

Collaborative practice insight two:

Systems and processes

About this document

This is one of a series of research informed briefs which bring together learning from Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme (SPP).

SPP is a partnership-based approach to school improvement, working collaboratively with over 1,300 schools. Through the programme, groups of schools build capacity and capability in effective school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

These research informed briefs report what school partnerships have discovered about working together through peer review and how their experience compares with wider research findings.

This brief examines what schools have discovered about the practical systems and processes that support effective peer review partnerships.

By his own admission, headteacher Ashley Izzard-Snape has learned a lot about the process of effective collaboration in the last 12 months.

'As a group of eight schools, we formed a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) in 2012. We wanted to take more control of our own destiny and develop approaches to learning which reflected the needs of our communities,' says Ashley.

'As headteachers, we knew each other. We had established a good level of trust with one another and our MAT created a framework for collaboration. But we knew we had to do more to spread effective practice across our schools.'

The Trust of which Ashley is a part – Montsaye Community Learning Partnership – is in Northamptonshire. It is made up of seven primary schools of varying sizes, and a single secondary school.

Like many new and emergent Trusts, Montsaye had begun the process of joint working with some limited school-to-school support and some cross-trust working groups focused on common issues, such as assessment. But it wasn't enough: it lacked challenge.

'We knew we had to deepen our relationships,' says Ashley. *'We wanted to understand the actual nuts and bolts of teaching and learning in all our schools, so that we could develop practice in our own school.'*

When the Trust's CEO, Ann Davey, sent Ashley an email suggesting Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) as a way

forward, he knew they were onto something: he had (simultaneously) sent her the same email!

They saw SPP as a potential route to move practice forward because it would take leaders into each other's schools in a different – and structured – way.

'It offered a way to share effective practice,' continues Ashley, *'but also to gain colleagues' perspective on challenges and barriers so that we can change practice. It's a way to move practice according to a school's own needs and ambitions – not just the Ofsted accountability framework.'*

To gain the benefits of SPP, however, both Ann and Ashley knew that common purpose and enthusiasm – essential as they were – would only take them so far. Moving forward, they knew that they had to establish behaviours and working practices that would make peer review meaningful between partner schools. In other words, it would require rigour.

Collaborating to make a difference

There is good evidence that the process of partnership matters – be that in relation to peer review or more broadly.

Academic, Jorge Ávila de Lima, has studied networks of schools across the world. He acknowledges that school networks often lack rigour (Lima, 2008).

'Despite their growing prevalence, (school) networks have become popular mainly because of faith and fads, rather than solid evidence on their benefits or rigorous analyses of their characteristics, substance and form,' de Lima says.

He points out that there is nothing inherently positive or negative about a network of schools: *'(A network) can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests.'*

Quite simply, the character of a network – and ultimately its effectiveness – is heavily influenced by the systems and processes that it adopts.

Researchers Paul Armstrong and Mel Ainscow have studied school partnerships to discover why some succeed and some fail (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018).

'It is evident that there is a strong appetite across the school system for collaboration and partnership working among school stakeholders and an understanding of the potential for sharing knowledge, intelligence, and resources as a means of improvement,' they say.

But they also warn that evidence suggests that school-to-school collaboration is not necessarily a simple strategy which guarantees progress. *'It might simply be a fad that goes well when led by skilled and enthusiastic advocates but then fades when spread more widely,'* they warn. In such circumstances, school partnerships can lead to wasted non-productive time,

as members of staff spend periods out of school, and to schools colluding with one another to reinforce mediocrity and low expectations.

It is a warning not lost on Ashley Izzard-Snape. *'We worked from the principle that the best form of support between our schools is rigorous and timely; it challenges to improve; and it is led by highly regarded peers,'* he says.

Montsaye Community Learning Partnership: principles of peer review process

All schools will be taking part and the process will be:

- reciprocal and mutually beneficial
- a joint exercise between the review team and the school
- based on the principles of genuine professional dialogue and enquiry
- a powerful model of professional development.

'To start with, we made sure that everyone involved in our peer review process was on the same page, as a simple way of ensuring rigour – and also transparency. We prepared a short briefing for leaders which explained the purpose of peer review and set out our working principles.' (See inset box.)

It was a simple initial step – but a vital one. What leaders at Montsaye had shrewdly concluded was that it's not just what you do together – it's how you do it. For rigour, process matters.

Lessons from the front line

So, what have other SPP leaders learned about the systems and processes that make their partnerships work?

Steve Wilks, a former headteacher of an outstanding secondary school in the London Borough of Redbridge, emphasises the need for tight organisation to leverage benefit from the peer review process. Although Steve has now stepped back from headship, he has been retained by school leaders in Seven Kings Teaching Alliance to provide capacity to keep the peer review programme on track. His role is tightly defined within a written job description.

'From experience of setting up other consortia, I knew that unless the organisation was absolutely tight, it could become an excuse not to do things,' says Steve. He takes the lead in coordinating the peer review schedule at the beginning of the year with headteachers. A clear focus is agreed for each review, matched with a review team with appropriate expertise. Steve organises training sessions for reviewers and convenes short meetings with all headteachers each half term to ensure the process is on track.

Every school's responsibilities within the Alliance are defined within a written partnership agreement.

'Everybody knows what they're doing,' says Steve. *'That's why they're so positive. And that's why the meetings are short! It is the best attended group I am involved with.'*

Back in Northampton, Ashley Izzard-Snape also started by making sure everyone knew what role they had to play to enable the partnership to succeed.

'I took on the role of Partnership Lead and then identified our peer reviewers from the heads and deputy heads in our schools. The reviewers saw it as a great professional development opportunity.'

'We paid special attention to how we identified our Improvement Champions (ICs). We wanted the best. We came up with a written job description and person specification for the IC roles and advertised to all teaching staff in the Trust. We asked teachers to express interest with a covering letter about why they would like to take on the role. We interviewed and appointed

Seven Kings Teaching Alliance

Advice on key processes for SPP:

- Spend time fixing dates for the whole process at the beginning of the year. If you try to fix dates as you go along, it quickly unravels and you lose momentum. Set the drumbeat for moving forward together and stick to it.
- Each year we have an evaluation session in June. Copies of all reviews are shared so that we can try to improve their consistency. We can also look for common issues that can be built into our training programmes for the following year. We review all aspects of our organisation so that we can make the necessary improvements.
- Be completely clear about requirements for sharing data and information. Establish formal agreements to avoid ambiguity.



three ICs and identified a further two 'assistant ICs' to shadow them so that we had a pipeline of future ICs.'

'It was a great way to get the calibre of teachers that we wanted as Improvement Champions – and created interest with other teachers for when we recruit again for a second year.'

Ashley funded his Improvement Champions by releasing cash they had used previously for School Improvement Partners (SIPs). *'By switching some resource from SIPs to the Improvement Champions, we were able to fund the ICs for planning, taking feedback and running workshops.'*



Setting the architecture: the role of the Partnership Lead

The process of establishing clear roles and responsibilities is what Maggie Farrar calls *'strengthening the alliance architecture.'* A former Director and interim CEO of the National College for Teaching and Leadership, she has considered how groups of schools – or clusters – develop mature approaches to collaboration (Farrar, 2015).

'(Those school groups with the strongest and deepest partnership) have agreed their priorities and the metrics by which they hold each other to account. They have agreed a system ... to share data and involve senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers,' she says. *'They have strong governance and, increasingly, portfolio leadership where each senior leader has responsibility for leading on an aspect of the work of the cluster.'*

That is why, she suggests, the role of the Partnership Lead is critical within the School Partnership Programme.

In Haringey, Tony Woodward agrees. He has been the Partnership Lead for a group of schools across Haringey for the last two years. The group is actively engaged in SPP peer review.

'I was chairing our learning partnership of schools before we got involved in SPP, so it made sense for me to take on the role of Partnership Lead,' says Tony.

'My role initially was to maintain the momentum we had built up across our partnership and to keep everyone on board, including our local authority.'

'It was time intensive at the beginning. I would probably spend an afternoon every week, making sure I was in contact with heads, that training was set up, that we had the right people in the right place. But I think I'm reaping the benefits now, because it created momentum and I was able to hand over to heads leading smaller clusters of schools. Now I spend perhaps an hour or two each week making sure we're on track and that we're all joined up.'

'As a group of heads and colleagues, we are all very like-minded. We understand one another and stand by one another; we have a rapport. I like to feel that heads know that I am there for them. They can ask me anything and I will find the answer.'

In fact, research underlines the experience of Haringey's school leaders: that clarity of roles within a partnership is critical to success.

Writing for the Harvard Business Review, Lynda Gratton from the London Business School explored how organisations encourage effective partnerships (Gratton and Erickson, 2007).

Gratton challenged her readers: *'Which is more important to promoting collaboration: a clearly defined approach toward achieving the goal, or clearly specified roles for individual team members?'*

Gratton reflected that a common assumption is that carefully spelling out the approach is essential, but leaving the roles of individuals within the team vague will encourage people to share ideas and contribute in multiple dimensions.

'Our research shows that the opposite is true,' she wrote. *'Collaboration improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood – when individuals feel that they can do a significant portion of their work independently. Without such clarity, team members are likely to waste too much energy negotiating roles or protecting turf, rather than focus on the task.'*

Gratton concludes: *'Strengthening your organisation's capacity for collaboration requires a combination of long-term investments – in building relationships and trust, in developing a culture in which senior leaders are role models of cooperation – and smart near-term decisions about the ways teams are formed, roles are defined, and challenges and tasks are articulated.'*

Back at Montsaye, it is possible to see how 'smart near-term' decisions around peer review are contributing to long-term investments in deeper partnerships across the Trust.

Headteachers across the Trust meet fortnightly, with a standing item for 'peer support' at every meeting

– which includes planning the mechanics of SPP. By embedding peer review into leadership discourse, the nature of the interaction between leaders has changed. The focus on peer review is a 'smart near-term decision' to bring rigour into improvement planning which, in turn, contributes to long-term investments in effective, knowledge-based partnerships.

What skills do partnership leads need?

Leading educationalists, Steve Munby and Michael Fullan, considered the skills needed by a new kind of school leader, able to bring about collective improvement across the wider school system. Their list makes a good checklist for the skills and behaviours needed by school leaders participating in SPP peer review:

- skilled at giving robust and honest feedback with candour and empathy
- highly data literate, able to combine quantitative and qualitative information to create new insights into inter-school performance
- skilled at problem definition and solution design, helping to create innovative new approaches with key local partners
- able to create and drive effective collaborative networks of schools; learns from the group and helps the group learn
- able to develop approaches which share accountability and collective responsibility
- a courageous grasper of nettles, willing to confront poor performance on the basis of moral purpose
- has a deep understanding of whole-system reform issues and how to make sense of them at local level in the interests of student learning
- passionate about the work and able to agitate for systemic change at the local level
- exceptional networker and connector of people; able to broker constructive relationships where none looked possible
- demonstrates ambition for the system while modelling humility for self.

(Munby and Fullan, 2016)

Transferring knowledge, developing models of improvement

So, what have other SPP leaders learned about the systems and processes that make their partnerships work?

That combination of long-term investments and near-term decisions is evident in the network of school improvement partnerships across Essex. Schools across the county are grouped in 36 partnerships, most of which are engaged in peer review. The partnerships cover more than 400 schools.

Leaders in Essex set out to ensure that every school is in a formal partnership. The model is built on clarity of purpose. A formal document sets out what an accountable partnership means in practice (Kershaw, 2016), agreed between Essex County Council, Essex Primary Heads Association, the Association of Secondary Heads in Essex, Essex Special Schools Education Trust and Essex School Governors. It sets an expectation that schools will support each other and headteachers will participate within partnerships. It is a long-term investment in building the right relationships.

Nicola Woolf has the task of facilitating the near-term decisions that enable partnerships to work. Formally head of an outstanding school, she is Assistant Director of Education for West Essex.

'Working at scale, our greatest challenge is building and sustaining the momentum of partnership,' she says.

Nicola brings more than 30 partnership leads together once a term, ensuring that meetings include a development input as well as formal business – as a payback for participants. *'We set out to invest in partnership leads,'* says Nicola. *'We work together to*

develop tools which can support every partnership. We have recently published a partnership evaluation and development tool – which includes peer review evaluation – to establish some common ways of working.'

We work together to develop tools which can support every partnership.

'We also put effort into making the work of partnerships visible – to encourage others to consider it and also to demonstrate the importance we attach to it. Partnerships are producing case studies of their work and we are bringing everyone together in an annual "partnership conference".'

By creating processes for sharing learning and insights, coupled with peer review, partnerships across Essex are building a body of knowledge about effective school improvement for their own context – and a means of transferring that knowledge.

Headteachers in Essex are discovering that SPP peer review can be a mechanism for thinking through approaches to school improvement. For some partnerships, the programme is revealing what works

to make a difference. They are building their own theories of change – enabling schools to develop knowledge-based, replicable processes, which could help to drive school improvement at scale.

Former Ofsted chief, Christine Gilbert, believes this is a vital step for mature school partnerships. She has investigated the development of education partnerships in England. While almost all the partnerships she examined had spent time working out their vision, values and priorities, far fewer had gone further to establish the processes to drive improvement (Gilbert, 2017).

'Initially, very few (partnerships) spent time explicitly devising and articulating a model for collective improvement, most particularly how knowledge and

skills would be transferred and developed across the system,' she says. 'So, although most referred to the importance of a self-improving system or a school-led system, few had initially thought through exactly what that meant for the way they worked as a partnership and even fewer about how it might align to evidence. They had not really thought through their theory of change.'

As partnerships have matured, Gilbert says it has become more common for successful school networks to analyse the key elements of their approach to improvement and how it is different from the approach adopted in the past. The best are finding creative ways of releasing capacity to support improvement across their partnerships.



Building on strong relationships

Schools in Haringey, where Tony Woodward is the Partnership Lead, started the School Partnership Programme with the advantage of having worked together as a mature network learning community (NLC) since 2003. Today, schools are clustered in six NLCs, varying in size, each with a clear structure and purpose and all engaged in the SPP peer review programme. The chairs of all the NLCs meet twice a term.

'We wanted to explore ways of supporting each other collaboratively which went beyond a rigid Ofsted-style model,' says Tony. 'That's when we looked at Education Development Trust's SPP model for peer review, among others. We wanted to find a process for assessing the impact of our schools working together. We were drawn to peer review because, as an NLC, we wanted to open ourselves to external scrutiny.'

The longevity of local partnerships has undoubtedly helped them get a peer review process off the ground, says Tony. '(Our existing relationships) meant that heads were able to make decisions together, work out the challenges together. It didn't feel top-down. It's definitely been a bottom-up approach.'

The approach is underpinned with clear systems and processes.

With NLCs, schools are organised into small clusters, each with a cluster-lead who takes responsibility for maintaining momentum behind the peer review process. They set dates, keep lines of communication flowing and act as a general point of contact to keep the process moving.

There have been regular training sessions for key players in the peer review process – especially Improvement Champions. *'Originally, every cluster of schools had two or three Improvement Champions,' says Tony, 'but you always have to be thinking ahead so that you have a pool of trained ICs, even if you lose some when they move to other jobs.'*

Tony's next goal is to develop a stronger network to link all their ICs together more closely.

Schools began to share data five years ago. That enables reviews to pick up any patterns across schools that emerge from the data. Actions that schools take after a review are shared across the whole NLC, so that solutions to common challenges can be considered by all schools, where relevant.

Together the NLCs are beginning to form a body of knowledge and a framework for change to sustain their schools' effectiveness.

Towards maturity: growing together

Tony Woodward's agenda in Haringey is very different to Nicola Woolf's 400-school-challenge in Essex – which is different again to Ashley Izzard-Snape's mission in an emerging multi-academy trust. But they have common strengths. Each understands that partnerships without rigour are of limited value – and that peer review can be a means of bringing constructive challenge (and support) to relationships. Tony, Nicola and Ashley are each investing in the 'how', as well as the 'why' of partnership.

The evidence suggests they are right to do so.¹ Effective collaboration is not an easy business.

Often, the strength of a partnership is only tested when the going gets tough.

Studying school-to-school partnerships, researchers Armstrong and Ainscow put this simply: 'It is relatively easy to maintain cooperation until the moments when hard decisions have to be made, most particularly regarding the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources. That is when the quality – and maturity – of a partnership is tested.' (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018).

This is where focused and rigorous peer review is able to pay a partnership dividend. The SPP programme brings partners together in a structured 'improvement workshop' to set an action plan and support arrangements. The tricky issues of priorities and resource allocation, highlighted by Armstrong and Ainscow, are brought into the open in a transparent process.

Back in 2012, Professor David Hargreaves considered the quality of school partnerships when he offered a 'maturity model' for a self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2014). Among other things, he said mature collaborations paid attention to 'partnership competence' and 'collaborative capital'.

Partnership competence is the skill of working in partnership together. It includes a requirement for fit governance and robust systems for evaluation and challenge. Collaborative capital, on the other hand, describes the skills and talents that a mature partnership assembles: creative entrepreneurs, disciplined innovators, analytic investigators and alliance architects.

Done well, peer review can contribute to both competence and capital.

By definition, it injects evaluation and challenge into a school partnership. That contributes to Hargreaves' 'partnership competence'. But the process of peer review – managed well – also builds collaborative capital. It creates the investigators, analysts and architects that Hargreaves suggested were needed for a mature partnership.

**Done well, peer review
can contribute to both
competence and capital.**

1. Research suggests that the effectiveness of school collaborations is mixed. Some have been shown to make a difference to student outcomes; many have not. (See, for example: Ainscow, 2015; Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Fielding et al., 2005; Mujs et al., 2011; Greany, 2017; Sammons, et al., 2007; Woods et al., 2006).

A means to an end and an end in itself

Back in Northampton, the team at Montsaye may be near the start of the journey, but it seems their approach could pay a double dividend: competence and capital.

The effort invested to define, recruit and support their Improvement Champions, for example, may result in more than identifying short-term resource; it could also be building capital for the future.

'This process is deepening our relationships, as schools, and building even greater trust for the future,' says Ashley. 'It's about improving our schools and outcomes for our young people.'

Bibliography

- Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards self-improving school systems: Lessons from a city challenge*. London: Routledge.
- Armstrong, P. and Ainscow, M. (2018) 'School-to-school support within a competitive education system: Views from the inside.' *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 29:4, 614–633.
- Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2010) 'School-based networking for educational change.' In A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan and D. Hopkins (eds.), *Second handbook of educational change* (pp. 765–780). London: Springer.
- Farrar, M. (2015) 'Learning together: The power of cluster-based school improvement.' Seminar Series 249, Centre for Strategic Education.
- Fielding, M., Bragg, S., Craig, J., Cunningham, I., Eraut, M., Gillinson, S., . . . Thorp, J. (2005) 'Factors influencing the transfer of good practice' (Research Report No. 615). Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.
- Gilbert, C. (2017) 'Optimism of the will: The development of local area-based education partnerships. A think-piece.' London: Institute of Education UCL.
- Gratton, L. and Erickson, T. J. (2007) *Eight ways to build collaborative teams*. Boston: Harvard Business Review, November.
- Greany, T. (2017) 'Collaboration, partnerships and system leadership across schools.' In P. Earley and T. Greany (eds.), *School leadership and education system reform* (pp. 56–65). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hargreaves, D. (2014) 'A self-improving school system and its potential for reducing inequality.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 40:6, 696–714.
- Kershaw, C. (2016) 'Schools are not islands.' In R. Blatchford and R. Clark (eds.), *Self-improving schools: The journey to excellence*. Melton: John Catt Educational Ltd.
- Lima, J. A. (2008) 'Thinking more deeply about networks in education.' *Journal of Educational Change*, 11:1, 1–21.
- Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and West, M. (2011) *Collaboration and networking in education*. London: Springer.
- Munby, S. and Fullan, M. (2016) *Inside out and downside up: How leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems*. Reading: Education Development Trust & Motion Leadership.
- Sammons, P., Mujtaba, T., Earl, L. and Gu, Q. (2007) 'Participation in network learning community programmes and standards of pupil achievement: Does it make a difference?' *School Leadership & Management*, 27:3, 213–238.
- Woods, P. A., Levacic, R., Evans, J., Castle, F., Glatter, R. and Cooper, D. (2006) 'Diversity and collaboration?' Diversity Pathfinders evaluation (Research Report No. 826). London: Department for Education and Skills.

WHO ARE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT TRUST?

At Education Development Trust, we transform lives by improving education around the world. Our specialist knowledge means we design and deliver effective, sustainable education solutions tailored to the local context. As a not-for-profit organisation, we invest annually in our programme of research because it matters to us that teachers benefit from the latest best practice.

HOW DO I FIND OUT MORE?

To find out more, get in touch at
partnerships@educationdevelopmenttrust.com
www.SchoolsPartnershipProgramme.com
0118 902 1661.

