families. However, careful consideration is needed by programme delivery teams when support for beneficiaries is time limited. From school staff members' perspectives, the support that they, young people, and families had received from HeadStart staff was hugely welcomed and often positively viewed. However, staff also indicated that they, young people, and families were not always certain when and why HeadStart support had come to an end.

Establishing clear, effective and efficient identification and referral processes is a core aspect of preventive programme delivery

The findings indicate that HeadStart (and other programmes like it) should work closely with schools to identify young people in need of support, with consideration of the types of help that work well in schools' contexts. This is necessary to ensure that young people and schools are matched with the most appropriate support to meet their needs.

However, the findings also suggest that delays in programme implementation processes, such as around identifying or referring young people in need of support, and limitations in the availability of support, can present challenges for maximising the positive impact of preventive programmes in schools. Programme delivery teams need to be mindful of the constraints on their own capacity, including how this may affect their ability to liaise with schools in a timely manner, and how this could impact on the extent of the support that they can offer to schools.

Planning ahead for the end of the funded period is key to embedding learning and ensuring potential for the continued support of young people

From school staff members' perspectives, the legacy and ethos of HeadStart seems likely to continue in schools beyond the funding period of the programme. This includes embedding HeadStart learning within school structures, having ongoing access to HeadStart resources, and trained school staff being able to implement HeadStart support. This highlights the importance of providing schools with access to resources for long-term use, as well as providing schools with the capability to cascade training to other staff. The latter is integral to ensure that new initiatives are sufficiently embedded, so that even if key staff members leave, such initiatives will continue.



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