



Local authorities and school improvement: the use of statutory powers

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Aim of the study

Supporting school improvement has consistently been a key concern for the Government, policymakers and practitioners over the past decade. Local authorities are a central component of the school improvement process, and the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to examine the strategies which local authorities (LAs) have used to support and challenge their schools.

This study focused in particular on the use of statutory strategies by LAs, an area which has been the subject of renewed attention following the announcement in September 2008 of legislative proposals to strengthen the Government's role in intervening in schools causing concern.



On behalf of the LGA, NFER therefore investigated why, when and how LAs have (or have not) used the intervention powers that have been available to them, and the reasoning behind their approach. These powers include:

- requiring underperforming schools to work with another school, college or other named partner for the purpose of school improvement
- appointing additional governors
- applying to the Secretary of State to replace the entire governing body with an Interim Executive Board (IEB) and
- taking back the school's delegated budget.

Guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) suggests that these powers should be used by LAs when voluntary cooperation with schools has not been successful, sufficient improvement is not being made, or there are serious concerns about the management or safety of the school and its pupils.

Key findings

NFER conducted 12 qualitative case studies for this study, and interviewed LA officials, School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and headteachers within each LA. Based on these interviews, this study found that statutory powers have not been regularly used in the case-study LAs, and that they are predominantly used as a last resort. While most LA officials felt they have used (or would use) the statutory powers when necessary, NFER found that all stakeholders preferred the collaborative 'partnership' approach to school improvement, which they felt was working well and, in the vast majority of cases, achieving the improvements that were desired.

This is not to say that there were not occasions when the LAs needed to make strong interventions with individual schools. However, there was no evidence that the increased use of warning notices would greatly assist processes of school improvement. Indeed, such notices have the disadvantage that they can unnecessarily worsen relations between LAs and schools, and could be counter-productive where a school is in a gradual or fragile process of improvement. The power of 'requiring' partnerships with other schools or educational institutions was also seen as being inappropriate: voluntary, collaborative, persuasive, agreed partnerships were seen as being much more useful and appropriate than imposed partnerships.

Non-statutory strategies used by LAs to support school improvement

Based on the collaborative model of school improvement, LAs have developed a wide range of strategies for supporting the maintained schools in their area. These non-statutory strategies include:

- producing policy statements on school improvement and schools causing concern
- regular monitoring and reviewing of the performance of their schools
- use of multiple data sources to monitor school performance and progress
- categorisation of schools in terms of performance and need

- provision of differentiated levels of support
- use of an integrated, cross-sectoral policy approach
- use of SIPs to provide challenge to schools and feedback to LAs
- peer support networks for schools
- collaborative approach to school improvement.

These systems help to identify which schools are performing well or underperforming, and the different areas in which the schools can be supported to improve.

LA supplementary strategies for supporting schools causing concern

Schools causing concern receive additional attention and support, and LAs have developed further supplementary strategies to target schools that are causing concern. These include:

- contacting school to discuss the challenges faced, the assistance available and the consequences of non-improvement.
- preparing a flexible and tailored action plan to meet the school's needs
- providing additional expertise
- supporting and strengthening school leadership
- instituting close monitoring and regular review
- working in collaboration with schools.

What are the key features of successful non-statutory intervention?

LA officials, headteachers and SIPs emphasised that these non-statutory strategies had a beneficial impact on school improvement. The respondents indicated that the following were key characteristics of successful, non-statutory interventions:

- collaborative relationships between the LA and their schools
- clear roles and responsibilities agreed between the LA and the school leadership team
- contact-based and context-driven understanding of the needs of each school
- continuity of staffing in LA school improvement teams
- coordination and communication between the LA and the school leadership
- creating self-sufficiency, not dependency in school leadership teams
- challenging as well as supporting schools
- creating effective leaders by coaching and capacity building.

These features were identified in most of the LAs visited. Based on their success, it could be argued that these eight Cs represent 'best practice' in LA interventions to support school improvement.

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Recommendations from key stakeholders

The study found little appetite for additional statutory powers among LA officials, SIPs or head-teachers, except possibly in the areas of recruitment and the deployment of resources. Instead, the participants in the study pointed to the need for:

- better communications between local and central government
- improvements to the structure and status of the SIP system
- universal implementation of the collaboration model
- additional financial and human resources.

Measures such as these, it was suggested, would strengthen the successful strategies that LAs are using to further school improvement. Moreover, stakeholders emphasised that national policies in this area should take due account of the predominant collaborative models that LAs use, and that all stakeholders should be fully consulted about any proposed changes in policy.

Further information

To access the full report visit: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/other-publications/downloadable-reports/local-authorities-and-school-improvement-the-use-of-statutory-powers.cfm.

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