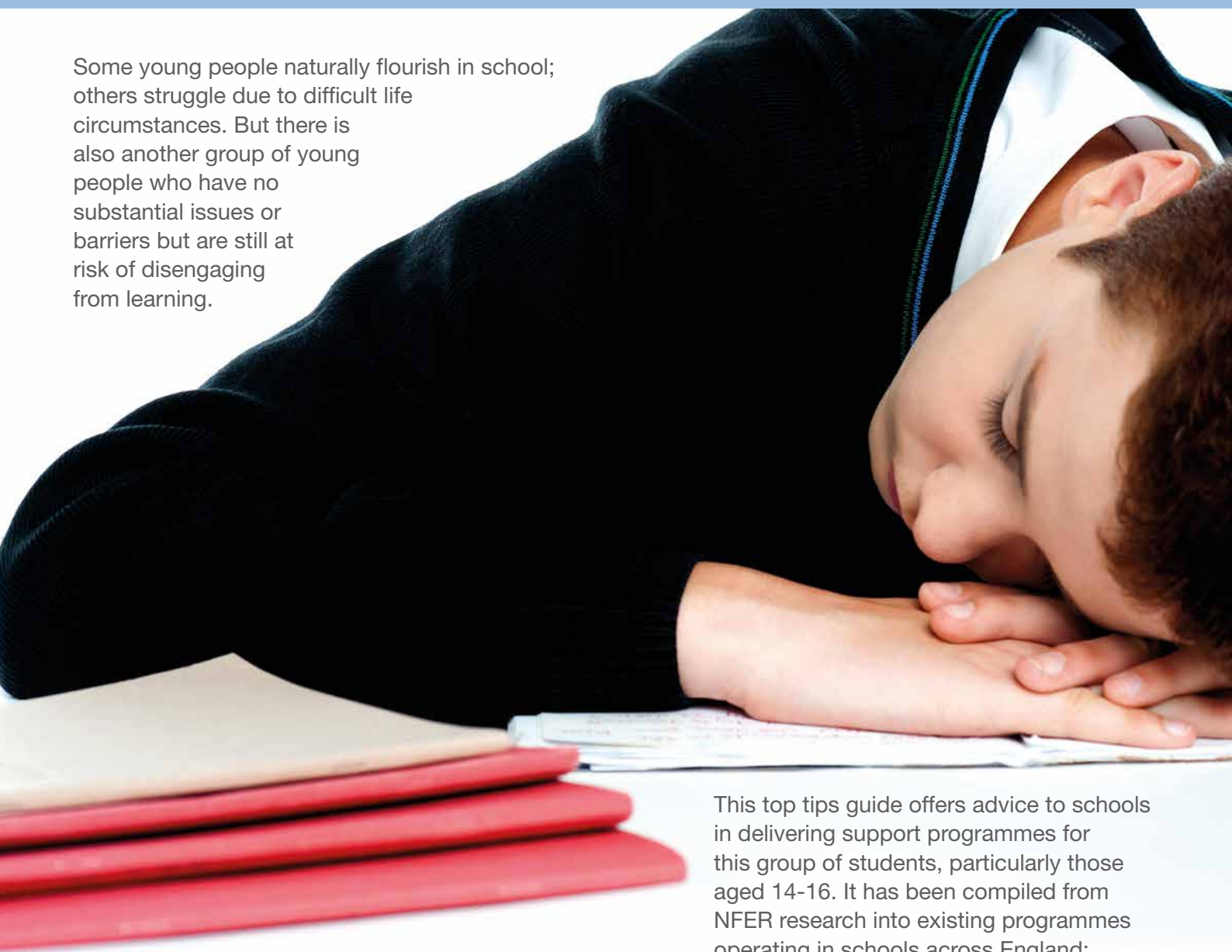# NEET prevention: Keeping students engaged at Key Stage 4

Top tips for senior leaders

Introduction

Some young people naturally flourish in school; others struggle due to difficult life circumstances. But there is also another group of young people who have no substantial issues or barriers but are still at risk of disengaging from learning.

This top tips guide offers advice to schools in delivering support programmes for this group of students, particularly those aged 14-16. It has been compiled from NFER research into existing programmes operating in schools across England:

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IMPE02

Using this top tips guide

This guide is designed to help schools develop the programme of support that will help their students to remain engaged in learning after Key Stage 4. The diagram below allows for a systematic approach to developing programmes, starting by thinking about what you want to achieve and the resources and activities needed to achieve your aims, and how you can measure impact.

A. Programme objectives
1. Identify students at risk
2. Set aims and objectives

B. Resources
3. Tailor your approach

C. Activities
4. Implement and deliver
5. Support continued engagement

D. Impact
6. Develop a monitoring system
7. Evaluate success and measure outcomes and impact

TOP TIP 1:

Identify students at risk

• Adopt a structured approach to identify students who are at risk of becoming NEET but who do not face multiple and complex barriers to learning, so that support programmes can be targeted effectively. This includes using a mix of 'hard' attainment data and 'softer' behavioural or attitudinal data. It can also be useful to gather additional information from a range of staff that have direct knowledge of the identified students to further contextualise this data.

• Use NFER's interactive checklist of indicators to understand the reasons behind the behaviour of students so that you can design an appropriate programme of support: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/INDS02

• Identify appropriate methods of communicating to students why they have been identified to participate in the support programme, to help secure their involvement. Avoid situations where young people may feel stigmatised, singled out or perceive their selection as a sanction or punishment. Ensure that clarity about the reasons for the support programme is communicated to all parties.

Set clear aims and objectives for the support programme, so that there is a shared understanding about what your school wants to achieve. Consider how you would like to measure impact at the end of the programme so you can put processes in place.

TOP TIP 2:

Set aims and objectives

TOP TIP 3: Tailor your approach

- Gather evidence of the experiences of other schools tackling similar challenges, from published research and your own networks. Examples of evidence could include case studies within our research report (see **Useful resources** section for details).

- A 'one size fits all' approach may not be appropriate. Programmes should be flexible and where possible, tailored to individual pupils' interests and needs.

- Consider the abilities, needs and behaviours of the cohort of students identified. Think about whether they can be brought together successfully as a group, or is one-to-one support more appropriate? Provide additional support for those that require it and regularly review their learning and pastoral support needs.

Working in partnership

Oasis Academy Shirley Park is working with BT to offer employer mentoring to students, with the aim of improving students' self esteem and ultimately their attainment. Mentors meet with their student twice a term, to help the students realise how their interests and skills can steer them towards a fulfilling career path, and reach their full potential. BT provides mentors who are matched to students based on their career interests, and also trains mentors before they begin.

Gaining the right balance

The Winston Churchill School deliver an NVQ Level 2 beauty course in school which involves a mix of practical activity and assessments. Students learn practical skills and study anatomy and physiology, health and safety, client communication and numeracy and literacy. The design of the course is perceived to 'work' because it consists of around 80 per cent practical work, in contrast to a traditional 14-16 college course which has a higher theory content and more written work.

- Decide on the expertise and resources that are needed to deliver the support programme, to establish what can be provided 'in house' by the school and what might need to be sourced externally. It may be cost-effective to work in partnership with other schools/colleges, volunteers, or external providers where they can offer added value. If working in partnership establish clear lines of communication from the outset so that any issues can be identified at an early stage and appropriate remedial action taken.

- Ensure the support programme is compatible with wider school priorities. Where possible, there should be some focus on improving pupils' academic outcomes. It may also be useful to provide opportunities for students to gain formal accreditation through their participation in the programme.

- Consider the balance between practical and theoretical content and activities in relation to the abilities, needs and interests of the students and the aims of the programme. Offer sufficient variety so that students remain engaged.

- Give careful consideration to the timing and duration of the programme of support. Plan around the availability of students and staff, and ensure that there is sufficient time to cover what you aim to achieve.

- It is important to ensure that wherever possible students can still access core curriculum subjects and that they do not miss the same lessons on a regular basis.

TOP TIP 4: Implement and deliver

- Give consideration to where the activities will take place. It is important to link the learning environment to the types of activities being delivered. Where possible, include a mix of structured and informal settings. Delivering activities outside of the school environment can be particularly engaging.

- Ensure there is dedicated time for staff to plan, prepare, deliver and manage support programme activities. It is important to clarify the roles, remit and conduct of all staff in advance; particularly where the support programme involves external partners or volunteers.

- Where students come together to receive support, invest time to develop a cohesive group identity.

- Provide an introductory session so that students are fully informed about the programme, how it is structured, what it entails and how they will benefit.

- Develop positive and trusting relationships between staff and students by setting aside adequate time for the support programme as a whole and for what you want to carry out in each session.

Developing positive and trusting relationships

Rushden Academy is part of a consortium delivering a programme to help students remain engaged at school. The programme includes a range of activities including academic mentoring, targeted careers advice and tailored work experience. Staff believe that part of its success is due to the relationships that have developed between students and their mentors. While mentors are only given limited timetabled time to support mentees academically, they spend a substantial amount of time providing informal pastoral support. These relationships have enabled the mentors to identify more personal issues that are affecting the students, which may not have been addressed otherwise.

TOP TIP 5: Support continued engagement

Gaining 'buy-in' from students

Goole High School Academy for Excellence is delivering academic intervention support in English and mathematics. Some of the students had initial reservations about being selected for the programme. However, this attitude has changed over time as students have recognised the impact it is having. A Progress and Intervention Development Teacher at the school has kept comprehensive progress data and worked closely with staff and students to help them to see the benefits. They have also used interactive teaching tools (such as computer games) and offered incentives such as merit stickers to keep students engaged.

- Clearly communicate details of the value, purpose and remit of the support programme to key members of staff (including senior leaders) to ensure their buy-in and to help support and encourage students' attendance and engagement with the programme.

- Reiterate the aims of the programme to students on an ongoing basis to help them maintain their connection and engagement.

- Provide regular opportunities for dialogue with students to discuss progress and where they can improve. This can help to demonstrate to students how their continued engagement with the support programme will be beneficial to them.

- Devise an innovative system of incentives to encourage students' ongoing attendance and participation in the support programme. This may include reward systems, such as awarding merits from which students can get team points and prizes, offering free refreshments or the chance to attend an end of programme celebration event. Encourage parental support for the programme by developing sessions where parents/carers can be involved.

D. Impact

- Have a clear exit strategy at the end of the support programme to help maximise students' chances of successfully maintaining higher levels of engagement with education. This may include, for example, offering transition support when students return to mainstream lessons or move on to post-16 destinations.

- Give regular feedback throughout the support programme to students, key members of staff, and parents/carers so that they understand progress made and distance travelled. Give positive reinforcement through good news stories.

TOP TIP 6:
Develop a monitoring system

TOP TIP 7:
Evaluate success and measure outcomes and impact

- From the outset, ensure you have processes in place to measure the impact of the support programme in achieving its stated aims and meeting individuals' personal, social and educational objectives. This could include standardised testing or tracking student progress, and collecting feedback from staff, students and parents/carers on their perceptions of impact. For guidance on evaluation, see the NFER website's Research in Schools section which provides useful advice and guides for undertaking research in schools www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/research-in-schools .

- Review the support programme throughout the year by bringing together those involved in delivery to assess what worked well/less well and whether it offers value for money. Use this information in combination with the evaluation data to improve future programme planning to ensure the aims remain relevant and achievable.

Further Resources

This research forms part of NFER's Education to Employment research programme, which examines approaches that support young people to carve themselves a route to employment and therefore prevent them from becoming NEET. Further information can be found on the project website: www.nfer.ac.uk/IMPE

Useful resources:

- NFER case studies of school-based support programmes:
  www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IMPE02

- NFER's interactive checklist of indicators to understand the reasons behind the behaviour of students: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/INDS02

- Useful advice and guides for undertaking research in schools:
  www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/research-in-schools

● independent ● insights ● breadth ● connections ● outcomes