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

Report on the research findings from the Brighton and Hove Local Authority case study

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1 Aims and purposes of the case study

The *What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier* study, carried out in partnership with NFER, aims to investigate how schools are accessing services and support for school improvement, with a focus on school-to-school support. As part of this work, NFER undertook a rapid review of the evidence on how high-performing countries enable school-driven systems leadership (*Smith et al.* 2012). The review was unable to identify one single method of enabling school-driven system leadership, however the successful systems all shared some common features and each had some form of middle tier that was distinct from national government. Therefore our study also examines the role that this emerging middle tier plays, or needs to play, in school improvement.

The team has also drawn on important 'think pieces' such as Hargreaves (2012), *A Self-Improving System: Towards Maturity*. There are five case study areas: Brighton and Hove, Hertfordshire, Wigan, York and Southend. The Southend case study was commissioned by the Southend Educational Trust, while the others were commissioned by their local authorities (LAs). Brighton and Hove also requested that their case study provides recommendations to guide the next stage of reform, and these are set out in the final section.

2 Research base

The interviewee list was assembled by Brighton and Hove LA to represent a cross-section of views. It included representatives from the LA, the teaching school, headteachers from all sectors who have been closely involved in school-to-school support, and LA officers. The interviews were conducted following a standard format during a day visit. In addition, a considerable amount of background information was provided. The opportunity has been taken to draw on the other four case studies as well as the research review. Although the report is based on a fairly narrow sample, there was a great deal of consistency in the emerging messages.

3   The Brighton and Hove context

Brighton and Hove LA recognises that school-to-school support is going to be the main engine for driving school improvement over the next few years. In this, they are responding to the two challenges set out in the DfE White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010, section 5.7 and p.13), which made clear that LAs have a responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient high-quality schools and signalled the increasing importance of using outstanding schools to undertake this work. The city of Brighton and Hove has 36 maintained primary schools, two nursery schools, nine infant schools, eight junior schools, one primary free school, six special schools and nine secondary schools, including two academies (part of the Aldridge Foundation) and one Church of England secondary free school in planning. Sixteen of the primary phase schools, three of the special schools and one secondary school are rated as outstanding. The three main partners to support school improvement are the LA, the teaching school alliance (TSA) and the strategic City Learning Partnership.

The LA

There are a range of school partnerships in Brighton and Hove, including the eight cluster partnerships, the secondary schools partnership, the TSA and the City Learning Partnership. They sit alongside, and to some extent complement, the other main school improvement strands being pursued. The LA's overall role was summarised in interview as being: 'To provide a strategic overview for school improvement for the city, to meet their statutory duties, to engage all schools in improvement and co-ordinate the range of services to help make them accessible to schools.'

The LA Standards and Achievement Team is responsible for leading the following programmes:

1. The School Partnership Adviser three-day programme, which is purchased by schools and provides challenge and support for all primary schools, including a clear categorisation of schools' performance. There is a proposal to extend the monitoring visits to secondary schools – these lapsed when School Improvement Partners (SIPs) became non-mandatory.
2. Identification of schools causing concern. Currently, out of 61 schools in Brighton and Hove, there is one school in special measures, one with a notice to improve, two below floor targets and six at risk. Brokering and commissioning is available from the TSA and from the partnerships in Table 1 that can offer support.
3. Providing school improvement and support services that schools can purchase.
4. Promoting funding, advice, school-to-school support and the good-to-outstanding agenda, as well as tackling issues of concern. Brighton and Hove has a rich pattern of school-to-school support arrangements, with different origins and at different stages of development.

School-to-school support networks

In most areas of the country, school-to-school support is becoming a major means of improvement because:

- it is one of the few areas being advocated and resourced by the DfE
- LAs have insufficient resources to maintain their own teams
- there is growing evidence of its effectiveness, beginning with the use of executive headteachers.

From the five case studies, it is clear that there are broadly two kinds of school-to-school support networks present in the areas studied: **base or core networks** and **strategic networks**. Schools will often choose to belong to more than one base or core network to meet all their needs. Typically these might comprise:

- a local network, perhaps for the family of schools
- a network focussed on teaching and learning
- a TSA.

They also see being part of a strategic network as critical.

Brighton and Hove core and strategic networks

The **core or base networks** are the forum for potentially intensive school-to-school support work, usually consisting of up to 12 schools. They correspond to Hargreaves' potential focus for 'deep' inter-school partnerships (Hargreaves, 2012). Brighton and Hove has a number of these networks, which include local clusters, cross-city partnerships (including one for all secondary schools) and the TSA. Another example would be the LA-led executive headship arrangements.

Strategic partnerships seek to set a vision and strategy for teaching, learning and quality assurance that:

- includes a framework for core or base groups
- embodies the sense of place
- brokers and coordinates
- provides services for schools (usually for them to purchase)
- promotes cross-area and cross-border learning.

Increasingly, as in three of our five case study areas (Brighton and Hove, Wigan and York), these partnerships are school-led but involve the LA in an enabling role.

Brighton and Hove's response is the **City Learning Partnership**, chaired by the Principal of Brighton and Hove Sixth Form College. It brings together all the key education partners for the city, including the two universities. Each of the main inter-school partnerships are represented, including the head of the Brighton and Hove TSA, as are the chairs of the primary and secondary headteacher partnerships and governors. Its vision statement is: 'To achieve the best possible outcomes for all learners in Brighton and Hove through working in partnership.' The strategic board of the partnership will be expected to contribute to the setting of educational policy in the city, including the new strategy, and for devising the strategy and overseeing the drawing up and communication of operational plans to school-

to-school partnerships. The City Learning Partnership in its early stages, focused on identifying what all the partners have to contribute. This is clearly seen as an important body, looking upwards to the city's broader strategic partnerships. It is evident that a number of schools will look to this body to bring greater transparency, predictability and equity to the allocation of discretionary funding.

Teaching school alliance

There is currently one teaching school in Brighton and Hove: Westdene Primary Teaching School. The LA, according to both its own staff and the teaching school, liaises closely with Westdene, assisting with identifying need, commissioning services and working together on leadership and succession planning.

The six key roles of a teaching school are defined in the System Leadership Prospectus (2012), produced by the National College for Teaching and Leadership as:

- initial teacher training (ITT)
- support for School Direct (teachers being trained in other schools)
- continuing professional development (CPD)
- school-to-school support
- support for leadership and succession planning
- research and development.

The prospectus makes clear that the teaching school should focus on prevention rather than intervention to tackle failure.

Westdene Primary Teaching School, based on an interview with the deputy headteacher, is clearly very energised by the role some 18 months into it, and is developing action in all six areas identified by the National College.

In addition, each national teaching school is required to have a close relationship with a group of up to 40 schools through a TSA. The teaching school is expected to be able to demonstrate improvement from the baseline for these schools. The TSA group in Brighton and Hove currently comprises 18 schools and, from the interview with the deputy headteacher, it appears that the relationship, as would be expected, is at an early stage. It seems to be one of service provider rather than yet demonstrating the deeper relationships that Hargreaves (2012) describes as being characteristic of a 'mature' partnership (see Annex 1).

4   Emerging impact

This assessment of emerging impact focuses on the LA's work in enabling school-to-school support but it will refer to the emerging role of the teaching schools, because this has been the study's focus and has driven most of the school-to-school support work.

The six key drivers of networks, drawn from national and international research and highlighted by the five case studies, have been used to guide the interview questions and analyse the answers. They are:

1. Purpose
2. Relationships
3. Leadership (as reflected in collective sense of moral purpose and vision and strategy)
4. Workforce (joint professional development (JPD))
5. Systems (service access and underpinning of school-to-school support)
6. Evaluation and challenge (quality assurance of inputs and challenge and support of practice)

Purpose

There were issues about the teaching and learning focus of some of the partnerships. Many originated from supporting extended schools and were at different stages in moving on from that role. One purpose of the LA review of partnerships was to assist in that process. Interviewees stated that the school-to-school support work was either commissioned by the LA as part of their action to tackle failing schools, or funding was allocated via a bidding process between the LA and the school partnerships.

Relationships

Interviewees were clearly keen to support their clusters and the new City Learning Partnership, and all expressed a commitment to the city. It was evident that headteachers, teachers, governors and LA staff in Brighton and Hove know each other well. This is partly because the LA is small and partly because many headteachers have worked in the city for a long time and 'everyone knows each other'. However, this is 'not so good for the newcomers', as one headteacher said. There seemed to be a strong collective sense of Brighton and Hove as a place to which schools belonged, even if their focus was on their local partnership. The number of headteachers who referred to the Learning Partnership as a way of strengthening this collective sense was striking.

Schools that chose not to engage in any partnerships were a key concern of those headteachers interviewed. This was a concern amongst LA officers too, but they felt the majority who did not engage were classed as schools causing concern, and were therefore already being addressed.

Leadership

Collective moral purpose

'Moral purpose' in the context of school-to-school support is usually defined as schools recognising that they have a duty to all the children in an area, not just to their own. However, many interviewees felt that the acid test of this sense of moral purpose was whether a headteacher and governors would release a member of staff to help another

school. There was a clear view from headteachers and system leaders that this practice was patchy. But it was encouraging that there were plenty of examples of headteachers who were able to make it work. One LA officer cautioned that school-to-school support was very time consuming for staff, 'who would often say 'no' to taking part in end-on projects'.

Vision and strategy

The vision and strategy for school improvement is captured in the document *School Improvement Strategy 2008-13*, by the Brighton and Hove Children's Trust (2008). This focuses, as most such strategies do, on the need to improve key stage results – key stage 4 has been a particular challenge for Brighton and Hove, although results have improved significantly in recent years. In addition, like other councils taking the lead from the DfE, 'closing the gap' has been a particular focus. It is noticeable that 'tackling inequality' is the number one priority for the city council's 2011-12 *Corporate Plan* (Brighton and Hove City Council, 2011). Brighton and Hove LA has been quicker than many to appreciate the critical role of school-to-school support and make it a key plank of their strategy for school improvement. In addition – and this reflected the reported personal views of the previous Director of Children's Services, Terry Parkin – there has also been a particular focus on ensuring teaching in schools is rated 80 per cent good or outstanding. The city is about to engage its partners in reviewing the vision and strategy for school improvement.

Workforce

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p.98) identify the difficulties that systems have found in sharing good practice. They define the critical stage in workforce development as moving beyond 'show and tell' to support for the implementation and development of that best practice. Hargreaves (2012, p.8) describes this as 'joint practice development' (JPD). This is achieved through mentoring, coaching and peer-to-peer reflection and feedback in the implementing school. It is clear that there were a number of high-quality examples of JPD in Brighton and Hove – for example, the 'Leadership and Learning Partnership' cross-phase approach to 'achieving pedagogical continuity' in teaching, in years six and seven. There are other partnerships which are moving towards JPD, for example as shown in the Teaching and Learning strand of the Brighton and Hove Secondary Heads Raising Achievement plan 2012-13.

Systems

The LA and the partnerships have both given considerable thought to ways of strengthening school-to-school support in Brighton and Hove. The LA has done four key things:

- used £40,000 per annum of their central funding to support partnerships' plans and hold them to account
- carried out a review of partnership implementation of LA-funded programmes to identify best practice
- provided SIP/Ofsted training for headteachers to strengthen their capacity for challenge and support from their colleagues
- clarified the roles of the LA in relation to the TSA, academy school and Local Leaders of Education (LLE).

It was also apparent that the partnerships themselves are developing good systems. The Westdene Teaching School Alliance has a very clear and business-like system for contracting services and the Hove Partnership bid for LA funding, for a twelve-week 'Quality First' teaching programme for teachers who want to go from good to outstanding, showed a good understanding of the systems needed to underpin the programme.

What was less in evidence were quality assurance systems covering the inputs to school partnerships, in particular the approach to selecting leaders and teachers providing support, and the time allocated to them and how they were held to account. This was also the case in the TSA.

Evaluation and challenge

Hargreaves (2012, p.20) has observed that embedding evaluation and challenge in school-to-school partnerships is perhaps the biggest challenge of all. This is clearly an issue in Brighton and Hove (as it is everywhere), as all the interviewees attested. The LA and headteachers expressed concerns about other headteachers who were reluctant to engage in a dialogue. Concerns were also expressed over the need for more focus on impact when assessing partnership activities. A primary headteacher believed that the LA was the only body that could challenge effectively, especially when headteachers did not want to engage. Of course external accountability primarily through OFSTED is a very important part of evaluation and challenge.

It is worth noting the close linkage between these drivers and the criteria described by Hargreaves (2012, pp.8–22), whose work was clearly familiar to interviewees. There are, of course, other key drivers for networks, such as teacher recruitment and the accountability framework. See Annex 1.

5   Views on the middle tier

In this section, views were gathered on how services were accessed, gaps in provision and the perceived benefits, if any, of the middle tier.

Access to services

Accessing services was not seen as a difficulty. There was a great deal of knowledge of what was available and whom to contact, if advice or information was needed. There was an online brochure listing LA services. Otherwise, headteachers would go to one of the partnerships they were involved in. This included the TSA, which has a website setting out its offer across the six areas of activity defined by the National College. The LA is supporting partnerships in pulling together what they can offer.

Gaps in provision

There was only one main gap in provision identified by more than one person. Both the LA and the TSA highlighted the lack of curriculum consultants for numeracy and literacy since the demise of the headteachers' national strategies. Both the LA and TSA were considering

how to remedy this, largely through schools but also looking at re-employing consultants themselves.

The need for a middle layer

The need for a body to support schools in school improvement was taken as a given by all interviewees. Schools said that they see the importance of joining a range of middle tiers for different purposes. They also thought that a rather simplistic hierarchy of partnerships was not helpful. For example, one headteacher explained he needed to be closely involved in a teaching and learning partnership for most of the time and only occasionally attended the Learning City Partnership on behalf of his colleagues. Although requiring less time, he still felt that it was equally important for him and his colleagues to be linked with their wider community. Table 1 sets out why interviewees felt a support framework was needed for school improvement. There was a large overlap between the views of schools and LA officers, but also some differences.

Table 1: Reasons for a middle layer

Identified by schools	Identified by LA
• To provide support and general school improvement	In addition to those identified by the schools:
• To give LAs the means to tackle schools that do not engage	
• To enable groups to work together and ensure they are held to account	• To provide a city-wide strategy
• To provide an important source of motivation	• To champion those falling through the gaps
• To enable the work to be done by someone who has the time to co-ordinate it	• To challenge role
• To provide a point of connection to the Learning Partnership Board (clusters are represented on the Board, with the exception of the TSA)	
• To offer personal support for headteachers – respondents felt that this needed to be the LA	

Training and support

The main training identified for headteachers was the SIP training provided by the LA, which headteachers commented upon favourably. A number of headteachers were being trained as Ofsted inspectors, which they also felt would be helpful. Some felt that National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and post-NPQH training might also prove to be useful.

The training programme identified positively for LA officers was the coaching training from the Pacific Institute: 'From Potential to Performance'. LA officers felt that it was important for partnerships to be supported through working groups monitoring programme outcomes.

Sustainability

Headteachers made a number of comments about what would make school-to-school support more sustainable: the embedding of evaluation and challenge, and progress in establishing the City Learning Partnership, especially to oversee the allocation of funding grants. There was scepticism expressed by one headteacher about how much improvement could be sustained without tackling leadership weaknesses in individual schools, which he saw as the key.

The LA was especially concerned about whether the funding settlement would enable them to continue to support anything but a narrow interpretation of their statutory duties, focussing on failing schools.

6   Conclusions

Successes

- The LA has been successful in engaging most schools, including the academy, in working together on a school improvement agenda, which includes the satisfactory-to-great agenda.
- There are the beginnings of a system to ensure that funding for school-to-school support is allocated against plans, which are monitored and evaluated.
- Relationships are strong enough for schools to be keen for the City Learning Partnership to play an active role.
- The teaching school is well integrated into the LA school improvement processes and range of offerings.

Areas for improvement

- The development of a long-term strategy for teaching and learning to energise teachers and assist schools, both individually and collectively, to embed key behaviours and systems.
- The selection of partnership leaders and other staff to provide school-to-school support and hold partnerships to account. An evaluation was in progress at the time of the interviews to assess the impact of LA investment. It was recognised that it was not clear at this stage what impact had been achieved.
- The provision of funding to ensure school-to-school support has sufficient capacity.
- Embedding evaluation and challenge – this was identified as a key issue by all interviewees.
- One of the challenges for the City Learning Partnership, in the eyes of some schools, is to bring greater transparency, predictability and equity to the distribution of discretionary funding. It must also be able to adapt to a fluid, bottom-up, school-driven improvement system, drawing on experience from other such partnerships.

Recommendations

1.   Consider adopting a long-term vision and strategy

There is an opportunity to move beyond a narrow, compliance-driven focus on key stage results – important though that is. This could involve partners signing up to a long-term strategy to adopt what are now broadly accepted as the characteristics of outstanding learning in the 21st century, the kind of teaching necessary to deliver that learning, and the school conditions needed to achieve it. One such approach is provided in the work of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012); Hattie (2008, 2011) and Hargreaves (2012).

In a recent article, *Oceans of Innovation,* Barber *et al.* (2012) summarise most aspects of this consensus very well. This leaves room for differing views on the effectiveness of individual programmes. It could provide the framework, for example, for tackling evaluation and challenge as something that is organically grown in schools and cross-partnerships as part of a common approach. It would provide a common school improvement language to launch the setting up of the Learning Partnership. Just as important, it has the potential to mobilise teachers around a professionally enhancing agenda, which can only benefit children's learning. Other key elements could be:

- A stronger focus on growing the number of outstanding schools and system leaders to create the capacity in the system. The top is as important as the bottom. This is a key issue for Brighton and Hove, with only one secondary school rated outstanding, although primary and special schools are in a healthy position.

- Continued incorporation of the teaching schools as an integral part of the strategy. All five case studies clearly show how support from the LA (or, in Southend's case, SET) enhances the development of the teaching schools. Two of its roles are fundamental to any future success, namely teacher recruitment and induction, and leadership development.

2.   Systems

- **Inputs.** Consider adopting robust, transparent criteria for the selection of partnership or system leaders. Ensure they have time to undertake their role and will hold the partnership to account for outcomes-system framework as well as key stage results. Brighton and Hove might also consider doing the same for teacher inputs. Wigan and Hertfordshire have existing models, for example, they both use the National Leaders of Education (NLE) selection criteria as the basis for selecting cluster leaders.

- **Consider adopting a version of the six drivers** identified in this case study for holding the network to account for delivery and ensuring sustainability, namely: purpose, relationships, leadership, workforce, systems, and evaluation and challenge. They can be linked to Hargreaves' four criteria for assessing the maturity of a partnership (2012). See Annex 1.

- Develop the **concept of abandonment** in schools. Schools have been conditioned to think that new initiatives have to be funded externally instead of revising priorities and dropping less important activities to make space. This will need to include making space for two to five per cent of funds for professional development.

- Consider whether it would be worth **agreeing protocols for school-to-school support,** as Hertfordshire has done.

3.   Evaluation and challenge

Take steps to embed evaluation and challenge. Evaluation and challenge has to be embedded in individual schools if it is to operate across partnerships through peer-to-peer support and challenge, use of data and training, which is modelled by leaders. A Southend primary headteacher (interviewed during one of the other case studies) made the telling point that if effective challenge is not happening within an individual school, then that school is unlikely to engage in effective challenge with other schools. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p.146) put it another way: 'The principles that underpin effective approaches to teaching and learning at an individual school level are the same at a partnership level.' The underpinning of an agreement about schools' categorisation by the LA is an important foundation.

Wigan LA has taken this as far as confining their role to school categorisation, then giving responsibility for the LA's statutory duties to eight school consortia. The LA allocates funding and holds networks to account. They encourage the consortia to use external consultants or even, in exceptional cases, the LA themselves to undertake the challenge role if the schools feel they cannot effectively challenge themselves. This is not an approach for all areas but shows what is possible.

4.   City Learning Partnership

Give further thought to how the City Learning Partnership can respond to schools' expectations, deliver quick wins and cater to a dynamic, bottom-up school improvement process. The York Education Partnership, in one of the other case studies, might be worth looking at.

5.   Sustainability

Sustainability depends in part upon embedding the key drivers outlined above or something similar. However, it is clear that it also depends upon adequate funding to create the capacity for school-to-school support. In the new world of increasingly constrained funding, it will depend upon school contributions, but LAs will also be challenged to shift resources with school support. There is no intention in this report to suggest that school-to-school support is the only effective method of school improvement. There are always a number of successful methods. However, with the kind of steps suggested above, it could be worth considering whether more funding should be shifted to school-to-school support, as some other LAs have done, to enable the city to build upon the progress it has made. It would help create the capacity for school-to-school support. It would also be reasonable through the City Learning Partnership to open discussions about schools subscribing, as has happened in another case study area.

When this capacity is combined with the development of a more rigorous framework of the kind described, there is every chance of sustainable momentum.

Annex 1: David Hargreaves' partnership maturity criteria

Criteria for a deep partnership according to David Hargreaves (in ascending order of difficulty)

1. Joint practice development is well established within and between schools.

2. Social capital is high within and between schools.

3. Collective moral purpose is a value shared and enacted by all stakeholders, including students.

4. Evaluation and challenge are practised at every level within and between schools.

(Hargreaves, 2012)

Annex 2: References

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