What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier

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Summary

Against a background of increased school autonomy, the NFER has published (April 2013) What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier by Helen Aston, Claire Easton, David Sims, Robert Smith, Fiona Walker, David Crossley, and Jonathan Crossley-Holland (the author of this briefing). This publication describes ‘what works’ in enabling school-led system improvement and the emerging role of ‘middle tier’ bodies: ‘middle tier’ bodies are defined as the diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement. This includes, among others, local authorities, school clusters, academy chains, Teaching School Alliances, education trusts and partnerships.

Overview

The NFER study finds that in high-performing countries the middle tier plays an important part in school improvement, nurturing and facilitating school-to-school support.

In the accompanying local authority case studies, schools were choosing to belong to a range of middle tier bodies which between them provide strategic and operational functions, and a local and national perspective. The local authorities were repositioning themselves to put schools in the lead, while securing delivery of their statutory duties through education partnerships. They were adopting a more adaptive style of leadership, and were making radical changes to enable school to school support. Many schools wanted LAs to continue to have a school improvement role albeit a very different one from the top-down model. National Teaching Schools were increasingly important and their work seemed to be enhanced by working with other middle tier bodies in the case-study areas.

The following challenges for local authorities and their schools were found:

- delineation of roles, reflecting lack of clarity about accountability and leadership
- finding capacity among senior leaders to take on a systems leadership role
- engaging all schools in looking beyond their own institution’s performance
- measuring and evaluating impact effectively in the rapidly changing landscape
- long-term funding and sustainability.
Briefing in full

The move towards a more autonomous school system, driven by the Government’s expansion of academies and free schools, emphasised the importance of school-to-school support. The 2010 Schools White Paper states that: “The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools, and the wider system should be designed so that our best schools and leaders can take on greater responsibility”. This involves driving improvement within the sector rather than relying on externally-driven interventions or top-down initiatives. The McKinsey Report How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better by Mourshed et al (2010) reviews school systems in developed countries and concludes that a middle tier is necessary to mediate between schools and central government and support and sustain school improvement.

The NFER study provides key pointers to leaders of ‘middle tier’ bodies on how to support school improvement and school-driven systems leadership: ‘middle tier’ bodies are defined as the diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement. This includes, among others, local authorities, school clusters, academy chains, Teaching School Alliances, education trusts and partnerships. Pointers are provided on developing a school-led school improvement system, supported by effective partnership working with a middle tier that builds relationships, shares knowledge, facilitates peer learning, and holds accountability.

School-to-school support and the role of the middle tier are described in five local authorities: Brighton and Hove, Hertfordshire, Wigan and York authorities and the Southend Education Trust (SET). These areas are doing something innovative and distinct from the traditional LA school improvement role and other areas may be able to learn from their experiences. In addition, a rapid review of the evidence on how some high-performing countries enable school-driven systems leadership is reported.

Academy chains were not part of the study as they have been researched elsewhere. See Related Briefings.

The key findings are:

- Schools were choosing to belong to a range of middle tier bod(ies) which between them provide strategic and operational functions, and a local and national perspective.
- **Strategic** partnerships generally:
  - brought together stakeholders
  - carried out long-term planning
  - established a framework for robust school to school support
  - commissioned appropriate support
  - held schools accountable for their performance.
- **Operational** networks focussed on brokerage and ensuring delivery to agreed aims as well as sometimes simply providing a supportive local environment for sharing experiences.
- Some middle tier bodies, such as the York Education Partnership and academy school chains, fulfil both strategic and operational functions; others do not. Other middle tier bodies, which originally carried out an operational function, such as the Wigan Consortia and National Teaching Schools, were becoming more strategic as they found their feet.
Local strategic partnerships, which embody a sense of place, were important to schools. Schools also looked to national middle tier bodies for inspiration and support.

Case-study LAs were repositioning themselves to put schools in the lead, while securing delivery of their statutory duties through education partnerships. They were adopting a more adaptive style of leadership, and were prepared to move radically to enable school to school support. Many schools wanted LAs to remain players in school improvement.

National Teaching Schools were increasingly important and their work seemed to be enhanced by working with other middle tier bodies in the case-study areas.

There have been some challenges, particularly around:
- delineation of roles, reflecting lack of clarity about accountability and leadership.
- finding capacity among senior leaders to take on a systems leadership role
- engaging all schools in looking beyond their own institution’s performance
- measuring and evaluating impact effectively in the rapidly changing landscape

While there is no one right way for the middle tier to work with schools to develop effective school-to-school support, there are some common features to the approaches we looked at, presented in the diagram below.

The case-study findings chimed with those from the rapid review. This found that in high-performing countries, the middle tier nurtures and facilitates school-to-school support through:

- practical work (maintaining a knowledge of the education system, and using data to support work on the ground)
- engaging with schools’ improvement work and enabling them to maximise the capacity of that work to benefit the system as a whole.
• brokering school-to-school collaboration, facilitating initial discussions and working with schools to help them as they respond to challenges or develop new approaches
• nurturing a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility for the system as a whole through effective system leadership
• helping to embed and sustain the work in individual schools and across networks
• disseminating effective practice
• being open to innovation and new ways of working.

Case Studies

County of Hertfordshire
Hertfordshire is a top quartile LA with 446 nursery, primary, special and PRU and 82 secondary schools. Three of the primary schools are Teaching Schools. The majority of secondary schools are academies and five are Teaching Schools. The LA has a strong relationship with its schools and has taken a radical approach to working with them. It is setting up Herts for Learning (HfL), a schools’ company, from September 2013 to lead school improvement across the locality and respond to the schools’ desire for a Hertfordshire ‘Club’. HfL will be 80 per cent owned by schools and 20 per cent by the LA. HfL will deliver services to the LA to meet its statutory duties through a service level agreement, while schools will purchase services. The LA has focused on providing:

• an agreed Framework for Monitoring, Challenge, Support and Intervention
• ‘The Hertfordshire Improvement Partner’ (HIP) performance assessment, support and action planning package, purchased by 93 per cent of primaries
• secondary school support facilitated and commissioned by a central team. Schools deliver approximately 70 per cent of this support.

City of York
York City has 65 maintained schools, with whom it has good relationships. It has responded to schools’ increased autonomy by creating the York Education Partnership (YEP) which is led by an independent chair chosen by headteachers. Its role is to:

• fulfil the functions of the Schools Forum (from which it grew originally)
• bring together the stakeholders and prevent fragmentation
• develop the education strategy for the City
• commission services through the School Improvement Steering Group which brings together the Executive Board of the Teaching School and the key school leaders from YEP. The LA improvement team is responsible to the Steering Group.

The LA has no votes on the YEP and, demonstrating ‘adaptive leadership’, describes its role as ‘servant leaders’. Its key role is to hold schools accountable. Yet, it has not moved to extensive use of school-to-school support, because its current services are strong.

City of Brighton and Hove
The City of Brighton and Hove combines affluence with significant areas of deprivation. It has 71 schools: 56 primary, six special and nine secondary schools. One primary is a Teaching School. School performance is steadily improving.
The City has set up a Learning Partnership to bring together school leaders. This is not currently planned to be a legal entity. Chaired by the principal of the Sixth Form College, its remit is to: set the City’s education vision and strategy; oversee its design and implementation; bring together key stakeholders; and respond to the desire for the local community to work together. Alongside this, working with the Learning Partnership, the LA seeks to provide:

- a challenge and support service to heads and governors.
- a strategic overview for school improvement, which meets statutory duties, engages all schools and coordinates services
- a performance categorisation for all primary schools

The City has invested heavily in school-led partnerships focussed on teaching and learning, including eight, mainly cross-phase, clusters; a partnership of nine secondary schools; and the Teaching School Alliance. Schools tend to belong to more than one partnership.

**Southend Education Trust**

Southend has 54 schools, including one National Teaching Secondary School, and standards overall compare well with national ones. It combines considerable affluence with high levels of deprivation. Three main local partners work with schools on the improvement agenda: the LA; the Teaching School Alliance; and the Southend Education Trust (SET), which evolved from an Education Action Zone and an Excellence Cluster.

The LA has focussed on: setting a strategic direction; data collection on school performance; and the traditional group of schools causing concern. Meanwhile, SET has pioneered local school led partnerships: encouraging strong school partnerships; promoting Southend as a learning community; encouraging innovation; and providing Heads with a strong voice in shaping services for schools that fall outside the LA focus. All Southend schools are SET members, and an elected group of them make up 75 per cent of the board of trustees. In 2011/12, SET had a turnover of £4.5m, funded by government grants. Schools now fund most of SET’s work since central funding decreased.

**Metropolitan Borough of Wigan**

Wigan Metropolitan Borough has 137 maintained schools. The LA has significantly distributed leadership, responsibility and resources to its school-led clusters. Wigan has achieved improved student outcomes; and authority was highly praised in the 2011-12 Ofsted Annual Report. The LA is committed to partnership working and has adapted the services it still provides to support the new model. These include data, governor services and intervention monitoring, although seconded headteachers now undertake the latter element in part. Developing a fit for purpose LA infrastructure to support partnerships was key. The main focus was on:

- categorisation of schools by the LA, based on their performance data
- contracting eight phase-specific consortia to deliver agreed improvement, supported by funding from the LA
- identifying consortia leads using NLE criteria and funding their involvement
- creating an Improvement Board run by the LA to hold the consortia to account.
The successful implementation of the model depended on a collaborative leadership style, good relationships and shared objectives, rather than executive power (whilst keeping in reserve judicious use of statutory and other powers where needed).

Conclusions
In order to support the development of a middle tier which enables school to school support, local authorities should:

**Develop a long-term vision and strategy for Teaching and Learning that moves beyond compliance and to which all partners sign up. It might include:**

- Prioritising changing the culture of LA staff and schools and developing a more adaptive leadership approach.
- Growing system capacity. Focus on growing the number of outstanding schools and system leaders, as well as supporting lower-performing schools to improve.
- Supporting Teaching Schools’ development and effectiveness, particularly around leadership development, teacher recruitment and induction. If there is more than one Teaching School you may want to encourage specialisation to increase effectiveness.
- Encouraging schools to ring fence funding for professional development, if necessary, by dropping less important activities to make space.

**Develop a framework for school-to-school support, covering:**

- An agreed data-based system for categorising all schools’ performance as a basis for planning support
- Recognition of schools’ autonomy to choose which middle tier bodies they join and the way that they develop for NLEs
- Funding to ensure capacity for leadership and intervention, produced by redeploying resources in schools and the LA
- A mechanism for holding the operational network and strategic partnership to account for delivery against agreed objectives.

**Embed evaluation and challenge**

- Encourage – and support capacity building in – individual schools to embed evaluation and challenge through a common approach to developing teaching and learning, including peer-to-peer support and challenge, use of data and CPD. Leadership teams are critical in modelling the right behaviours, which can then extend across schools.
- If necessary, have a mechanism for undertaking the challenge role if the schools feel they cannot.
Comment

The NFER study underlines three important trends in the development of school improvement:

- School Led System Change will dominate school improvement
- Middle Tiers are crucial and evolving
- The Importance of Moving Beyond Compliance

School Led System Change Will Dominate School Improvement

The likelihood is that school led system change will dominate school improvement over the next few years in England. It has had quite a long pedigree, championed first by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) through its ‘By Schools For Schools’ approach initially in the 1990s. This was enriched by the much respected London Challenge initiative (first Secondary Phase 2003-8) and by the Raising Achievement Transforming Learning (RATL) Programme involving 700 secondary schools nationally (2004-8), and led by David Crossley one of the contributors to the NFER study. It is however, the National College which has developed the concept of system leadership principally through the National leaders of education (NLE) programme and now national teaching schools.

There are four main reasons to support the conclusion that Schools Led System Change will be the way forward:

- Government policy;
- Increased school autonomy;
- Rapidly decreasing resources available to LAs; and
- It can be very effective.

The 2010 Schools White Paper spelt out the DfE commitment to school to school support. This was reinforced by the 2011/12 Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills which found that: “The best local authorities have reformed in anticipation of the changing education landscape by commissioning services that they can no longer provide, contracting out responsibilities to their more effective schools and promoting high standards and fair access to educational opportunities in their areas”. The main DfE investment in teacher training and in school improvement is in the National Teacher School network which now numbers nearly 400 and is planned to reach 500 by next year.

Increased school autonomy has been a key objective under all Governments for over 30 years.

The resource challenge for local authorities is that they are expected to promote high standards in all schools, not just those which are failing, at a time when resources are being cut sharply through a combination of academisation, reduced central government funding, and additional pressures from other services including child protection and safeguarding. There is little doubt that further cuts are coming after the next expenditure review. There are examples in the Case Studies, especially Wigan and Hertfordshire, where LAs have successfully squared this circle by passing the middle management role to schools, so enabling them to reduce their central costs significantly and still see standards rise. Two of the Case Studies Hertfordshire and Southend also demonstrate the ability to persuade schools to subscribe a school-run organisation to underpin services where relationships are strong.
What is striking in all the studies is the energy and creativity that has been released in schools, especially in the underrated primary sector where LAs have given them permission to lead. Many LAs are uneasy about whether there will be sufficient challenge in a school led system and this is holding them back. This is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges, but there are some pointers about how this concern can be met and about what the other key drivers are of an effective school led system. Wigan and Hertfordshire, in particular demonstrate that school to school support does not mean lower standards.

**Middle Tiers are crucial and evolving**

The evidence from the five local authority case studies is that a middle tier is a very necessary part of school improvement, confirming what McKinsey and others have concluded from international studies of the highest performing education systems internationally. The NFER study demonstrates that there are several kinds of middle tiers and that they are increasingly shaped by the wishes of schools rather than their local authorities. Middle tiers have operational and strategic functions, and some combine both. However, proactive LAs have a role in providing a strategic middle tier framework for school to school support: through brokering formal governance arrangements between schools; by enabling National Teaching Schools to become respected players; and by providing an increasingly robust framework for school networks which embeds challenge and support alongside traditional intervention strategies employing central staff. What was also apparent is the importance that schools attach to their locality whether it is Wigan, the Cities of Brighton and Hove and York, Southend or the much more dispersed County of Hertfordshire. Good LAs, as in these Case Studies, were seen as still playing a very important role in connecting schools to their wider area, both for practical reasons: to promote collaboration between schools and with other agencies, and to re-enforce the identity of the children, the school and the community.

This is a particularly difficult time for LAs, because some parts of government behave as though they do not exist and others as though they are central. So, for example, LAs barely feature in many Ministerial speeches on school improvement while HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw stresses the importance of their accountability for the achievements of schools in their areas. Ofsted has developed an inspection programme accordingly. This incoherence, which goes right up to Ministerial level, is unlikely to be resolved this side of the next general election in 2015. What is apparent is that the DfE are encouraging the development of alternative regional and sub-regional structures; Ofsted has set up regional bodies, part of whose role is to identify good practice and ensure connections with schools. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Nash, speaking at the Academies Show in London on 24 April 2013, promoted a model of regional hubs created by outstanding academies forming groups and sponsoring weaker schools. The implication being that there is a shift in Government policy away from large national academy chains. The driving force appears to be a business model which sees proximity as the key to delivering what is seen as the main driver for school improvement: school to school support. There is however little evidence that the Government recognises the importance of a sense of place and a link with local agencies including local government. Michael Gove in a speech to at the National College for Teaching and Leadership on 25 April 2013 identified the importance of what he called ‘Self-help’ school-led groups like the ‘Challenge Partnership’ “a group of over 70 schools distributed throughout England … the route to school improvement lies in a collaborative approach between schools”. One of the case studies, the Southend Educational Trust describes another. While there is no national register of them they seem to be increasingly important.
One of the great challenges facing the DfE which is now seeking to run an increasing number of schools from the centre is whether it is efficient or practical to do so, as the large high performing national academy chains, as a new kind of middle tier, look unlikely to provide the solution. The positive point for LAs is that it provides further space for them to demonstrate their value and where they are well regarded they seem to offer schools the preferred solution.

**The Importance of Moving Beyond Compliance**

Perhaps the biggest challenge of all is to enable schools to look beyond the need to comply with national requirements, inevitably policed by OFSTED. The irony is that Sir Michael Wilshaw would be the first to say that schools are about much more than exam and test factories, or the need to satisfy the latest national curricular requirements, but, as many people have observed, the pressures to comply are increasingly dominating school life with consequences for broader educational aims. The NFER report emphasises the importance of adopting a vision and strategy for teaching and learning to provide a common language and enhance teachers’ sense of professionalism (expressed through their sense of control of what they are doing) which will take account of national requirements but look beyond them and be informed by local needs.

**External Links**

NFER [What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier](http://www.nfer.ac.uk) (April 2013)


**Related briefings**

[Inspection of local authority school improvement functions – Ofsted consultation](http://lnk.ly) (February 2013)


[Outcomes of Ofsted school inspections](http://lnk.ly) (November 2012)


[Local authority role in education](http://lnk.ly) – ISOS final report for Ministerial Advisory Group (July 2012)


[Schools White Paper – The Importance of Teaching](http://lnk.ly) (November 2010)

See also: LGiU [Should We Shed the Middle Tier?](http://lnk.ly) (September 2012)

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