



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

Summary report

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

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Introduction

By 'middle tier' we mean the diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement.

This summary provides key pointers to leaders of middle tier bodies on how to support school improvement and school-driven systems leadership. By 'middle tier' we mean the diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement. This includes, among others, local authorities, school clusters, academy chains, Teaching School Alliances, education trusts and partnerships. The summary is based on a study carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in partnership with consultants Jonathan Crossley-Holland and David Crossley.

The move towards a more autonomous school system, driven by the Government's expansion of academies and free schools, emphasises the importance of school-to-school support. The 2010 Schools White Paper states that: "The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools, and the wider system should be designed so that our best schools and leaders can take on greater responsibility"¹. This involves driving improvement within the sector rather than relying on externally-driven interventions or top-down initiatives. Nonetheless, Mourshed *et al.*'s (2012) international review makes it clear that a middle tier to mediate between schools and central government is necessary to support and sustain school improvement.

This summary provides pointers on developing a school-led school improvement system, supported by effective partnership working with a middle tier that builds relationships, shares knowledge, facilitates peer learning, and holds accountability. It is based on:

- **case studies of how school-to-school support and the role of the middle tier is developing in five areas of England – Brighton and Hove, Hertfordshire, Wigan and York authorities and the Southend Education Trust (SET). These areas were generally seen to be doing something innovative and distinct from the traditional LA school improvement role, which might provide using learning and experience for others areas facing similar challenges.**
- **a rapid review of the evidence on how some high-performing countries enable school-driven systems leadership.**

Academy chains were not part of this study as they have been researched elsewhere².

¹ Department for Education (2010). *The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper 2010* (Cm. 7980). London: TSO. p14.

² For example in Hill, R. *et al.* (2012). *The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership*. Nottingham: National College.

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Key findings

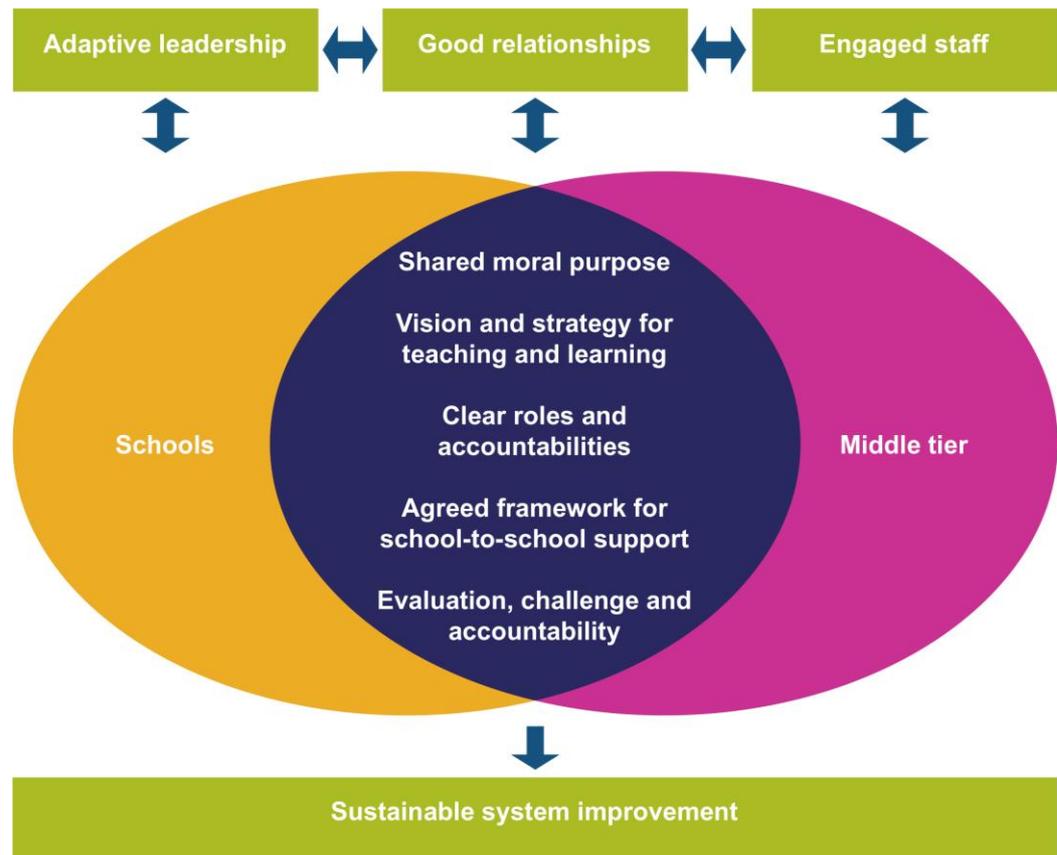
While there is no one right way for the middle tier to work with schools to develop effective school-to-school support, there are some common features to the approaches we looked at.

NFER co-funded the work with the five case-study areas. **The key findings from the case studies are below.**

- Schools were choosing to belong to a range of middle tier bod(ies) which between them provide strategic and operational functions, and a local and national perspective.
- **Strategic** partnerships generally:
 - brought together stakeholders
 - carried out long-term planning
 - established a framework for robust school to school support
 - commissioned appropriate support
 - held schools accountable for their performance.
- **Operational** networks focussed on brokerage and ensuring delivery to agreed aims as well as sometimes simply providing a supportive local environment for sharing experiences.
- Some middle tier bodies, such as the York Education Partnership and academy school chains, fulfil both strategic and operational functions; others do not. Other middle tier bodies which originally carried out an operational function, such as the Wigan Consortia and National Teaching Schools, were becoming more strategic as they found their feet.
- **Local** strategic partnerships, which embody a sense of place, were important to schools. Schools also looked to **national** middle tier bodies³ for inspiration and support.
- Case-study LAs were repositioning themselves to put schools in the lead, while securing delivery of their statutory duties through education partnerships. They were adopting a more **adaptive style of leadership**, and were prepared to move radically to enable school to school support. Many schools wanted LAs to remain players in school improvement.
- National **Teaching Schools** were increasingly important and their work seemed to be enhanced by working with other middle tier bodies in the case-study areas.
- There have been some **challenges**, particularly around:
 - delineation of roles, reflecting lack of clarity about accountability and leadership.
 - finding capacity among senior leaders to take on a systems leadership
 - engaging all schools in looking beyond their own institution's performance
 - measuring and evaluating impact effectively in the rapidly changing landscape

While there is no one right way for the middle tier to work with schools to develop effective school-to-school support, there are some common features to the approaches we looked at, presented in the diagram below.

³ For example, national collaborations of school leaders, such as the Whole Education Network and the PiXL Club.



The case-study findings chimed with those from our rapid review. This found that in high-performing countries, the middle tier nurtures and facilitates school-to-school support through:

- practical work (maintaining a knowledge of the education system, and using data to support work on the ground)
- engaging with schools' improvement work and enabling them to maximise the capacity of that work to benefit the system as a whole.
- brokering school-to-school collaboration, facilitating initial discussions and working with schools to help them as they respond to challenges or develop new approaches
- nurturing a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility for the system as a whole through effective system leadership
- helping to embed and sustain the work in individual schools and across networks
- disseminating effective practice
- being open to innovation and new ways of working.

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Case-study approaches

The case-study findings chimed with those from our rapid review. This found that in high-performing countries, the middle tier nurtures and facilitates school-to-school support.

County of Hertfordshire

Hertfordshire is a top quartile LA with 446 nursery, primary, special and PRU and 82 secondary schools. Three of the primary schools are Teaching Schools. The majority of secondary schools are academies and five are Teaching Schools. The LA has a strong relationship with its schools and has taken a radical approach working with them. It is setting up **Herts for Learning (HfL)**, a schools' company, from September 2013 to lead school improvement across the locality and respond to the schools' desire for a Hertfordshire 'Club'. HfL will be 80 per cent owned by schools and 20 per cent by the LA. HfL will deliver services to the LA to meet its statutory duties through a service level agreement, while schools will purchase services. The LA has focused on providing:

- an agreed **Framework for Monitoring, Challenge, Support and Intervention**
- 'The Hertfordshire Improvement Partner' (HIP) **performance assessment, support and action planning package**, purchased by 93 per cent of primaries
- secondary school support facilitated and commissioned by a central team. **Schools deliver approximately 70 per cent of this support.**

City of York

York City has 65 maintained schools, with whom it has good relationships. It has responded to schools' increased autonomy by creating the **York Education Partnership (YEP)** which is led by an **independent chair chosen by headteachers**. Its role is to:

- fulfil the functions of the **Schools Forum** (from which it grew originally)
- **bring together the stakeholders** and prevent fragmentation
- **develop the education strategy** for the City
- **commission services** through the **School Improvement Steering Group** which brings together the Executive Board of the Teaching School and the key school leaders from **YEP**. The LA improvement team is responsible to the Steering Group.

The LA has no votes on the YEP and, demonstrating '**adaptive leadership**', describes its role as '**servant leaders**'. Its **key role is to hold schools accountable**. As yet, it has not moved to extensive use of school-to-school support, because its current services are strong.



The City has set up a Learning Partnership to bring together school leaders

City of Brighton and Hove

The City of Brighton and Hove combines affluence with significant areas of deprivation. It has 71 schools: 56 primary, six special and nine secondary schools. One primary is a Teaching School. School performance is steadily improving. The City has set up a **Learning Partnership** to bring together school leaders. This is not currently planned to be a legal entity. Chaired by the principal of the Sixth Form College, its remit is to: set the City's education **vision and strategy**; oversee its **design and implementation**; **bring together key stakeholders**; and respond to the desire for the **local community** to work together. Alongside this, working with the Learning Partnership, the LA seeks to provide:

- a **challenge and support service** to heads and governors.
- a **strategic overview for school improvement**, which meets statutory duties, engages all schools and coordinates services
- a **performance categorisation** for all primary schools
- It has invested heavily in school-led partnerships focussed on teaching and learning, including eight, mainly cross-phase, clusters; a partnership of nine secondary schools; and the Teaching School Alliance. Schools tend to belong to more than one partnership.

Southend Education Trust

Southend has 54 schools, including one National Teaching Secondary School, and standards overall compare well with national ones. It combines considerable affluence with high levels of deprivation. Three main local partners work with schools on the improvement agenda: the LA; the Teaching School Alliance; and the Southend Education Trust (SET), which evolved from an Education Action Zone and an Excellence Cluster.

The LA has focussed on: setting a strategic direction; data collection on school performance; and the traditional group of schools causing concern. Meanwhile, SET has pioneered local school led partnerships: encouraging strong school partnerships; promoting Southend as a learning community; encouraging innovation; and providing Heads with a strong voice in shaping services for schools that fall outside the LA focus. All Southend schools are SET members, and an elected group of them make up 75 per cent of the board of trustees. In 2011/12, SET had a turnover of £4.5m, funded by government grants. Schools now fund most of SET's work since central funding decreased.

The LA is committed to partnership working and has adapted the services it still provides to support the new model

Metropolitan Borough of Wigan

Wigan Metropolitan Borough has 137 maintained schools. The LA has significantly distributed leadership, responsibility and resources to its school-led clusters. Wigan has achieved improved student outcomes and was highly praised in the Ofsted Annual Report⁷. The LA is committed to partnership working and has adapted the services it still provides to support the new model. These include data, governor services and intervention monitoring, although seconded headteachers now undertake the latter element in part. Developing a fit for purpose LA infrastructure to support partnerships was key. The main focus was on:

- **categorisation** of schools by the LA, based on their performance data
- **contracting eight phase-specific consortia** to deliver agreed improvement, supported by funding from the LA
- **identifying consortia leads** using NLE criteria and funding their involvement
- **creating an Improvement Board run by the LA to hold the consortia to account.**

The successful implementation of the model depended on **a collaborative leadership style, good relationships and shared objectives**, rather than executive power (whilst keeping in reserve judicious use of statutory and other powers where needed).

⁷ Ofsted (2012). Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12. London: TSO.



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Key pointers for the middle tier

Develop a long-term vision and strategy for Teaching and Learning, develop a framework for school-to-school support, and embed evaluation and challenge.

We suggest the key foci for the middle tier in enabling school-to-school support are:

- **Develop a long-term vision and strategy for Teaching and Learning that moves beyond compliance and to which all partners sign up. It might include:**
 - Prioritising changing the culture of LA staff and schools and developing a more adaptive leadership approach.
 - Growing system capacity. Focus on growing the number of outstanding schools and system leaders, as well as supporting lower-performing schools to improve.
 - Supporting Teaching Schools' development and effectiveness, particularly around leadership development, teacher recruitment and induction. If there is more than one Teaching School you may want to encourage specialisation to increase effectiveness.
 - Encouraging schools to ring fence funding for professional development, if necessary, by dropping less important activities to make space.
- **Develop a framework for school-to-school support, covering:**
 - An agreed data-based system for categorising all schools' performance as a basis for planning support
 - Recognition of schools' autonomy to choose which middle tier bodies they join and the way that they develop for NLEs
 - Funding to ensure capacity for leadership and intervention, produced by redeploying resources in schools and the LA
 - A mechanism for holding the operational network and strategic partnership to account for delivery against agreed objectives.
- **Embed evaluation and challenge**
 - Encourage – and support capacity building in – individual schools to embed evaluation and challenge through a common approach to developing teaching and learning, including peer-to-peer support and challenge, use of data and CPD. Leadership teams are critical in modelling the right behaviours, which can then extend across schools.
 - If necessary, have a mechanism for undertaking the challenge role if the schools feel they cannot.

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Find out more

To talk to us about the study, please contact David Sims at d.sims@nfer.ac.uk. NFER's rapid review is available [here](#). Jonathan Crossley-Holland and David Crossley's case studies are available [here](#).

About the authors

NFER is the UK's leading independent educational research charity and an active fundraiser providing evidence to influence and improve future education policy and practice. Our aim is to improve education and learning and hence the lives of learners. We work closely with schools, local authorities, government and other bodies to both deliver research evidence and support service improvement. NFER is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity (no. 313392).

Jonathan Crossley-Holland was DCS for Sheffield for 12 years and is a member of the School Teacher Review Body. He has written and worked with schools and LAs on the evolving role of the middle tier in enabling school system leadership.

David Crossley is an independent consultant who has led four very different schools and has a particular interest and involvement in school led system leadership. He created the internationally validated Raising Achievement Transforming Learning programme for the SSAT and was strategic adviser for the Middle Leadership Development Programme for the National College. Current roles include supporting the development of the Whole Education Network. His new book, *Sustainable School Transformation: An inside out approach*, will be published by Bloomsbury in 2013.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

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