

## Aspiration interventions

Very low or no impact for moderate cost based on very limited evidence.

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months

### What is it?

Aspirations are about what children and young people hope to achieve for themselves in the future. Raising aspirations is often believed to be an effective way to motivate pupils to work harder so as to achieve the steps necessary for later success. A number of approaches to raising aspirations have been tried across three broad areas: 1. interventions that focus on parents and families; 2. interventions that focus on teaching practice; 3. out-of-school interventions or extra-curricular activities, sometimes involving peers and mentors. Approaches which seek to raise aspirations are very diverse and may seek to improve learners' self-esteem, self-efficacy or self-belief, or to develop motivation and engagement.

### How effective is it?

On average, interventions which aim to raise aspirations appear to have little to no positive impact on educational attainment. This may seem counter-intuitive – and it should be noted that the relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex and not fully understood – but there appear to be three main explanations.

First, evidence suggests that most young people actually have high aspirations, implying that much underachievement results not from low aspiration itself but from a gap between the aspirations that do exist and the knowledge and skills which are required to achieve them. As a result it may be more helpful to focus on raising attainment more directly in the first instance.

Second, where pupils do have lower aspirations it is not clear that any targeted interventions consistently succeed in raising their aspirations.

Third, where aspirations begin low and are successfully raised by an intervention, it is not clear that an improvement in learning necessarily follows. In programmes which do raise attainment, it is unclear whether learning gains can be credited for raising aspirations rather than the additional academic support or increased parental involvement.

### How secure is the evidence?

Generally the evidence base on aspiration is weak, and further, more rigorous studies are required, particularly focusing on pupil level rather than school level interventions. There are two systematic and high quality reviews of aspiration interventions, some of which include quantitative data. These indicate that the relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex, but that there is no evidence of a clear causal connection between learning, aspirations and attitudes to school. There are no **meta-analyses** of interventions to raise aspirations which report impact on attainment or learning. Most studies look at the relationship between aspirations and attainment and some find a link, particularly between low aspirations and low attainment. However this does not mean that raising aspirations will raise attainment. This lack of evidence does not mean that impact is not achievable, but should make schools cautious as to how they make any investment of time or resources in this area.

For full references click [here](#).

### What are the costs?

Costs vary widely, and are hard to estimate precisely. After school programmes typically cost about £5 to £10 per session, so a 20-week programme once per week would cost a maximum of £200 per pupil. Parental involvement programmes also vary but again are typically between £200 per child per year where the school covers the staffing costs and up to about £850 per child per year for family support involving a full-time support worker. Mentoring approaches in the USA have been estimated at \$900 per student per year or about £560. Overall the costs are estimated as moderate.

### What should I consider?

- The relationship between aspirations and attainment is not straightforward; in general, approaches to raise aspirations have not translated into increased learning.
- A key reason for this may be that most young people have high aspirations for themselves. As a result, it is more important to keep these on track by ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to progress towards them.
- The attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that surround aspirations in disadvantaged communities are diverse so generalisations should be avoided.
- Effective approaches almost always have a significant academic component, suggesting that raising aspirations in isolation will not be effective.
- Have you considered how you will monitor the impact on attainment of any interventions or approaches?

For more information, videos and supporting resources, please visit  
<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/aspiration/>

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