

## GwE Report/2025

# GwE:

## Schools Partnership Programme

### Introduction

#### The Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) in North Wales

Over the past five years, Education Development Trust (EDT) has collaborated with GwE, the North Wales regional consortium, to implement the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) across 255 schools, representing over half of the schools in the region. This report discusses the impact of SPP, which aims to foster collaboration, build leadership capacity, and drive sustainable school improvement. Through this structured collaborative school improvement model, the programme aligns with Welsh Government priorities, including self-evaluation, collaborative school partnerships to help drive school improvement, and the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales.



“It has been a real pleasure to work with colleagues from GwE and the schools in North Wales that took part in the programme.

“Key to the success of the programme is creating professional networks which will outlive the programme helping to embed the right culture and to develop the key skills and practices that are required to sustain the approach over time.

“With around half of all the schools in the GwE region having completed the programme, I have no doubt that they will continue their own school improvement journey with great success.”

**Nicola Gillard – Senior Programme Manager, Schools Partnership Programme – Education Development Trust**



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## Background

GWE partnered with EDT to develop a regionally consistent peer review model across North Wales to establish a self-improving school system rooted in collaborative support and leadership development across the six local authorities in the region.

The approach was based on the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) framework, which utilises a supportive peer review process to drive collaborative school improvement.

By fostering strong relationships through knowledge sharing, practice evaluation and accelerated learning of effective school improvement strategies, the SPP framework helps schools collaborate effectively, building trust, leadership capacity, and robust networks both within and between schools (Godfrey, 2020).

## The Schools Partnership Programme (SPP): practical applications

SPP applies the theoretical principles of a 'Learning Organisation' (OECD, 2013) and a 'Self-Improving School System' (Hargreaves, 2012) through a structured maturity model framework that guides sustainable school development.

By embedding a reciprocal peer review process, SPP serves as a vehicle for school improvement enabling colleagues to share knowledge, evaluate practices, and accelerate learning while building Professional Learning Networks (PLNs).



Research shows that sustained, collaborative professional development, particularly through coaching and long-duration Continuous Professional Development (CPD) initiatives, significantly impacts teacher learning within PLNs (Ventista & Brown, 2023).

The framework offers a peer-led model to support Teacher Professional Development (TPD), build leadership capacity, foster trust, and establish networks for knowledge sharing. The programme's JPD approach focuses on collaborative, practice-based learning, through coaching and improvement workshops, integral to the school improvement process (Godfrey & Muñoz-Chereau, 2024).

The networks created and strengthened between schools and the wider education system ensure fluid knowledge sharing and the exchange of expertise, to improve pupil outcomes and drive innovation in schools. PLNs make schools more responsive to their communities and help them to address shared challenges such as social deprivation and inclusion (Greany and Kamp, 2022).

## **The Welsh context and regional adaptations**

SPP aligns closely with the Welsh Government's statutory guidance on school collaboration for improvement. The guidance encourages Welsh schools to engage in cycles of self-evaluation and improvement planning, with support from local and regional authorities, to foster continuous reflection, professional growth, and enhanced student outcomes (Welsh Government).

The SPP model operationalises these principles, providing a framework that builds leadership capacity, strengthens partnerships and ensures local ownership of improvement processes - an approach proven effective through the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) independent three-year evaluation of the programme (EEF, 2023).

Recognising the need for a flexible, school-led improvement model, GwE commissioned Education Development Trust to develop a collaborative school improvement framework that aligns with regional goals.

The resulting SPP model allowed schools to set their own goals, choose peer partners, engage in reflective practice and JPD. The approach aligned with the Welsh Government's aim to create a collaborative, self-improving school system that empowers educators at all levels.

In response to the bilingual needs of North Wales, GwE and SPP trained Welsh-speaking facilitators and translated all resources into Welsh, ensuring inclusivity for Welsh-medium schools. This bilingual approach reflects the commitment to preserving the Welsh language and supporting the Curriculum for Wales.



## Capturing impact: our approach

This report draws on a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact on schools by combining quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout the programme's implementation. Data was collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and workshop observations. This approach was planned to capture participants' experiences, assess the programme's impact, and uncover any challenges or unexpected outcomes that emerged.

### Consultation process

In the initial stages, GwE conducted a comprehensive consultation with school staff and leaders across primary, secondary, and special school sectors. This engagement aimed to ensure that the model developed would be both owned by the schools and flexible enough to address their unique needs. Feedback from these consultations informed the structure of the GwE-SPP collaboration, highlighting the necessity for a supportive, non-judgmental peer review process grounded in trust, transparency, and shared professional responsibility.

### Surveys

Surveys were distributed to understand attitudes, evaluate programme delivery, track skills, and perceived impact over the duration of the implementation.

The consultation gauged participants' initial confidence levels, appetite for collaboration, and attitudes toward school partnerships and informed the approach.

The data indicated a high level of interest in collaborative processes, setting a positive foundation for the GwE-SPP programme.

Surveys during engagement asked participants to reflect on their SPP experiences and evaluate various outcomes, including:

- Development of leadership skills.
- Beliefs around effective collaboration.
- Perceived strengths and areas for improvement in working as partners.
- Specific impacts of the SPP as defined by participants, including the programme’s effectiveness in meeting their partnership goals.

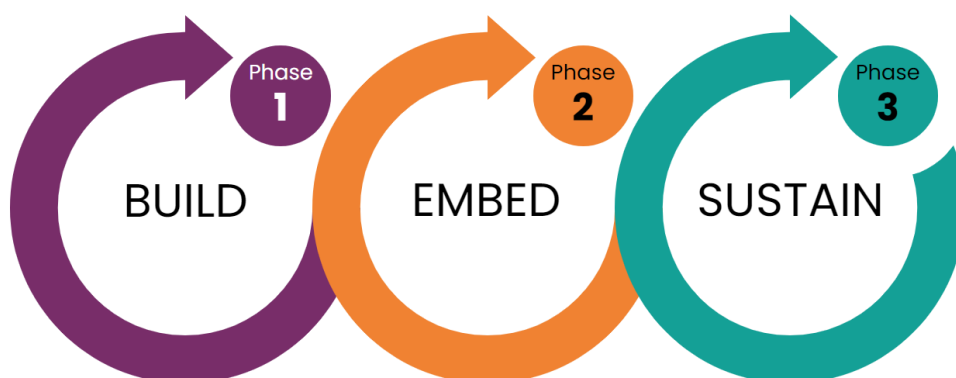
School leaders / Peer Reviewers (PRs) and Improvement Facilitators (IFs) were surveyed, enabling insights into the experiences of both those directly involved in the facilitation of improvement workshops and school leadership who conducted peer reviews and were responsible for school improvement.

### Interviews and focus groups

In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with GwE leaders, school leaders, PRs and IFs from selected partnerships to gain a deeper understanding of the programme’s impact. Conducted throughout the duration of the project, these interviews aimed to gather qualitative data to assess the programme’s success, highlight any unexpected impacts, and identify challenges encountered by participants. Findings from these discussions provided valuable context for qualitative impact stories, which illustrated specific examples of the programme’s implementation and impact.

### The SPP Model

SPP uses an enquiry-based framework in three phases to:



- Build peer review skills of school leaders across middle and senior leadership.
- Embed the culture change across all levels - rather than just at the top.
- Sustain the continuous cycle of improvement through planning and professional development.

This is achieved by having sustained, collaborative professional development through training of key roles; PRs and IFs, which include regular impact and evaluation meetings to support undertaking the improvement cycle which is implemented independently by

participants in their settings. The improvement cycle involves three stages; self-review, peer review led by a team of Peer Reviewers from partner schools and an improvement workshop led by Improvement Facilitators from partner schools.

### **Key Role 1: peer reviewer (PR)**

Peer Reviewers are equipped with the skills and tools to carry out effective and focused peer reviews, supported by high-quality training, effective framework and process for peer review. Peer reviewers engage in continuous professional development throughout the programme including; collaborative practice and leadership, using evidence and data to make informed evaluations and system analysis. The independent EEF evaluation of the programme said:



Reviewers learned valuable skills of reviewing and self-evaluation; and school leaders learned how to collaborate more rigorously and transparently, offering increasing challenge to each other with time, and enabling more fluid knowledge exchange and shared professional development that benefitted their staff and schools

EEF, 2023.



### **Key Role 2: improvement facilitator (IF)**

Improvement Facilitators take ownership of school and partnership improvement by becoming experts in coaching and facilitating improvement workshops. The training develops coaching and facilitation skills, using evidence-based improvement strategies and school-based research. Their role is to monitor the impact of peer review by ensuring progress is made on the outcomes of The independent EEF. The evaluation of the programme said:



The ‘improvement champions’ (IFs) training gave them the methodology, skills and tools to lead an improvement process in a partner school. The headteachers and ‘improvement champions’ (IFs) we interviewed were highly complementary on the training they received for this role.

EEF, 2023.



## Impact

### Benefit 1: creating a shared vision

One of the core benefits of (SPP) is the ability to bring schools together under a shared, impact-driven vision. Part of the process of the programme is to establish a Professional Learning Network (PLN) with a clear purpose, shared values, and well-defined goals. Shared objectives not only align the network's efforts but also provide a basis for measuring success, enabling participants to understand their roles and contributions within the network (Stoll et al., 2006; Greany & Kamp, 2022).

SPP encourages and creates an environment of trust and openness by ensuring that participants develop shared values, practices, and attributes such as solidarity, reciprocity, honesty, and lateral trust. The training involves developing the ability to provide formative and developmental feedback using the shared principles, which are shown to be fundamental to creating a cohesive and collaborative culture and an effective, sustainable community network (Stoll et al., 2006; Hargreaves, 2010).

Headteachers taking part in SPP were asked to report on their shared vision and goals through their SPP partnerships, the analysis of their responses showed key themes:

#### Collaborative culture

Building a collaborative culture based on mutual trust and support was a primary goal, by creating positive working environments across school clusters. Clusters shared a vision of becoming self-improving systems, supported by collaborative workshops targeting common school improvement priorities. Schools within clusters collaborated to share best practices, develop new curricula, and enhance evaluation systems through mutual support. The partnerships aimed to build the confidence of individuals within the partnership, encouraging learning from each other and acting as supportive and constructive partners.

#### Shared targets and priorities

Schools aligned their efforts by setting shared goals from their School Development Plans (SDPs), including areas such as differentiation, behaviour management, outdoor learning, and the new curriculum. Schools within clusters supported each other by sharing good practices and working together to improve. This included developing new curricula and supporting each other's scrutiny and evaluation systems.

#### Quality of education and curriculum evaluation

A major focus has been evaluating the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) to ensure it meets diverse learner needs, delivers balanced experiences, and fosters holistic development. Shared plans focused on self-evaluation processes and action-oriented development planning which included; Quality Assurance of teaching and learning through collaborative efforts.

This involved supporting each other's schools in reflecting on current practices and using peer evaluations to strengthen implementation of continuous school improvement. Partnerships aimed to improve peer support within classrooms to enhance student attitudes, performance, engagement, and aspirations, which was a focus of particular attention to schools in areas facing deprivation. Some clusters emphasised STEM education as a priority, aiming to improve educational outcomes in these critical disciplines.

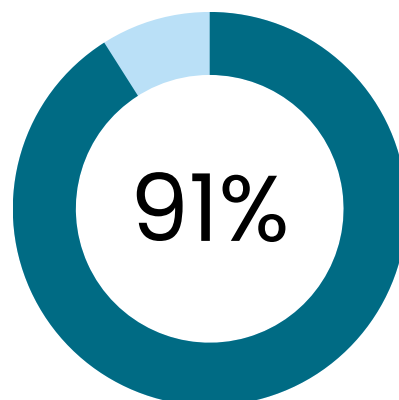


## Benefit 2: strengthening relationships

Strengthened relationships and partnerships between schools significantly improve the quality of education. Michael Fullan's research consistently demonstrates that collaborative school cultures enhance student learning outcomes (Fullan, 2016). John Hattie's research on effect sizes emphasises that collective teacher efficacy, is one of the most significant factors influencing student achievement, collective efficacy and trust develops as teachers collaborate, share practices, and work together to enhance student outcomes (Donohoo et al, 2018).

International studies by the OECD highlight that school-to-school collaboration contributes to educational innovation, equity, and system-wide improvement (OECD, 2013). Such partnerships enable schools to draw on diverse strengths and create tailored solutions to local challenges (Armstrong, 2015).

The GwE Headteacher survey results show that **91% of respondents indicated strong or very strong relationships between schools** as a result of participating in the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP).



**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
PARTNER SCHOOLS  
STRONG / VERY STRONG**



I really enjoyed the process – not only on a school improvement basis, but also for the support and collaboration SPP develops amongst colleagues. We already had a strong cluster ethos, but this has opened us up more deeply by getting staff into each other's schools to work and share good practices.

**Headteacher – GwE Survey**

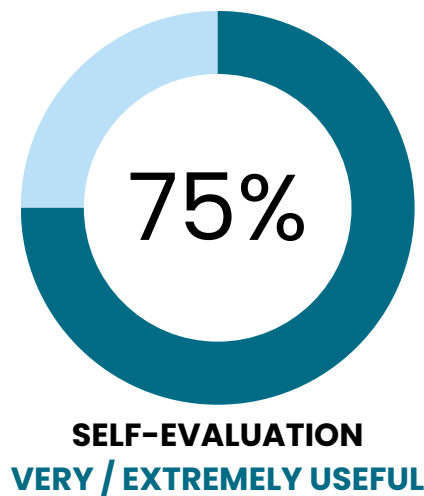


### Benefit 3: Framework for self-evaluation

Research strongly supports the importance of self-evaluation in schools as a means to drive improvement and ensure high-quality education. Self-evaluation helps schools identify strengths and weaknesses, align priorities, and maintain accountability for student outcomes, by providing clarity, structure, and direction. Having a robust framework helps schools focus on the most impactful areas, such as teaching quality, curriculum effectiveness, and student well-being. It ensures evaluations are not only comprehensive but also targeted at areas that directly influence student outcomes (DfE, 2015).

The SPP framework helps schools use both qualitative and quantitative data to inform their self-evaluation and improvement decisions.

The GwE Headteacher survey found that **75% of Headteachers found self-evaluation using the SPP framework very or extremely useful**. A robust framework for self-evaluation in schools is critical to a structured, consistent, and evidence-based approach to assessing and improving practices.



The SPP framework uses an evidence-based approach to improve objectivity. This enables leaders to focus on areas for improvement effectively whilst simultaneously embedding a reflective culture, where staff feel empowered to adapt and innovate (Chapman & Sammons, 2013).

Having a framework for self-evaluation allows schools to reflect and discuss their progress with partner schools with similar challenges, encouraging shared learning and collaboration (OECD, 2013), resulting in shared accountability and creating a culture of continuous learning and growth.



The self-evaluation process has been the most useful for us. It has been really beneficial for teachers who were not as comfortable when self-evaluation activity was happening previously. This was something new we were trying, it was really positive and they didn't mind the process at all as it did help them.

**Headteacher - GwE Survey**

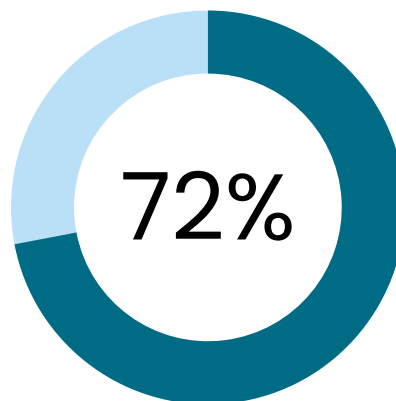


#### **Benefit 4: effective peer review**

Peer review is highly effective in schools as it fosters collaboration, accountability, and professional growth among educators. It builds a culture of trust and teamwork, encouraging open dialogue and reflective practice that enhances teaching and learning (Godfrey & Muñoz-Chereau, 2024).

Peer review frameworks, such as the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP), play a pivotal role in creating professional learning by enabling educators to examine diverse classroom practices and adapt effective strategies to align with their school's goals. Observing others' practices uncovers knowledge and best practices that might have remained hidden, creating opportunities for shared growth.

Furthermore, peer review sharpens evaluative skills by encouraging evidence-based analysis of teaching and learning. Peer review develops educators' ability to assess lesson plans, observe teaching, and evaluate the impact of these strategies on student outcomes. (Godfrey, 2020). **72% of Headteachers surveyed found that conducting a Peer Review in partner schools was very or extremely beneficial.**



**PEER REVIEW OF  
PARTNER SCHOOLS  
VERY / EXTREMELY  
USEFUL**

Headteachers reported that being reviewed validated self-reviews and supported leadership confidence and self-efficacy. Schools reported feeling better prepared for external inspections, as the process develops their ability to articulate strengths and areas for development which also boosts the confidence and morale among staff preparing for external evaluation.

Read two headteachers experience of what it was like to be reviewed by school partners:

“The team's findings confirmed my opinion as a headteacher which strengthened the school's evaluation. There were a few things I hadn't realised. The other headteachers were smart and picked up on things and this gave me more faith in the process. It improves the element of accountability ensuring that the improvement plan is prioritised.”

“(the review) confirmed our own evaluation of the situation and this gave us (leadership) further credibility with staff who might be 'reluctant' to change. (In other words, 'it's not just us that are saying this - look, professionals from the cluster think it also!')

By formalising relationships through a peer review framework, schools benefit from alignment and consistency in practices across networks of schools. SPP drives sustainable, meaningful change by creating a framework for mutual learning, professional trust, and shared responsibility for school improvement.

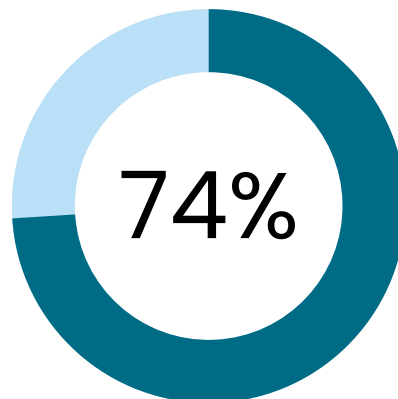
## Benefit 5: Improvement workshops

A distinctive feature of the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) is the inclusion of "Improvement Workshops" as a crucial follow-up step after a peer review. Unlike other peer review programmes, SPP emphasises sustained collaboration, encouraging schools to work together beyond the review to address shared priorities.

Improvement Facilitators, trained specifically for this step, play a key role in guiding schools through this process. The Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) independent three-year evaluation highlighted the Improvement Workshops as instrumental in empowering staff at all levels and fostering a sense of ownership over school improvement priorities (EEF, 2023).

Dr. David Godfrey and Dr. Bernardita Muñoz-Chereau (2024), summarising the EEF-funded evaluation, emphasised the significance of leadership development across all roles:

“The SPP demonstrates the importance of leadership development not only for headteachers but also for mid-level leaders and classroom teachers. Policymakers and school leaders should prioritise programmes that build leadership capacity at all levels, enabling teachers to lead professional learning communities and drive school improvement. This distributed leadership approach aligns with the findings that teacher leadership can significantly enhance school effectiveness and teacher engagement”



**IMPROVEMENT CHAMPION  
WORKSHOPS IN PARTNER SCHOOLS  
VERY / EXTREMELY USEFUL**

The GwE Headteacher survey found that **74% of respondents considered Improvement Workshops in partner schools to be very or extremely useful**, with a headteacher noting:

“

“It has developed staff confidence and helped us to look inwards and outwards. As a school we look forward to being able to work together with other schools within the region.”

”

Improvement Facilitators reported that being an Improvement Facilitator has:

- Further developed leadership skills.
- More involved in planning the school's improvement.
- Feel empowered to identify areas that need improvement.
- Feel more empowered to bring forward solutions to challenges.

Reflecting on the SPP process a Headteacher noted:

“

“Coaching and discussions with staff were excellent. There is evidence of more differentiation techniques in lessons across the school. Staff have shared good practice. Some approaches (e.g. scaffolding) help desk, word mats are becoming more regularly used.”

”

The structured and collaborative approach of peer reviews followed by improvement workshops ensures that improvement efforts are sustained and driven by all staff in a culture of trust, shared leadership, and continuous professional growth.

The EEF's independent evaluation (2023) emphasised the importance of empowering staff to actively participate in the improvement process, noting that this significantly enhances staff engagement and ownership of school improvement initiatives. Training more staff to lead improvement communities within schools is essential to increasing capacity and driving lasting change.

“

“Releasing staff to make this type of visit would have been almost impossible without it being funded by GwE.”

“SPP experience was at times, difficult to complete and we felt this was an additional pressure on staff.”

“We want to continue the SPP model in-school and with partner schools. For our in-school self-improvement, we have increased the staff that are trained.”

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## Impact Stories

The impact stories demonstrate enhanced collaboration, capacity building, and sustainable improvement across diverse school contexts. A common theme among the schools is the development of stronger inter-school relationships, built through formalised peer review processes and shared professional development. Despite initial challenges—such as coordination issues, reluctance to engage, and disruptions caused by Covid-19, the implementation of SPP has led to improved behaviour strategies, curriculum alignment, and teacher engagement.

Key themes emerge highlighting how SPP fosters trust and collaboration while supporting evidence towards Welsh inspection frameworks, promoting mutual accountability over competition. Challenges remain, particularly around time management, sustaining momentum, and ensuring depth in reviews.

Schools have mitigated these issues by embedding SPP practices into regular workflows and prioritising leadership development. Notably, funding and structured success measurement are critical factors for long-term sustainability.

These findings highlight the critical importance of a clear and structured framework, ensuring staff buy-in through robust induction processes, and sustained funding support for ongoing professional development (CPD) to maximise the benefits of SPP and further embed a culture of continuous improvement in Wales.

- [Impact story 1 - Coastal North Wales Primary School](#)
- [Impact story 2 - A cluster of seven schools in North Wales](#)
- [Impact story 3 - Ysgol Penmorfa](#)
- [Impact story 4 - Ysgol yr Hendre](#)
- [Impact story 5 - A rural primary school](#)





## Conclusion

This report demonstrates SPP's impact, offering insights into how peer review and collaboration can drive meaningful, sustainable improvement in education systems. The GwE-SPP partnership has created a robust framework for school improvement in North Wales, underpinned by collaboration, bilingual inclusivity, and alignment with national policies.

Llyr Gilmour Jones, Data and Quality Unit Lead and Supporting Improvement Advisor for GwE, said:

“The experience of taking part in SPP has enriched leadership across the GwE region. Headteachers are thriving in their roles as peer reviewers and middle leaders are contributing as improvement champions, to facilitate and develop the continuous improvement process in their own and partner schools.

It is easy to see the impact the programme has had on all aspects of peer collaboration, and on deepening relationships with their partner schools.”

The implementation of the SPP across North Wales has delivered lasting impacts on school improvement by fostering trust, collaboration, and shared learning among schools. The peer review framework and JPD model have effectively enhanced leadership capacity, strengthened PLN, and driven evidence-based decision-making.

By building strong school partnerships and aligning with local and national priorities, including the Curriculum for Wales, SPP has cultivated a reflective and accountable school culture. The SPP model, with its emphasis on distributed leadership and JPD, has shown that collaborative cultures where educators work together towards common goals lead to enhanced student outcomes and greater teacher engagement.

The GwE-SPP partnership has been transformative, demonstrating how peer review, leadership development, and collaborative networks can support a self-improving school system. It provides a scalable model for driving sustainable change in education both within Wales and beyond.

Prepared by Michelle Richards, Partnerships Manager.

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