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Reforming the school support system in Wales: evidence from high-performing systems

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1 Context

Raising standards in education is at the heart of education policy in Wales. The Welsh Government's 20-point Action Plan, announced in 2011, and the subsequent *Improving Schools* (Welsh Government, 2012) document, outlined a range of measures which have been or are being introduced with the aim of delivering significant improvement in Wales' performance in GCSEs and A levels and in the PISA international assessment. The overarching intention is to enable all pupils to fulfil their potential with a specific focus on literary, numeracy, and reducing the impact of socio-economic deprivation on attainment.

The *Improving Schools* paper includes specific references to the need to ensure that schools are provided with appropriate challenge and support. Its tenor echoes many of the themes of *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* report (Welsh Government. Task and Finish Group, 2011) which highlighted weaknesses in the way this specific role has been undertaken in the past.

In 2012 the NFER undertook a rapid evidence review (Smith *et al.*, 2012), focusing on how schools are supported in high-performing education systems. In particular, the aim was to identify the characteristics of effective support and the role played by the 'middle' or 'mediating' tier, defined as being the entity which lies between the level of national government and individual schools. The review focused on the way schools are supported to maintain and improve standards and did not, for example, address issues such as how school places are organised in successful systems, arrangements for safeguarding, or how the needs of vulnerable children are met. The latter, of course, also impact directly on the standards agenda.

Since the publication of the NFER's rapid review, further impetus to the discussion of the way the education system in Wales needs to develop has been provided by *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013), a review undertaken by Robert Hill on behalf of the Welsh Government.

This paper considers the issues identified in the NFER's rapid review from the Welsh perspective, in order to inform discussions in local authorities and, more broadly, about the future direction of travel for the education system in Wales. It examines the essential ingredients that will enable schools to contribute their capacity and expertise to a system that relies on them to drive systemic improvement. It acknowledges that, in the context of 22 local authorities, it will be increasingly difficult for individual councils to retain responsibility for school improvement, and that this may require not only joint working, but also the separation of education services from the other functions of local education authorities. Local authorities may therefore need to identify a range of core functions where education policies genuinely need to be formed from a local perspective.

2 The evidence considered

The international evidence suggests that the most effective education systems have some form of middle tier that is distinct from national or state-level government.[1] This was emphasised by Mourshed *et al.,* (2010) who argued forcefully that a middle tier is necessary both to support and also to sustain school improvement. Structures used in the countries examined in the rapid review vary and include local authorities or municipalities, networks of schools, federations of schools, schools associated with national organisations, or national organisations of schools. These differ in how they are structured and the rapid review found that no one model was more effective than another. However, middle tiers in high-performing countries display common attributes which influence their working practices. These can be summarised as:

- a collaborative culture, in which schools have a shared collective moral purpose

- an emphasis on powerful professional relationships based on interdependence and trust

- the use of distributed leadership, harnessing expertise across the system

- facilitation by the middle tier coupled with a willingness to engage on the part of schools

- a willingness to harness innovation

- a shared commitment to system-wide improvement.

High-performing systems have rejected prescriptive, top-down means of working (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009). Instead they have moved towards school-led approaches, based on networks that are designed to harness the professional expertise which exists across the system. In these systems, schools are supported to engage with each other, in a culture of mutual improvement, and are outward-facing rather than focused predominantly on their own needs (Pont *et al.*, 2008; Harris, 2010). At the same time, high-performing systems have not confined themselves to approaches where 'successful' schools are called to demonstrate effective practice. Instead they have found ways of working that make use of the capacity and knowledge of those working in all schools – whether they are 'providing' or 'receiving' evidence on effective practice.

In this context the role of the middle tier is increasingly defined as that of a commissioner and broker. Aston *et al.,* (2013) succinctly summarise it in the following terms:

- *developing 'a long-term vision and strategy for Teaching and Learning that moves beyond compliance and to which all partners sign up', focusing on changing the culture and growing system capacity, for example work to support*

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[1] The search focused on the following specific countries/jurisdictions: Alberta, Ontario, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Saxony, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Poland, Long Beach and Boston).

initial and on-going continuous professional development and to foster leadership development

- *developing 'a framework for school-to-school support' with agreed protocols for assessing and planning support, data analysis and interpretation, providing a robust evidence base that identifies needs and areas of strength, recognising that schools will need to obtain support from a range of different entities, and that funding may have to be redeployed to ensure capacity*

- *work to 'embed evaluation and challenge', creating a 'common approach to developing teaching and learning', nurturing peer-to-peer support and challenge, and modelling behaviours* (p. 7).

In the high-performing systems examined, such work was based on robust dialogue between the middle tier and schools that was open, based on mutual respect and trust, and which balanced sympathy and challenge.

At the same time, effective middle tiers are characterised by a number of common features which were identified by Smith *et al.*, 2012 which can be summarised as follows:

- They need capacity which is sufficient for them to provide sustained intervention, possibly for prolonged periods.

- They need to have a broad knowledge of the school system and the challenges confronting the area they serve.

- They need to be able to relate national aims and priorities to the local context.

- They need to be in position to have robust conversations with schools that are open and honest, that identify schools (or elements within schools) that are underperforming, and enable issues to be understood and challenged, in a culture in which schools are confident enough to receive vigorous challenge.

- They need to be in a position to intervene if necessary.

- They work best where they enable work on the ground to be led by individuals who enjoy credibility among practitioners.

- They need to promote activities that foster collaboration, encourage innovation and energise practice on the ground.

Although effective leadership at school level is crucial and underpins successful work to raise standards, the high-performing systems that were examined recognised that expertise was not confined to school leaders. Distributed leadership was promoted as a key element in the way successful schools and systems work, because it harnesses the potential, expertise and experience within schools, in particular among classroom practitioners. Releasing that potential for the benefit of the system as a whole was, therefore, an important ingredient in effective system leadership.

The range of networks in which schools in the countries examined engage is wide and usually falls into one of two categories: at the first level, core or base networks which comprise clusters or consortia of schools working collaboratively and, at the

second, strategic networks which have a broader perspective, usually across a wider geographic area, akin to a local authority.

The type of networks include:

- locality clusters
- school clusters
- subject-based clusters
- phase-based clusters
- schools that are part of specific initiatives.

The work in which they are involved is wide-ranging and includes:

- shadowing good practice
- faculty reviews
- cross-phase projects
- moderation activities and implementing common quality assurance processes
- reviews of pupils' performance data
- joint practice development, moving away from 'show and tell' towards activities such as mentoring and coaching
- self-evaluation activities.

While schools enjoy some freedom to choose with whom to work, it is clear that in most high-performing systems the middle tier plays a role in brokering, facilitating and moderating such arrangements, not least by advising schools where expertise rests and ensuring that their choice of partners is appropriate. A strong focus, therefore, is placed on addressing issues related to the practical realities confronting schools, on maximising the use of the data available to them, and on allowing practitioners the freedom to respond to their needs.

3 Implications for school improvement in Wales

In this paper, we consider the evidence summarised above from the standpoint of the challenges currently facing the education system in Wales. These issues have been highlighted in successive Estyn reports and in formal reviews of Wales' performance, including *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government. Task and Finish Group, 2011) and in *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013).

3.1 The case for change

This body of evidence concludes that Wales' performance compares unfavourably with other UK countries at both GCSE and A level, reinforcing the conclusions of the disappointing PISA results in 2009. Moreover, despite the fact that combating poverty and its effects is at the heart of public policy in Wales, the impact of economic disadvantage on educational performance remains stark.

Specific concerns, for example regarding the implementation of the changes recommended by the Daugherty review of assessment arrangements in Wales, were highlighted by *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government. Task and Finish Group, 2011). The Task and Finish Group also contributed to subsequent reforms, including the introduction of the national reading and numeracy tests and the overarching National Literacy and Numeracy Framework. *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* also referred to broader issues relating to school leadership, the failure to develop effective school-to-school support, and weaknesses in the way education services operate. The report's conclusions that the system was not sustainable were echoed forcefully in *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013).

Both reports did, however, acknowledge some promising signs. For example, the Welsh Government provides support for the implementation of specific programmes (such as the Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LNP)), and has developed on-line work such as Hwb. As part of that stratgy, the Welsh Government is evolving a way of working based on Outstanding Teachers of Literacy and Outstanding Teachers of Numeracy as part of that strategy. At the same time, schools in Wales are involved in a number of different practitioner-led networks (Professional Learning Communities, clusters, families of schools, post-16 consortia etc.) which fulfil important roles in raising standards through professional collaboration. Nevertheless, both *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* and *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* expressed concern at the way in which schools are supported, referring to inconsistencies in the support provided and lack of rigour in the system.

The reports emphasise the importance of supporting work on the ground by nurturing excellence and evolving a shared responsibility for all learners across the school

system. *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* concluded that executive headship and school-to-school support is underdeveloped in Wales and that schools need to take greater responsibility for the system as a whole. At the same time, both the 2011 and 2013 reports emphasise the fundamental importance of initial and on-going professional development that nurtures leadership at different levels in the system. This is not confined to school leaders (important though that role is), but relates to the role of leadership more generally within schools (akin to the distributed leadership identified in the rapid review).

In assessing the way forward, *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* concluded that, while the current system is unsustainable, a change in the number of local education authorities in Wales is unlikely to take place in the short term. It therefore made a case for reducing the number of education services and for significant reform of the regional consortia if they are to continue to be used to deliver certain services. The report also concluded that Wales needs to develop an approach based on 'hard' federations of schools which would take increasing responsibility and enjoy significant freedom to control budgets, staffing and the curriculum.

3.2 Foundations for change?

Although *The Structure of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government. Task and Finish Group, 2011) and *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013) both make a strong case for change in the way education services are delivered in Wales, it is clear that the education system displays many positive characteristics, which resonate with important aspects of the culture of collaboration and partnership which have been identified in high-performing systems. The sense of shared responsibility and commitment to system-wide improvement are evident in Wales where league tables have been removed, where collaboration between providers (not least in the post-16 sphere) is encouraged vigorously, and where successive reviews of the way public services operate have emphasised citizen-based rather than market-orientated models of delivery.

Cooperation and collaboration, rather than competition, have been the cornerstones of developments in Welsh education, such as the 14-19 Learning Pathways, and the collaborative ethos has featured prominently in specific approaches such as the tri-level reform model and the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF). Such work has been promoted strongly by the Welsh Government, drawing on international evidence. Similarly, while school autonomy has evolved in Wales since the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the late 1980s, there remains a strong sense of unity and a collective spirit within the system which stands in sharp contrast to the more fragmented pattern evident, for example, in England. These attributes mean that the Welsh system is, in many ways, well placed to move forward on the basis of a school-driven system of improvement; the challenge is to harness thispotential for the benefit of all learners.

3.3 A framework for school-to-school support

If Wales is to move to the kind of school-led – and middle-tier facilitated - model of improvement common in the high-performing systems examined by Smith *et al.*, (2012), issues concerning resources, capacity, and operational practices will need to be addressed. Some of the specific areas which have been identified from practice outside Wales are outlined below.

- **Resources**: Schools need to engage in activities to support each other in the context of a difficult financial climate when resources are under pressure. Issues such as the extent to which schools would be prepared to pool budgets and devote resources for the purposes of mutual support need to be addressed before such models can be expected to work. This may be addressed by the type of Federations envisaged in *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013). However, school leaders and governing bodies will need to be convinced of the need for them, and of the need to take responsibility for the system as a whole. They will also need to be persuaded that such work can benefit all participating schools.

- **Capacity**: Schools need the capacity to engage in improvement networks and to know that the demands of this work will not impact negatively on standards in any participating school. Because of the nature of school-led models, practitioners may have to engage in work outside their own classroom, often over a sustained period of time. It is therefore important that there is enough flexibility within the arrangements to enable school-to-school work in which staff are deployed away from their own institutions, to be sustained for prolonged periods, and there need to be agreed exit strategies.

- **Engagement**: The middle tier needs to be in a position to ensure that schools engage with the school-led model. This means ensuring that successful schools take responsibility for the wellbeing of the system as a whole and that those needing support are prepared to work with others. This has to be part of a culture which recognises that the schools providing support can benefit from the experience. The system should therefore avoid 'show and tell' approaches in order to enable the professional expertise of all practitioners to be harnessed. At the same time, the robust mechanisms used to identify weaknesses and areas for development need to be sufficiently sophisticated to capture instances where, for example, schools that are apparently performing well should be doing much better ('coasting' schools).

- **A robust system**: The middle tier needs sufficient authority to challenge schools and address issues where school-led approaches to improvement fail to lead to the desired outcomes. For example, where schools do not engage or reject support, or conversely where the kind of work that another school might advocate is clearly inappropriate. In the high-performing systems that were examined,

middle tiers were able to intervene under such circumstances and this was an important requirement of effective school-driven systems.

- **Accountability**: Protocols are needed to support robust professional relationships. For example, the extent to which practitioners are held accountable for performance when school-led improvement methods are used needs to be clear.

- **Monitoring and evaluation**: This needs to be embedded in school-led activities, with effective use of data that can be used to plan support and continuing professional development (CPD), and where effective practice is shared and disseminated widely.

3.4 Reappraising the role of the local authority

Reform of the way schools are supported in Wales is not something that can await the reorganisation of local education authorities (or a more widespread reorganisation of Wales' 22 local authorities). Consequently, local education authorities need to recognise the urgent case for change and for them to bring about a rapid move to new ways of working, based on the operational practices which underpin effective systems. Such changes would require local authorities and regional consortia to adapt to a new culture in which school-based, practitioner-driven work becomes embedded as the means of raising standards. The challenge is not necessarily to replicate structures used elsewhere, but to use the knowledge gained from other countries to develop the most effective school-led and middle tier facilitated improvement system for Walesas it is not clear how a sudden move to a fragmented system of networks would benefit Wales.

This may mean, as is implicit in *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2013), separating the work of local education authorities (possibly defined in terms of responsibility for the number of schools, admissions etc.) from that of education services (defined possibly in terms of school improvement and supporting work in classrooms). Such a change would not be without its challenges, not least because such separation would run contrary to the model of an effective middle tier that is responsible for the three areas of ensuring the supply of school places, tackling underperformance and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable learners, identified by Parish *et al.*, (2012). Instead, local authorities would have to entrust responsibility for work to promote school standards to a separate education service (which itself depended on school-led ways of working). This would raise fundamental and uncomfortable questions about accountability and the decision-making process. For example, issues arise around the extent to which directors of education and lead members retain a responsibility for standards, how they should be scrutinised, and at what point a local authority has to accept that an education service cannot enable a school to improve and save it from closure. However, given the context of the 22 local authorities in Wales, such difficult issues may be inevitable.

Change also requires local authorities to consider how resources can be freed to allow the development of effective school-led approaches, recognising ,as is noted

above, that such systems cannot operate on an ad-hoc, goodwill basis. Local education authorities will need to be clear about what elements of their work require a distinct tailored approach and which ones (for example back-office functions) could be delivered more cost-effectively by some form of collaborative arrangement. Such reform calls for a bold approach on the part of Wales' 22 local authorities, which are likely to find themselves performing fewer but essential strategic functions.

Fundamentally, however, proposals for reform of the structures by which schools are supported need to be judged from the standpoint of the extent to which they will build capacity and lead to sustained, system-wide changes in the way practitioners take the lead to improve the quality of education. Such developments would, it can be argued, enable Wales to harness the capacity of its practitioners and profit from the cultural factors that promote the notion of a shared responsibility for all learners and a collaborative approach that can lead to genuine system-wide improvement.

4 A model for Wales?

School-driven systems are increasingly the norm in high-performing education systems. At their best they enable practitioners at all levels in schools to share their expertise and support each other to succeed. They draw on the capacity of the system and give those with credibility as practitioners a platform on which to work in ways which harness their recent classroom experience. The evidence base is not sufficient to allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which school-driven systems are themselves responsible for rapid improvements in literacy and numeracy standards or whether they have reduced the impact of poverty on educational performance – both key priorities for the Welsh Government. What can be concluded, however, is that such progress was evident where school-driven approaches were adopted (for example in parts of urban United States and in Ontario, Canada).

More contextual information would be required to examine the impact of factors such as the curriculum and assessment arrangements, funding systems and funding levels, and the impact of social and cultural factors on those systems' performance before claims about the efficacy of school-driven improvement systems can be verified. However, a move to school autonomy, where schools take far greater responsibility for driving their own improvement is a common theme across these successful high-performing systems. Moreover, in each case, the role of the middle tier is based on their competence and expertise not by their position within a bureaucratic structure or their formal role within an external inspection regime or external network' (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009, p. 238). This calls for a system that is:

- **Responsive**: capable of providing support quickly and before problems become embedded.

- **Collegiate**: recognising that it must be more than a successful school partnering a school facing challenges and that all institutions benefit from mutual support.

- **Sustained**: enabling improvement to become embedded and recognising the need for cultural change rather than superficial, temporary improvement.

- **Learner-focused:** drawing on the expertise of school practitioners to respond to learner needs rather than seeking quick fixes.

- **Informed**: drawing upon research which collects, analyses and disseminates effective practice.

It is questionable whether the kind of centralised, local authority managed support systems which evolved in the last quarter of the twentieth century in Wales (reliant on expert practitioners taken out of the classroom and used to provide support as considered necessary by the LA) can be sustained, given the structure of 22 local education authorities and the financial constraints under which they work. Moreover, it is likely that schools in Wales will not be able to deliver the kind of significant

system-wide progress with which they have been charged, while local authorities spend time developing a new centralised model. Facilitating a school-driven model will certainly not be without challenges but may be a way of instigating the kind of sustained impetus that schools in Wales need as a matter of urgency.

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