



Joint practice development through a peer-led school improvement partnership: research-driven recommendations for policymakers and school leaders

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Introduction

This paper presents a summary of a three-year project funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) evaluating the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP). The SPP is a peer-led, collaborative school improvement model in England, developed by the Education Development Trust (EDT), where clusters of schools conduct peer reviews and support one another's improvement. The study was conducted by academics at the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership and involved both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a quasi-experimental impact evaluation and a mixed-methods process evaluation (Godfrey et al., 2023).

This condensed report focuses on key findings and offers research-driven recommendations for policymakers and school leaders, specifically regarding how peer-led initiatives can foster teacher professional development (TPD), improve school outcomes, and encourage leadership. The theoretical underpinning is based on the Joint Practice Development (JPD) model, where learning is collaborative, practice based and deeply integrated into the fabric of school improvement (Sebba et al., 2012).

Context and theoretical framework

The concept of peer-led school improvement has been championed as a strategy within the self-improving school system (SISS) in England. Peer reviews and collaborative school partnerships have been promoted as mechanisms for achieving system leadership and professional or horizontal accountability, while reducing the dominance of top-down accountability systems (Hargreaves, 2010). OECD research underscores the benefits of peer reviews, particularly in high-stakes accountable education systems like that of England, where external evaluation pressures can be counterproductive to school collaboration (Hofer et al., 2020; OECD, 2013).

The SPP operates by creating clusters of schools, where self-evaluation and peer review serve as the foundation for improvement activities. The SPP model is deeply embedded in the JPD model (Fielding et al., 2005), where teachers and leaders work together to learn from one another, share expertise, and co-create solutions to common challenges (Brown et al., 2016). This model departs from hierarchical, top-down approaches to professional development and instead promotes mutual learning and knowledge exchange (Sebba et al., 2012).



The SPP model

Peer review:

Schools take turns to review one another, focusing on self-identified areas for improvement.

1

Improvement workshops:

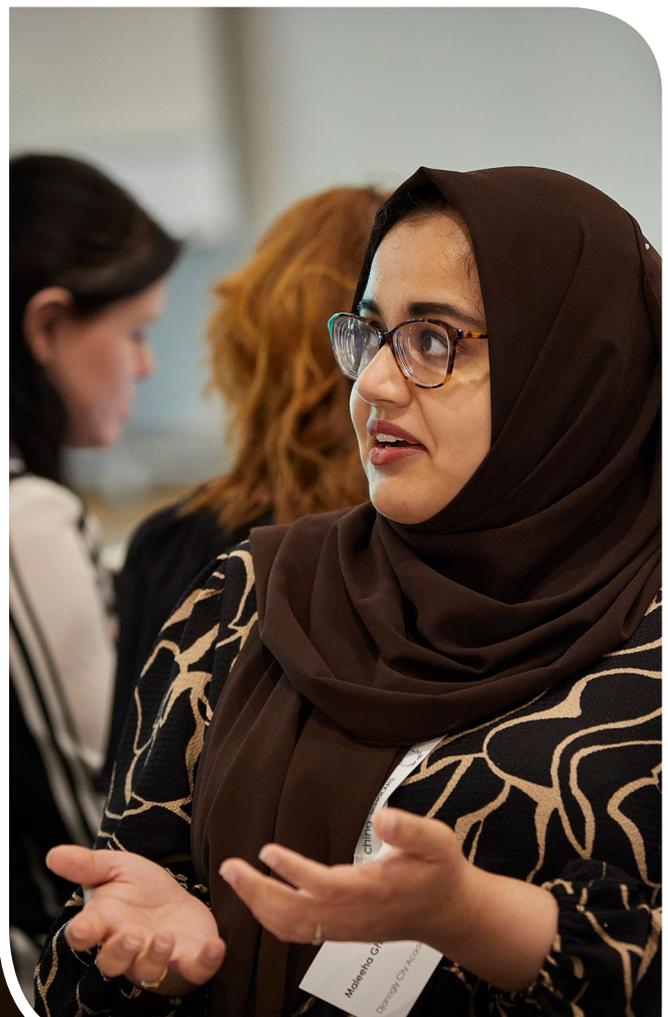
After each review, improvement champions (ICs) facilitate workshops in the reviewed school, helping staff to develop solutions collaboratively.

2

Follow-up support: Schools engage in periodic reviews of progress and continue reflecting on and refining their improvement strategies (Godfrey et al., 2023).

3

Through these processes, the SPP aims to build leadership capacity across schools and empower teachers at all levels to take ownership of school improvement. By encouraging enquiry-based learning and peer collaboration, the programme fosters teacher leadership and professional growth, driving both individual and institutional improvement.





Key findings

Teacher professional development

The SPP demonstrated a strong capacity for fostering teacher ownership of school improvement. By the conclusion of the trial, 88% of school leaders reported that the programme had helped their teachers feel a greater sense of engagement with their school's improvement objectives (Godfrey et al., 2023). This aligns with existing literature that emphasises the importance of collaborative, sustained and practice-based professional development (Cordingley et al., 2015).

Teacher leadership and joint practice development

The SPP promotes teacher leadership by encouraging teachers to act as peer reviewers and ICs. These roles empower teachers to lead professional learning within their schools and across partnerships. Teacher leadership in this context is seen as a collective effort, where teachers influence their colleagues and engage in system-wide improvement (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). The JPD approach ensures that professional development is mutual and involves sharing knowledge laterally rather than through traditional, top-down methods (Brown et al., 2016).

Knowledge exchange and collaboration

The SPP model facilitated significant knowledge sharing among schools, with 91% reporting that they openly and transparently shared data, systems and processes by the end of the programme (Godfrey et al., 2023). The regular exchange of expertise and collaborative problem solving contributed to stronger partnerships and more sustainable school improvement efforts (OECD, 2013).

Addressing educational disadvantage

Schools serving disadvantaged communities benefitted particularly from the SPP. Those in the most deprived quintiles, as measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), reported higher levels of teacher engagement, leadership capacity, and evidence-informed practices compared to less deprived schools (Godfrey et al., 2023). This suggests that peer-led models like the SPP can play a crucial role in narrowing the educational attainment gap and supporting schools in challenging contexts.





Recommendations for policymakers and school leaders

1. Promote collaborative professional development models

Policymakers and school leaders should encourage the adoption of collaborative professional development models like the SPP, which emphasise peer-led learning, enquiry, and mutual accountability. TPD should be integrated into school improvement strategies, allowing teachers to develop their practice while directly contributing to broader institutional goals. Research shows that effective TPD is practice-based, collaborative and sustained over time (Cordingley et al., 2015).

2. Balance external and professional accountability systems

High-stakes accountability systems can place undue pressure on schools, limiting their ability to collaborate effectively. Peer review offers a complementary approach to external accountability by fostering professional accountability and trust among schools. Policymakers and school leaders should explore how peer review can be integrated into broader accountability frameworks, ensuring that schools can take ownership of their improvement processes without the overwhelming pressure of external inspections (Hofer et al., 2020; Godfrey et al., 2020).

3. Invest in leadership development at all levels

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 (York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001).

4. Target support for schools in disadvantaged areas

Schools serving disadvantaged communities may stand to benefit greatly from peer-led models like the SPP. The evidence from this study tentatively suggests that schools in more deprived areas experienced stronger benefits from the SPP in terms of leadership development and teacher engagement (Godfrey et al., 2023). More research would be welcome in this area since the conclusion was based on a small sub-sample of schools in the trial. Policymakers and school leaders should ensure that such programmes are accessible to practitioners in challenging contexts, and consider providing additional resources to support implementation.

5. Encourage evidence-informed practice

The use of research evidence was a key component of the SPP model, particularly in the improvement workshops led by ICs. Policymakers and school leaders should support initiatives that encourage teachers to engage with and apply research evidence in their practice. Providing resources and training to ensure that teachers can access and use educational research will help foster an evidence-informed culture across the school system (EEF, 2021).



About the authors



Dr David Godfrey is an Associate Professor in Education, Leadership and Management at UCL Institute of Education in London and Director of Academic Programmes in The Centre for Educational Leadership. Previously, he was co-director of the Centre for Educational Evaluation and Accountability until 2018, and prior to that he was a lead inspector for the Independent Schools Inspectorate (PFE). An advocate of research-informed practice in education, his projects and publications include research-engaged schools, school peer review, inspection systems and lesson study.

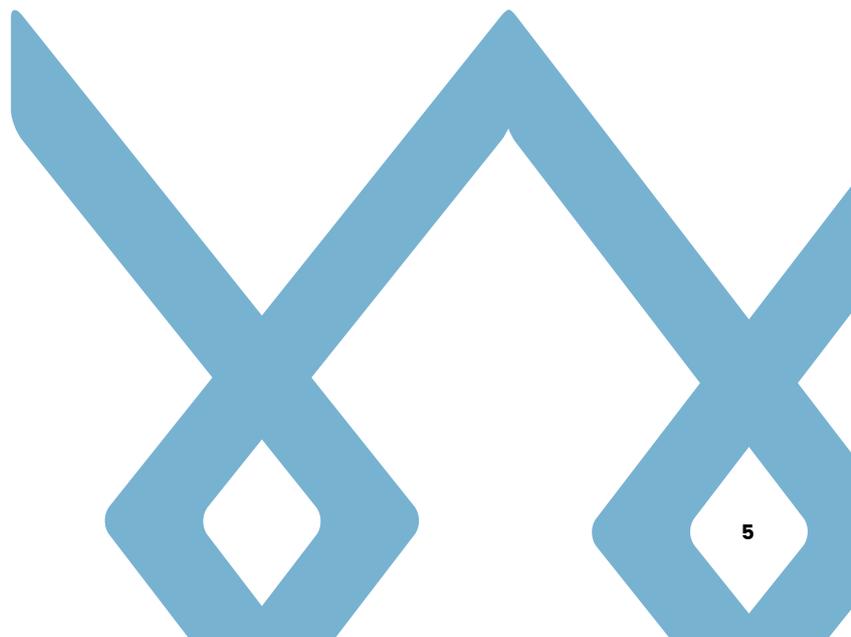
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A longer version of this publication, focusing on teacher leadership, can be found (in Spanish language) at: Godfrey, D., y Muñoz-Chereau, B. *Programa de Colaboración Escolar: desarrollo de práctica conjunta mediante una alianza liderada por pares para la mejora escolar*. in: Rojas-Bravo, J., y Ulloa Garrido, J. (Eds) (2024). *Desarrollo Profesional Docente; ¿Cómo liderar procesos de mejoramiento de las capacidades docentes?* Editorial Universidad de Concepción. ISNB impreso: 978-956-227-592-7. ISBN digital: 978-956-227-593-4

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