

POLICY BRIEFING

Collaborating for School Improvement

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KEY MESSAGES

- Collaboration within and between schools can strengthen the capacity of education systems to make more effective use of their untapped expertise.
- Carefully planned and implemented approaches bring about improvements in school performance – particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Local authorities can play an important part - facilitating collaboration and as guardians of improved educational outcomes for all children.
- Central government needs to foster collaboration between schools through greater readiness to trust local partners with the detailed implementation of policies.

SUMMARY

Government education policy has placed increased autonomy, accountability and competition between schools at the heart of its strategy to raise standards. Yet moving towards centrally-funded academies and free schools outside local authority control risks creating local fragmentation and greater disparities in attainment between schools and the communities they serve.

School collaboration will be a crucial element in supporting and improving schools in this environment. The 2008-2011 Greater Manchester Challenge and other school improvement initiatives studied by the Manchester Institute of Education highlight the part that collaboration can play in raising standards – especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

But this can only happen if policy makers allow practitioners the space to release the untapped expertise within classrooms. Local authorities should play a new part as the guardians of better outcomes for children, facilitating collaborative partnerships in education, in place of a “command and control” role.

BACKGROUND

The Government has encouraged more schools to become academies, independent of local authority control, while introducing free schools as ways of injecting new energy into improving education. Yet by emphasising autonomy and competition as the key to “driving up standards”, it has created new risks of institutional isolation, local fragmentation and widening disparities between the school experiences of more advantaged and less privileged learners.

Collaboration in this environment is challenging, given the need to surrender a degree of independent control in return for collective influence. Nevertheless, new forms of collaborative networks have begun to emerge, partly driven by the needs of free schools, academy trusts and chains, to find shared solutions to issues of teaching and learning, governance, recruitment and improvement.

Manchester Institute of Education is working with some of these new collaborative groups, and recently held an event to examine and learn from different models (www.manchester.ac.uk/educationdebates). Our research over the last decade also points to some of the key elements of self-improving school systems based on between-school collaboration.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

An evaluation of the Greater Manchester Challenge, between 2008 and 2011, provided specific evidence concerning the benefits of collaborative working across 1,150 schools, in ten local authority areas. The Challenge, which received £50m in government funding to raise school standards, was designed by Manchester Institute of Education experts based on their extensive research into ways of improving teaching and learning.

New working relationships established through the Challenge provided a way to mobilise some of the untapped potential within the school system. Schools were enabled to make better use of their own considerable expertise for self-improvement. Our work led us to conclude that successful collaboration can help to break down social barriers between schools as the basis for a “self-improving school system” (Ainscow, 2015).

By the end of the initiative, Greater Manchester primary school children were out-performing the national averages for standard tests. Greater Manchester secondary schools also improved faster than their counterparts nationally. The proportion of primary schools rated ‘outstanding’ in Ofsted inspections grew from 17 to 22 per cent, with an increase from 12 to 18 per cent among secondary schools. Encouragingly, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities had improved three times faster than equivalent schools across England. The collaborative approach developed during the Challenge has continued to be applied after it ended (Hutchings & Mansaray, 2013).

There is also evidence from other Manchester Institute of Education research – including involvement in the Coalition of Research Schools (Ainscow & others, 2015) - that collaboration between schools can not only transfer existing knowledge, but also generate ‘new’ knowledge to benefit schools in challenging circumstances. Greater collaboration *within* schools can, under appropriate conditions, serve to foster improvements (Ainscow & West 2006). But collaboration *between* differently performing schools can reduce polarisation within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who have been performing relatively poorly (Ainscow 2010; Ainscow & Howes 2007).

Our recent event drew on examples of emerging collaborations, revealing the different models that are emerging - from small and large multi-academy trusts to local-authority wide groupings filling what one headteacher described as ‘the vacuum’ left by the diminishing role of local authorities and the withdrawal of the national strategies. Questions each group had grappled with included whether, and how, staff expertise would be shared between schools; for example through loaning of subject experts to coach colleagues in other schools. Would there be reciprocal leadership visits, enabling mutually accountable head teachers to observe and provide feedback on each other's practice? What financial commitment would be required from the collaborating institutions; for example, regarding joint staff appointments?

Some examples of collaborative arrangements emerging in Greater Manchester schools are shown below

Learning from differences

The principal of a secondary academy described how she is working with colleagues in two other schools, using a process of peer review to help one another to strengthen leadership practices. The three heads have spent a morning in each of their schools, carrying out learning walks, looking at policy documents, and talking to staff and students. The schools are in different parts of Greater Manchester and serve diverse communities. What has become apparent is that exploring differences within a trusting partnership can encourage new thinking, whilst also sharing ideas.

Joint practice development

A group of primary schools use lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan. The goal is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their students. The focus is on a particular lesson, which is then used as the basis for gathering evidence on the quality of experience that students receive. Teachers from partner schools work together to design a lesson plan, which is then implemented by each colleague. Observations and post-lesson conferences are arranged to facilitate joint practice development.

Invisible students

Getting colleagues from another school to shadow groups of youngsters through part of a school day has led to important developments in a network of schools. Teachers in a secondary school were surprised to discover how some students go through the whole day without hearing an adult use their name. This stimulated discussions amongst the school partners about the subtle ways in which some young people come to feel marginalised. Staff development activities were then focused on making lessons more inclusive.

Taken together, our research and development work with schools suggests that key factors in effective collaboration include:

- *Long-term commitment* in terms of both leadership and resources, as well as a relationship of trust. New collaborations need to be carefully brokered, and coordinated and monitored sensitively.
- *Handling start-up issues well.* For example:

- All parties (including the local authority) need to be actively represented round the table
 - The purpose of collaboration and a framework for focusing on school improvement must to be specified from the outset.
 - Collaboration should be based on an inspiring statement of its shared vision and values.
 - Careful attention should be paid to leadership issues for the collaborative network and the ways they will be managed
 - Recognition that successful collaborative networks must be built on influence, persuasion and trust.
- *Using evidence as a catalyst.* Careful data analysis will help schools to identify priority areas for improvement and the staff resources needed to tackle them. It can also stimulate the development of new ways of working.
 - *Pursuing cross-border collaboration.* Collaborative working with schools in other local authority areas can provide an effective mechanism for encouraging innovation at different levels – although it may not prove effective in all policy areas.
 - *Supporting leadership.* Successful head teachers are often enthusiastic about taking on improvement roles with other schools, but their involvement needs to be encouraged, monitored and supported.
 - *Rethinking the role of local authorities.* Staff from local authorities have an important part to play in monitoring developments, identifying priorities for action and brokering collaboration, but this requires new thinking and practices.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our research shows how further potential exists within the education system for self-improvement. But this can only happen if local and national policy makers are prepared to allow practitioners the space to release the expertise and creativity within individual classrooms. The aim must be to “move knowledge around”. The best way to do this is through strengthening collaboration within schools and between schools.

Despite the potential for misunderstandings and tensions at a time of increasing school autonomy, it is difficult to conceive of a way forward that does not involve some form of local government co-ordination. Local authority staff will be best placed to monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals for their collaborative activities, while head teachers share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts within schools. Experience in Greater Manchester and elsewhere demonstrates how careful outside facilitation of collaborative school partnerships can increase their eventual chances of success.

By acting as brokers and coordinators, local authorities can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families; but not as custodians of the day-to-day activities in schools. Fundamental changes in thinking and practice are implied, with local authorities moving away from a 'command and control' role, towards one of enabling and facilitating the transfer of knowledge.

Action to foster effective collaboration between schools also holds implications for national policy makers. To harness the power of collaboration, they need to allow greater flexibility at local level. Practitioners must be allowed the necessary space to analyse their circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. For this to happen, central government must recognise that the details of how its policies are implemented locally will not be amenable to central regulation. Those who are best placed to understand local contexts should be trusted to act in the best interests of the children and young people, collaborating to pooling their knowledge and experience for the benefit of learners and teachers alike.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

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Useful Web Links

By Schools for Schools Network <http://www.byschoolsforschools.co.uk/>

Information about the Greater Manchester Challenge

- <http://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/research/impact/schools-rise-to-challenge/>
- <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/jan/25/school-improvement-city-challenge>