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

Report on the research findings from the Wigan Local Authority case study

Interviews and case study by David Crossley

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Introduction

The *What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier* study, carried out in partnership with NFER, investigated how schools are accessing services and support for school improvement and the role that the emerging middle tier plays, or needs to play, in this. It involved five case studies and a rapid review.

This case study, written by David Crossley, focuses on the evidence collected from Wigan. It is intended to identify Wigan's existing strengths and areas for development, as the local authority (LA) develops its middle tier. Interviews were carried out with two members of the LA leadership team, including the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Head of Education, a group of primary headteachers who play key roles as cluster leads and form part of the primary school improvement board, and two individual interviews with secondary headteachers.

This short report will:

- describe the changes Wigan has undertaken
- compare and reflect on the responses of key LA staff and both primary and secondary school leaders
- evaluate the current provision
- consider possible options to provide guidance on how to further embed and sustain the progress made to date.

Evidence from high-performing countries

As part of the wider study, NFER carried out a rapid review of the evidence on how high-performing countries enable school-driven systems leadership (Smith *et al.* 2012). The key findings are presented here, in order to provide a wider context within which to situate Wigan's approach. The review found that each of the successful systems identified in the literature had some form of middle tier that was distinct from national government. While there is no single method of enabling school-driven system leadership, successful systems shared some common features:

- stakeholders who are committed to working together and sharing experience
- distributed leadership, harnessing the expertise of all staff
- provision of traditional 'support and challenge' functions alongside brokering and enabling ways of working that respond to schools' needs.

Barriers to effective collaboration included:

- a lack of trust between the middle tier and schools
- a failure to challenge when necessary, which can lead to long-term decline
- a failure to look beyond one's own institutions and take responsibility for system performance
- a lack of capacity in the middle tier to support and challenge schools.[1]

Background to the Wigan case study

Wigan LA recognised that school-to-school support is increasingly the main engine for driving school improvement. The focus on teachers was a key aim of the Coalition's 2010 White Paper, *The Importance of Schools and Teaching,*[2] which promised a shift from top-down, centrally funded school improvement initiatives to 'teachers placed firmly at the heart of school improvement by focusing on school-led school improvement replacing top-down initiatives'. Professors Andrew Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley reflect on this in their book *The Fourth Way*.[3] They consider four decades of approaches to school improvement and identify three enemies of progress:

- 'The path of the autocrat' – the inability of politicians and others to let go;
- 'The path of the technocrat' – that puts undue emphasis on data and often not the right data;
- Teachers and school leaders who, when faced with what feels like ever-increasing pressures, become locked into immediate responses and neglect the medium and longer term.

Wigan is an LA that has had the confidence to 'let go' and has significantly distributed leadership, responsibility and resources to its school-led clusters. Its approach has also been validated in terms of outcomes and Wigan was highly praised in the annual report from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI)[4], which commented 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'. The report also made specific mention of Wigan as an LA where young

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[1] Smith, R., Aston, H., Sims, D. and Easton, C. (2012). *Enabling school-driven system leadership: Rapid review.* Slough: NFER.

[2] Department for Education (2010). *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010* P6Cm. 7980). London: The Stationery Office.

[3] Hargreaves, A. and Shirley, D. (2009). P23 ff *The Fourth Way.* Corwin USA

[4] Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2012). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011–12.* London: The Stationery Office. P16ff

people have twice the chance of attending a good or better primary or secondary school, compared with what it described as the least effective authorities.

What has been implemented in Wigan and how has it developed?

In my judgement, Wigan's approach can be described as one of the more radical and comprehensive changes I have seen. It has made a dramatic move towards a system of improvement that puts schools at the heart. The DCS stressed that, in planning, it pre-dated the acute funding crisis and new agenda of the 2010 White Paper. Influences included the work done by ISOS[5] to scope out options for councils and schools. The LA had also predicted much of current agenda well before the 2010 election, including the end of the National Strategies, which had contributed significant school improvement funding. The funding crisis and the response of the exiting LA school improvement advisers, who proposed that they leave together rather than facing a gradual decline in what they did and how they did it, provided an impetus for change. This resulted in the LA zero-basing the approach and beginning again with something new. That something new was a transfer of responsibilities to a series of school-led clusters. The council remained committed to school improvement but redeployed its resources in a very different way, investing virtually all of its school intervention money into the newly created clusters.

The LA feels that a zero-based approach has brought clear benefits. However, it also created risks and the challenge of how to keep the focus on improvement and the potential of intervention, whilst maintaining the principle that the consortia should decide the agenda. As ever, a great deal of the success of the model lay in the detail and skills of implementation. This included a different sort of leadership style, relying less on concentrated executive power and more on influence, persuasion, relationships and shared objectives, whilst at the same time keeping in reserve judicious use of statutory and other powers where needed. In the words of the DCS:

> *You do have to be confident enough to let go. If you don't you get found out very quickly as your actions reveal your real intention – you have be confident to do this but be clear about the terms you are letting go – not 100 flowers bloom or wilt – this is a formal relationship.*

Engagement buy-in and relationships

In terms of buy-in, there is a strong sense of cohesion amongst the primary cluster leads, as was observed both at a meeting and in individual interviews. The LA provided a space for them to occupy and they have risen to the challenge. Trust and positive relationships seem to be the byword, because people are seeing things working. One primary headteacher used the words 'credibility' and 'confidence' to describe what underpinned the development, while the cluster leads stated there has been unanimous engagement and buy-in. The secondary headteachers who we interviewed shared this view and felt that Wigan was lucky because

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[5] Baxter, A., Sandals, L. and Parish, N. (ISOS Partnership) (2012). *The Final Report for the Ministerial Advisory Group: Action Research into the Evolving Role of the Local Authority in Education.* London: Department for Education.

generally the headteachers get on well. They also described a longstanding, quite pastoral relationship with the LA, which had very much seen their schools as family. The headteachers felt that this had prevailed and survived the move to a more modern structure.

Whilst the initial impetus for change was top down, headteachers quickly began to understand the importance of filling the gap left by the loss of the LA school improvement team. The headteachers were presented with a number of models by the LA and, in their words, there was an open debate. They felt that the LA played a number of key roles: identification of criteria to choose the cluster leads; categorisation of schools, brokering and or coordinating the work of the consortium, and undertaking formal LA intervention when triggered by the consortia lead.

Headteachers responded to the changes in a range of ways. One remarked that it has made them and their colleagues feel more part of the process and the bigger picture; before they had been little islands rather than contributing to the locality. This was regarded as a win/win situation, which raises outcomes for the whole community. Another found the change 'very exciting and scary' and expressed a real consciousness of the need for them to gain credibility with colleagues. A number saw the first year as a transition year and commented that people became more open and took more risks as they moved into the second year. Headteachers also described that, whilst the focus as specified by the LA was primarily on challenging schools, there has been a conscious focus in the clusters on the rest of the schools (even though not formally funded) as 'any one of us could find ourselves in difficulties too'. It was an emerging, flexible (adaptive) strategy.

It was not just that the LA has distributed leadership to the clusters; the clusters have distributed leadership within themselves too. As one headteacher remarked, 'You also don't have to do it all yourself. It is about looking for talent both within and across consortia creating almost a shared directory consisting of NLEs, LLEs, and SLEs [and]…also schools that were supported and are now strong and can offer support too.' The primary cluster leads conveyed a real sense of responsibility, not just for their own school, but for the cluster as a whole. For example, one headteacher rushed back to Wigan from a meeting in London when the call from Ofsted came – not for her school but for one of her cluster schools. They also view that there is challenge and accountability, but there is the benefit of working together too. The two secondary headteachers interviewed expressed similar views to their primary counterparts, but one had concerns about buy-in from schools that are doing very well, questioning how it benefitted them. That said, the headteacher affirmed strong buy-in from those headteachers whose schools are in difficulty and who can see they need support and will access it.

The inclusive approach was in evidence, as one of the clusters is led by the headteacher of the first academy in the locality. The schools valued the LA's efforts to help keep them together as a group, when there was danger of fragmentation. Similarly the LA has enabled schools to remain inclusive in the face of the establishment of academies.

Systems, processes and workforce development

As previously alluded to, the whole process provided significant professional development for all those involved. When operating well, the work of the clusters exhibits diagnostics, action planning, direct support, joint planning and combines quick fixes with some longer term strategies too.

In addition, flexibility and evolving systems and processes seem to have generated a model of continuous improvement. The philosophy and approach of the Head of Education has played a critical role in the success of the model. When asked if it would be easier if they had more central staff, they said 'no', as the lack of school improvement teams means that they focus their time and depend on the schools' leaders more. The Head of Education commented:

> *The commitment to partnership working is driving the role of the LA, which has adapted the services it still provided to support the model put in place too. For example, data services investment increased and governor services has been retained, as was intervention monitoring, although this is now being undertaken in part by seconded headteachers. So a key process was the development of a fit-for-purpose LA infrastructure to support partnerships to deliver.*

There was general recognition of the sort of leadership style that is required to make this model work, relying on the skills of influence and persuasion rather than concentrated executive power. Note the distinction with this approach is that intervention tends to involve a coaching or partnership model, rather than the transfer of power to an executive head model.

Despite challenges and issues of capacity at times, all preferred the model to previous alternatives, as one remarked: 'The task of supporting another school is made easier because you are known as a person who knows what it is like.'

Sustainability

Sustainability is a strong feature of the Wigan model. It begins with money and investment in the clusters and leads but it extends to the approach taken by them too. One good thing seems to lead to another. As one headteacher remarked, 'There is not a lot of money – but the authority is successful in bidding for extra pots of money.' They also expressed some initial unease about certain schools being paid to do work, while others were not getting this kind of opportunity. The cluster has responded to this by widening the numbers of schools involved in providing support.

Most of the headteachers interviewed were of the view that undertaking this support work helps their own school to improve too. One cited the example of their mathematics department, which developed its analytical skills and focused them back in on itself, trying to see why they were good, in order to make this explicit. Clearly, if school-to-school support is not well managed or resourced, it can have a negative impact on those providing support. Nonetheless, as another headteacher remarked: 'It makes people more reflective, you pick

up things from schools you help too.' Clusters are also beginning to undertake wider work – following a session by David Hargreaves, they now talk of joint practice development (JPD) and cite examples of this. They also seemed to be moving from being reactive to more proactive; one primary headteacher noted that this year, the cluster was looking beyond just year six and considering the contribution of years two and four, and even reception and pre-school teachers. This illustrates a move to longer-term thinking.

This form of professional development seems more about committing time to the wider clusters, which ranges from staff spending time in other schools, to conventional joint training days, being outward looking through involvement in the national Whole Education Network and also in term of leadership development. There is even a primary leadership programme that has 45 aspiring leaders taking part inout of school hours twilight programmes. One headteacher summed up the value of effective collaboration, commenting that if you are not open, receptive and outward looking, you will have less capacity to improve practice in future, as schools need external involvement for ideas and influence to question, improve and move forward .

Do you need a middle tier?

Overall, there was strong support for a middle tier. Amongst the functions that interviewees felt the middle tier should adopt were:

- to provide a local perspective and much more focused intervention
- more focused intervention which is relevant to local needs
- commissioning ranging from specific intervention to inclusion of expectations of collaboration in contracts for schools
- fostering a sense of place and community
- protecting schools, 'keeping the wolf from the door' and being on their side

The notion that you can combine challenge and support was clearly evident here, though one respondent felt that the consortia arrangement can go so far with everyone but there comes a point when something outside that mechanism might be required. One headteacher also commented that governments have found it difficult to get rid of it and viewed that you do need something closer to the ground than Whitehall, as it is unwieldy to do it from the centre. Another went further to say the aspiration of the middle tier 'almost should be about development of world-class education rather than simply raising the floor, where much of most LAs' efforts are currently focused'.

Has the approach been successful?

There is clear quantitative and qualitative evidence of school improvement in Wigan, though we cannot attribute this to the change in the school improvement model. However, as the approach is Wigan's school improvement strategy, it clearly has made a contribution to the success. This evidence ranges from the number of schools in an Ofsted category, the percentage of good or better schools, improvements in test and GCSE outcomes and the HMCI validation, to the more specific evidence of progress in those schools being supported.

In qualitative terms, interviewees felt that the new model has clearly boosted the confidence of headteachers to lead on school improvement outside of their own institution. The cluster leads said that they have gained a great deal of confidence in supporting other schools in the past year, with many more headteachers wanting to be cluster leads in the future. As the Head of Education commented, one of the most significant developments is the headteachers' sense of ownership and 'the move [of headteachers] from concerned to comfortable, done to done with, reactive to proactive'.

In summary, there are positive indicators about the success of the approach.

Conclusions

Key facets which contributed to the success of the approach were:

1. The long-term good relationship between the LA and its schools, which helped overcome any initial suspicions and the subtle underlying question, in the words of the DCS: 'Does Wigan want to continue to take responsibility for its own destiny or leave it to chance?' This relationship helped overcome any initial cynicism that this change was just because of the cuts in funding.

2. Leadership (both leadership style and distribution of leadership), a genuine sense of collective accountability and ownership, and transfer of resources and responsibility.

3. A clear vision and focus on one specific function rather than all possible functions, in the belief that you can do anything but never everything.

4. Pragmatism rather than idealism – illustrated by the initial separation of primary and secondary schools into separate clusters.

5. The creation and nature of clusters, including: the way the cluster leads were chosen based on uncontestable criteria; creating a cluster lead team through the school improvement boards; transfer of funding; payment of leads; and the freedom for the clusters to invest in and undertake wider work with all schools in their clusters.

6. A degree of flexibility and adaptability in response to perceived needs – for example, clusters can commission other clusters and go outside Wigan too.

7. The size and profile of the LA with relatively few failing schools.

8. Clarity over respective roles and responsibilities.

9. An inclusive approach in two distinct ways: firstly, the aim of the clusters to involve and embrace all schools in their cluster, and secondly, the LA accepting academies and other emerging structures.

10. Philosophy, approach, culture and relationships.

Recommendations

The first overall recommendation is to both sustain the initial focus on intervention by remaining proactive, and also to move to parallel wider focus areas outside achieving floor targets. This is in terms of learning, both by focusing on developing and sharing potential pockets of greatness, as well as strategies to help schools move from satisfactory to good, good to outstanding and beyond. There are now more category 1 and category 2a schools than last year, which frees up capacity for other areas. Acting on this recommendation will both embed the inclusive nature of the partnership and ensure continued involvement of all. Linked to this is exploring ways of developing the investment of schools' own time and money on the clusters, as this will reduce dependency on additional funding from the LA and enhance sustainability. As one headteacher remarked, 'Commitment is as or more significant than the money.'

Secondly, there are some suggestions of ways of embedding good practice with regards to continuity of leads when the lead changes; of sharing examples of emerging successful systems, processes and practice between clusters; of developing more school-led self-evaluation; and of developing local data indicators that will validate and value other aspects of the education provision in Wigan.

The third recommendation is to explore ways of communicating more effectively with teachers and other staff, to develop their understanding of the model. This will further strengthen buy-in.

Fourthly, there is an opportunity to put some energy into wider stakeholder, employer and community engagement. This could extend to embracing business and universities in developing and implementing a vision for the community or responding to future employment needs.

Finally, given the fact that clarity and specificity of focus was a major contribution to the success of the work in Wigan, the caveat remains that any further development must not distract from current work, rather it should evolve where appropriate and ensure a cycle of continuous improvement. The current validation of the work in Wigan was timely and will undoubtedly strengthen commitment. However, it is important to validate and celebrate successes going forward.