

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

Report on the research findings from the York 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 support study*, carried out in partnership with NFER, aims to investigate 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 York. It is intended to identify York's existing strengths and areas for development, as the local authority (LA) develops its middle tier. Interviews were carried out with members of the LA leadership team, including the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and his team, the independent chair of the York Education Partnership (YEP), a group of primary headteachers, a separate group of primary teachers who had either provided support or had been supported, and the headteacher of one of the two teaching schools which form the Ebor Teaching School Alliance (TSA).

This short report will:

- describe the changes York 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 (2012) carried out a rapid review of the evidence on how high-performing countries enable school-driven systems leadership. The key findings are presented here, in order to provide a wider context within which to situate York'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 identified in the wider study 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 York case study

York LA and its wider education community recognised early that school-to-school support was increasingly the main engine for driving school improvement, building on a strong history of engaging schools in improvement work. This was not an authority where schools were simple passive recipients of LA dictats. The focus on teachers was a key aim of the Coalition’s 2010 White Paper, *The Importance of Schools and Teaching* (DfE, 2010), 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’.

York LA’s leadership team wanted to avoid their autonomous system becoming fragmented. but were concerned that their progress in developing collaborative improvement work could be undermined. However the DCS stressed that it was not about protecting the status quo. Instead, it was about responding to the question of whether the LA and local schools were making best use of the improvement capacity available within the wider education community.

Underpinning all this was a strong, shared sense of place and a shared vision. Their set of principles and key priorities were well communicated through their engaging York’s Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP). The CYPP sees educational improvement for all as key to a better city, and a plan that schools have engaged in and recognise. York benefits from having a clear sense of place, a relatively focused geographic area and the opportunity to engage all schools and governors in regular dialogue. The current CYPP is their fourth, evidencing the long history of partnership work dating back to 2002–3 and a history of

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

success as described through inspection and performance outcomes, beacon authority status, and so on. These strengths were identified by the LA as a history to build from, recognising the importance of leadership continuity, without the distractions of continual re-organisations. The LA articulated an aim to be innovative but also to build on current practice – to protect what works whilst finding new approaches in a changing financial and policy world. In terms of school improvement, whilst they sought to respond to the national headteacher and school autonomy agenda, as outlined in the 2010 Schools White Paper, they have also have kept what was described as ‘a school improvement team of a reasonable scale’. The LA still provides School Improvement Partners (SIPs) for all schools as part of its offer. One LA senior team member expressed a concern that, as the LA capacity decreased, school capacity was going up, though not necessarily at the same pace. Overall, the LA team felt that in many ways secondary schools were better placed to respond to the provision of support for schools, but that more funds were needed to make the model effective. In terms of other drivers for change, the Ofsted move to extending the reach to satisfactory schools was viewed as demanding the LA’s involvement in a larger group of schools.

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

At first sight what we see in York, in my judgment, is not a radical change in terms of approaches to school improvement and the role of the LA. Essentially the LA was responding to changing external circumstances and ensuring that their actions remained effective. The more innovative development, linked to but outside of this, was the creation of the YEP led by an independent chair. This took on and extended the school forum’s role beyond responsibilities for funding to the development and approval of the strategies and approaches, which should inform those financial decisions.

Here the LA adopted quite a different leadership role from that it had taken before: distributing leadership through creating an organisation that was a guardian of a wider educational vision and mission for York and its young people. The DCS decided, following widespread consultation across the school community, that creating the partnership as a new and separate legal entity should not be the primary focus. Such an approach may have longer-term merits but the desire to maintain pace undistracted from legal structures was key. There was local recognition that the authority of any partnership depends on the authority imparted by the community in it rather than its legal status. However, the new partnership clearly works at a level beyond just funding. Introducing an independent chair was an important step. This chair of the partnership describes it as ‘a turbo-charged version of the schools’ forum that has been successful because they ran the forum as if it was a partnership’. The chair saw huge benefit in moving into the formal structure of the partnership, commenting that it gives the LA:

... something that is much more powerful, in particular the ability to get schools to contribute towards a central fund – so they have a profitable school improvement fund which is significant and schools have access to – before that would have been top sliced.

York LA officers have become what was described by the DCS as ‘servant leaders’, servicing and supporting the partnership without having voting rights. It is headteachers that lead the partnership, with an independent chair from outside the LA. In terms of school improvement, they have established a school improvement steering group – bringing together members of the executive board of the teaching school with key school leaders from the partnership. The teaching school is seen as part of the whole, rather than something separate.

York describes itself as a proactive LA, for example in their response to the TSA, they considered the schools involved as part of the wider system and aimed to include every headteacher involved. It has also alerted and encouraged eligible heads to become Local Leaders of Education (LLEs). Both academies in the city (there is at least one sponsored academy to come) have remained involved in the partnership. Funding is underpinned by money from DSG (direct schools grant), and the YEP has affirmed a unanimous commitment to maintain this.

In the words of the DCS: ‘The YEP has opened a genuine debate between schools around the harder issues.’ This raises the wider system question of the potential and value of a separate body that sits alongside the LA.

Engagement buy-in and relationships

Communication with schools

York is proud of its communication with both schools and chairs of governors. One headteacher remarked that it feels very much like a family. This is further illustrated by the comment of one headteacher: ‘Everybody knows everybody and is looking out for each other.’ Another commented that it was definitely advantageous that the schools were physically so close. Schools value the fact that the key LA staff, chairs of governors, and headteachers meet three times a year, as part of what is seen as a good communication process.

David Cameron, the independent Chair of the YEP, echoes this view, talking of:

A real strong sense of ‘York-ness’...at the first headteacher conference in York, at times when the Chief Exec or others spoke it was almost affectionate, at times almost poetic. A real pride – echoed throughout the conference. Also there is real tradition in York – from Rowntree/Cadbury culture that is built into their DNA – sense of social responsibility and philanthropy that’s almost built in, and finally trust – high level of trust towards LA leadership team.

Approach to leadership

The case study evidence emphasised how important the style of leadership is in generating and retaining engagement and buy-in. The DCS discussed what he described about adaptive leadership, leadership in a new world. In his words: ‘You do it through nudge; you do it through influence, you do it through clear moral purpose and shared vision; that is what

we do here.’ David Cameron talks of the positive relationship between the DCS and the schools. He describes the leadership style of the LA leadership team as:

...incredibly unassuming, doesn't dominate, is direct but he is very principled, very steely, knows exactly what he wants and what he believes in but never has to push to get that – he has this real quiet charisma that people engage with and trust.

In my view, the DCS and the LA’s relationship with the partnership board, and the leadership style adopted, are what make the partnership effective.

This similar style of leadership was also exemplified in the interview descriptions given by headteachers and teachers of the way they work when supporting other schools. An example was given of a grade 3 school supporting a grade 1 school, which was clearly a two-way process where both understand their roles but also learn from each other.

On the question of whether schools felt the LA was on their side, one school leader described the challenges and dual nature of the LA’s role. He felt the LA had to tread a very fine line, commenting:

I don't think they are on anybody's side, we don't see them like that because they are holding us accountable and that's the biggest element of an LA's role that's left. We do feel that if the proverbial hit the fan they would be there behind us. If something disastrous happened in your school, e.g. buildings or unpleasant experiences with Ofsted personnel, then we have got their backing.

Relationship with teachers

Those primary school leaders who had undertaken school-to-school support said that they valued it. As one remarked: ‘Having had a taster of it last year I’m up for more and got a lot out of it personally but my staff and my governors are wary.’ They said that to get the most out of it you have to be ‘very honest about the situation, about what’s happening in school, which is sometimes tricky to do because for some people it’s a bit like washing your dirty linen in public’. They felt that a supporting headteacher needs to be empathetic too.

Of the primary teachers we spoke with, two provided support and one was a recipient; all three supported the notion of improvement being school-led, as people were doing the job themselves. All three think it is a two-way process. All three describe governors as supporting it.

In terms of the question of whether governors are in favour of their headteacher supporting schools other than their own, some feel there is an element of necessary altruism. York is small enough to feel they are dealing with all York children, with a sense of a wider group beyond the school, but ultimately their school comes first. As one headteacher commented, ‘I think there would be a tipping point at which my governors would start to get concerned.’

Systems, processes and workforce development

The LA's role

On the change from the LA moving from being mainly a provider of support to a commissioner, the DCS argues it is easier to fulfill their statutory functions if they increasingly move to a commissioning role. Interestingly, he argues that the LA has never needed to use their statutory sanctions, yet they always achieved what they wanted through shaping and influencing. The LA sees itself as a brokering commissioner, a coordinator and keeper of intelligence, rather than necessarily a provider. However it is interesting that in key subject risk areas, such as Maths and English, schools have continued to ask the LA to maintain a 'respected provider' role.

All three primary headteachers describe the local authority's role as setting up formal relationships, but they also mention and value less formal links and projects that they create through their clusters. Examples of less formal links they gave included a joint INSET day and a transition project. They see school-to-school support as the best form of professional development, as seeing and doing in practice, and contrast this with going on a course. They value York LA and believe that it is very good in what it offers. The headteachers felt that if you have a need, someone will come and help. For example, one of the headteachers commented that 'in science I wanted to change and didn't know who can help – with York being quite small – you can e-mail [the LA]- they know [who can} help [and will] put you in touch'.

CPD and workforce development

In terms of both professional development and support for teachers, the LA still provides a full CPD programme, working at individual teacher level in schools and offering bespoke training. This is clearly valued by the headteachers interviewed for the case study. The LA was proud of its very experienced primary team, stating that two members of the team have strong national profiles. This is validated by the primary school teachers who participated in the research. One commented that 'because we're so local there is a teaching centre for learning which is easy to get to from all the schools and the LA still offers very comprehensive CPD'.

Those who provide school-to-school support also view undertaking the role as a significant professional development opportunity in its own right.

Overall, those that provide support do seem to feel a peer-to-peer model is likely to be better than the traditional hard interventionist approach. As one remarked, 'I am lead mentor and there is a massive emphasis on seeing what is good – looking across the cluster not just at your own school with people really sharing best practice is the way to improve standards.'

Funding and capacity

There is a potential issue of funding and creating capacity, which was remarked on by the primary and secondary school leaders and teachers. The school-to-school support is often of short-term nature and this has an impact on the quality of fill-in staff that can therefore be

attracted. One remarked, 'We're trying to backfill for one day per week in a particular class and I'm on my second member of staff – well very quickly parents and governors are going to raise concerns.'

On the question of whether you can challenge and support, those I interviewed do feel you can combine the roles. The teachers involved had developed and used their skills to diffuse potentially negative situations.

Clusters

Local clusters are also a feature of York and provide evidence of a self-improving, school-led system developing. They are highly valued by the primary schools, though historically, not all had actively involved secondary schools. One cluster had recently organised a joint training day between clusters, which was felt to have been really successful: 'We did have to draw in some people from the LA but a lot of it was delivered from the staff that were actually working in the schools, and able to share that expertise in just one day.'

The clusters were originally set up by the LA, but are now very much managed by schools. The headteachers and teachers interviewed described some impressive examples of joint practice development (JPD), including a year-long transition project between one secondary and three primary schools that are happy to work with them. The project involved triangulating governing bodies, so the headteacher and the chair go to visit somebody else's meetings, and establishing a group that met and looked at Raise ONLINE and shared documents, looking for any commonalities between the schools in the cluster. One triad found, for example, that 'lower-attaining girls at the end of KS2 were not transferring into 5A-C at GCSE so we looked at what we could do, pairing up leaders across the cluster'. In another example, a primary school leadership team (SLT) was linked with the secondary SLT and did some paired observations in both contexts, with a particular focus on lower-attaining girls. The teams then made some recommendations to the whole cluster about practice that would benefit those girls in transition. This provides an interesting example of the potential of school-to-school support beyond just narrow intervention in times of crisis. One headteacher remarked that 'clusters are free, people commit time and it's at a particular level – tends to be heads – teaching staff are involved in projects but not taken out of classes. I think the clusters are going to play a bigger role'.

TSA

The headteacher of one of the two linked teaching schools wants the TSA to be about York schools doing things together. The head valued the fact that the LA had expressed an early interest in the potential of the TSA and had then followed that through to more formal engagement. The TSA includes seven or eight key partner schools, but all York schools are part of the larger partnership. A secondary and a primary school have been allocated teaching school status within the one application bid, and the LA is a strategic partner with representation on the sub-committees. Each of the sub-committees has been given a piece of work or area from the National College for Teaching and Leadership's six key functions of teaching schools. For example the initial teacher training (ITT) committees are working on a project to deliver the Schools Direct model of teacher training, starting in September 2013;

while the research and development group is looking at linking schools and interested parties with a national research project through CEBE (Centre for Evidence Based Education) at York University. In the headteacher's words, this provides 'a wonderful opportunity to make use of something on our doorstep that we hadn't really been made aware of'.

The school-to-school support group is working closely with the LA. This ensures a joined-up approach to school-to-school support within the governance of the YEP. It reduces the risk, so crucial at a time of financial constraints, of either duplication or inconsistency of support and intervention. Views vary as to how the roles will develop over time. The heads of the two teaching schools have used money to appoint a director, but it is not enough money to run it or do more than fund a part-time director. One of the questions for the executive board is that the money has gone very rapidly, and how will it sustain the work? The key issues going forward are whether schools are prepared to invest in the TSA and what it is that they are investing in. As one headteacher remarked:

I think we've all got pots within a budget that we've set aside for CPD. It depends on the need of your school at that moment as to how much you're prepared to invest – whether there is one very specific project that you're prepared to invest money in heavily – we've invested quite a lot in middle leadership programmes because that's where we felt we were getting the new leaders from. In briefings you get a split between the heads who say 'you have to invest in CPD if you are going to move your school forward' and other heads area saying 'this piece of money - how do I invest?' and that's where the teaching school, because it's still early days, will have a big sell to do to get other schools in York to be prepared to pay for things.

Primary teachers we interviewed had little awareness of the TSA. This may reflect either the small study sample or the stage of maturity, but if this is a general issue then it is something both the YEP and the TSA itself will need to address.

YEP

School leaders felt the YEP adds a feeling of 'we're all in this together and supporting each other'. There is a sense of holding on to what is good about York, as a small LA with a small number of schools that know each other. Headteachers didn't want to lose that closeness and the feeling they could support each other. One said, 'I think there are some difficult decisions – we've come a long way in terms of representation but there are still some difficulties with it and around the financial decisions because it is doubling up as the old schools' forum.' The primary teachers we interviewed all talked about clusters but, as with the TSAs, there was little real awareness or consciousness of the YEP. Again, this may reflect the relative newness of the current arrangements and in school communications on the work of the YEP. It is clear that the YEP was only established after considerable consultation with school leaders and governors.

Sustainability

In terms of sustainability, the LA view was that there has to be realism, as there is only a certain amount of funding to build capacity. Risks identified included the new funding formula, which some interviewees felt could lead to fragmentation. The DCS said that ‘the LA does keep their eyes over the horizon and are proactive, they communicate early and have debates’, which in my view bodes well for the future.

Interviewees from schools involved in the delivery approve of the principle of school-to-school support, but some have reservations about its sustainability, having seen the demands that it has placed on their schools. While schools’ involvement is funded, providing support to another school is about more than funding – it is also about advance planning and available capacity. Comments were made on the need for a more flexible approach around some decisions, such as funding. As one school interviewee remarked:

Historically, we’ve contributed so much towards school improvement, albeit a small amount because supplemented through the National Strategy but where budgets are very tight it might be that a group of schools would like to pool funds within that group of schools rather than city-wide schools to provide something that is pertinent to them and at the moment we haven’t found our way through that. There is a sense of doing it for the greater good (not just your school or cluster) and at the moment we’re sitting somewhere between the two – we don’t want to let go of supporting schools, [...], equally we need to make sure that what we’re providing within our own schools is good and cost effective.

Those primary heads interviewed also worried that changes in Ofsted’s approach mean that York has a growing number of schools requiring some level of support, and that this is primarily coming from other schools within the city. This places a very large demand on the local education community and LA resources. There is concern that, further down the line, many schools that provided support will not continue to do so because they ‘need to get on’. The heads felt that the remit is now much bigger and all schools have something they need to be focusing on; the concern is sustainability over time. They said that the LA was looking at over-staffing and creating additional roles, to enable good-quality backfilling for existing leadership teams, avoiding a situation where ‘you are putting into class somebody who is less successful and therefore ultimately your own school stands to lose’.

Do you need a middle tier?

The school interviewees listed a variety of activities that they felt the LA’s role should cover: intelligence gathering; holder of knowledge; commissioning; coordinating; overall strategic view for city; ‘takes a broader impartial and objective view’ and a focus on overall performance.

In the LA’s view, the Department for Education has neither the capacity, experience nor connectivity to fulfil the middle tier role. The LA sees the answer to facilitating school improvement as a local authority or partnership – or in York’s case, a combination of a LA

working in a partnership model. LA staff commented that the authority brings access to wider strategies, democratic accountability, and a public mandate – what makes societies, cities and places. In their view this access and mandate would prove difficult, if not impossible, for new dispersed academy chains to replicate. School leaders felt that, whilst they could do certain elements of the LA's work themselves, in the main they continued to want a middle tier. One said:

I think there's room for both. You do need the LA for some sort of commissioning to help you to see what's out there and where to go if you need something specific. I think that within that you need to move to some sort of flexibility and greater financial autonomy. For example, there are some budget headings that we've always delegated back to the LA, there is now greater flexibility to do something more creative with some of those and I think it's very hard – you can end up losing a complete service that is of value to a lot of schools if a lot of schools opt out.

The school leaders talked of the budget pressures, which are now such that they have to increasingly spend every penny wisely. They mentioned the example of a literacy consultant currently working for York LA. She has been at the hub of everything that has been going on and her name draws 100 per cent attendance rates, because everyone knows that she offers high-quality support. However, if the consultant left York tomorrow, the number of people who would buy in to the literacy support package would depend on who replaced her. David Cameron's reflection on this issue, and on York specifically, is interesting. He comments that 'there are signs in York that schools and headteachers are prepared to reconstitute that median level on a much more cooperative basis'. In his view, one of the corollaries is that you begin to think collectively about schools:

[School-to-school support] breaks down the sense of a headteacher in charge of a school, and encourages system leadership – system leadership needs to involve some kind of consensus in order for it to function effectively – so you're always getting that creation of a median layer. The trick for places like York is how fast you can maintain that while still having headteachers with that dual role – specific school responsibility and wider contribution.

In terms of training for the school-to-school role, Local Leaders of Education (LLE) training was mentioned. The role was described as a mixture of giving advice, mentoring and some coaching: 'Some of it is providing a sounding board and some of it's more what I've tried and seeing if it has any relevance for your school – it might not because the two settings are very different and you have to look at what else is out there.'

Has the approach been successful?

There is evidence of impact in York, namely:

- Outside proxy indicators in terms of outcomes – for the first time each key stage (EYFS, KS2 and KS4) saw progress in narrowing the gap without a reduction in the performance of the most able.

- Evidence of improvement in individual school performance, where the improvement capacity of the LA and the YEP had been targeted.

Evidence from most inspections of schools either consolidating against the new framework or moving to good.

- Engagement in the partnership: there is full attendance at the meetings; clusters are now stronger; good attendance at heads' termly briefing; people have tended to buy back services, and full investment by schools in the commissioning pot.
- Teachers who do the school-to-school support work think what they have done has made a difference and has benefited them and their own schools too.

Summary

In summary, in my judgement, York's success to date arises from its long-term commitments and relationship with its schools, their loyalty, its size, good communication and proactive approaches of the LA including the imaginative creation of the York Education Partnership.

Recommendations

- The first overall recommendation is to explore how the YEP should be formalised, and to revisit the advantages and disadvantages of creating a formal trust.
- The second is for the LA to consider the question of whether the combination of the old ways (LA support service) and new ways (school-to-school support and TSA) of working really is a sustainable way forward. In many ways it is designed as a best of both worlds, and it is certainly valued, but is it threatened as funding reduces?
- Thirdly, to further foster, validate, celebrate and review the continued work of the clusters and see it as an integral part of the wider whole.
- The fourth recommendation is to develop the understanding of the involvement of teachers and other staff in the work of the partnership and TSA, and to explore better ways of communication. This will further strengthen buy-in.
- Finally, to explore the use of the partnership 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.