School Partnerships and Cooperation: Commons Education Committee Report

Date 13 December 2013

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Summary
This briefing focuses on the Select Committee for Education report, School Partnerships and Cooperation published on 6 November. The key committee recommendations are summarised together at the end of this briefing.

This briefing will be of interest to school leaders, teachers, governors, local authorities and parents as well as national organisations involved in education policy development in this area.

Overview
In the 2010 Schools White Paper, the Importance of Teaching, the Government set out its vision of a self-improving education system, stating that:

‘our aim should be to create a school system which is more effectively self-improving. [...] It is also important that we design the system in a way which allows the most effective practice to spread more quickly and the best schools and leaders to take greater responsibility and extend their reach’.

Partnership working and cooperation between schools has long been part of the education landscape, whether encouraged by government or not. Nevertheless, in recent years and alongside the changing role of local authorities, school partnerships and cooperation have become an increasingly important part of what is referred to in the Select Committee Report as a "self-improving" or "school-led" system. The Committee regards this as particularly critical in the successful London Challenge and City Challenge programmes which led to significant improvements in the schools in the areas involved. It is also regarded as a key driver behind the rapid expansion of the academies programme.

The Education Select Committee launched its inquiry into School Partnerships and Cooperation on 13 March 2013, inviting written evidence on the following issues:

- the differing forms of school partnership and cooperation, and whether they have particular advantages and disadvantages;
- how highly performing schools could better be encouraged to cooperate with others;
- whether schools have sufficient incentives to form meaningful and lasting relationships with other schools;
- if and how the potential tension between school partnership and cooperation, and school choice and competition can be resolved;
whether converter academies' requirements to support other schools, included in their funding agreements, are sufficient and are effectively policed;
whether academies sponsored by another school receive sufficient support from their sponsor;
whether school partnerships drive effective school improvement;
whether there are any additional upsides or downsides for highly performing schools supporting others through partnerships.

The Committee received around 50 submissions of written evidence from a range of organisations and individuals, including state-funded schools, independent schools, an academy chain, Co-operative trusts and clusters, representatives of local government, national collaborative organisations, teaching and school leadership unions, academics, policy researchers, Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE).

Forms of collaboration

The forms of collaboration included within the description of "schools partnerships and cooperation" are highly diverse, both because of substantive differences in the depth of collaboration and because of differences in the forms partnership can take. The terms "partnership", "cooperation" and "collaboration" are sometimes used interchangeably, but the key distinction is between those partnerships which have a formal basis and those which do not. Set out below is a brief glossary of the key forms of collaboration referred to in the Select Committee Report.

Federations: In a Federation, schools create a single, federated governing body for two or more schools. The federated governing body may then choose to create joint roles, such as a single "executive" head teacher across multiple schools, but this is not a necessary part of federation. The Education Act 2002 initially laid the ground for formal partnership through federation. Since then regulations have been progressively updated so that now maintained schools form federations under The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012.

Trust schools: Introduced by the Education and Inspections Act 2006, Trust schools allow a maintained foundation school to be supported by a charitable foundation (referred to as "the Trust"). In return the Trust is able to appoint some of the Governors and bring additional expertise to support the school leadership. They have some similarities to sponsored academies, except that they do not entirely sever links with their local authority.

"Academy chains" (Multi-academy Trusts, Umbrella Trusts and Collaborative Partnerships): The term "academy chain" is often used to describe any group of academies working together (under some definitions, such as that adopted by the National College for School Leadership report, "The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership" – see Related Briefings). A Multi-academy Trust (MAT) is where a number of schools join together and form a single Trust and Board of Directors. An Umbrella Trust (UT) allows a cluster of primary academy schools, or a mixture of primary and secondary academy schools, to set up a trust which allows them to work together while still retaining a certain level of independence and individuality. Multi-academy Trusts can be members of an Umbrella Trust. A Collaborative Partnership is where there is simply an agreement between a group of Academies to work together and decide
Looser collaboration and school-to-school support

**National Teaching Schools:** The Government's primary focus for school-to-school cooperation is through National Teaching Schools, acting as hubs for both initial and ongoing training. Schools applying to become Teaching Schools are asked for "evidence of successful partnerships as well as excellent leadership with a proven track record of school improvement". Teaching Schools act as the core of a Teaching School Alliance which are cooperative organisations that may cross phase, sector and local authority lines.

**System leadership** (National Leaders of Education, National Support Schools, Local Leaders of Education and Specialist Leaders of Education): The National College of Teaching and Leadership co-ordinates the "system leadership" programmes. These encourage head teachers of highly performing schools to "use their skills and experience to support schools in challenging circumstances" by working to "increase the leadership capacity of other schools to help raise standards". Outstanding head teachers can apply to be Local Leaders of Education (LLEs) or National Leaders of Education (NLEs). There are over 800 National Leaders of Education (NLE) and almost 2,000 Local Leaders of Education (LLE), with a third of secondary heads and a sixth of primary heads either an NLE, LLE or a member of a Teaching School alliance. Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) are outstanding middle or senior leaders, with "the skills to support individuals or teams in similar positions in other schools". Unlike NLEs and LLE, SLEs are specifically attached to a local Teaching School alliance.

**Collaborative organisations:** Many national school-to-school support organisations have sprung up in the past few years. A report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on the role of the "middle tier" in enabling school improvement argues that such "national middle tier bodies [are important] for inspiration and support". Examples of national collaborative organisations include the Whole Education network, the PiXL club, and Challenge Partners.

**Briefing in full**

**Potential for school collaboration**

The report reflects near-universal support for the concept of schools collaborating in order to make better provision for all children and young people. A wide range of activities is described as being involved and a number of clear benefits identified. A common benefit was that collaboration enabled schools to provide activities, whether for staff or pupils, that would not be viable within individual institutions acting alone.

Much collaboration involved shared continued professional Development (CPD) and evidence of joint CPD revealed by the inquiry showed that the provision was better tailored to need, increased access and provided teachers with better opportunities for peer observation and gain professional feedback. Collaborative working is also shown as providing a broader base for developing leaders and greater opportunity for leaders to learn from each other. Collaborative working also involves greater potential benefits for pupils such as better access to minority and shortage subjects, opportunities for pupils from diverse backgrounds to mix, and better understanding of the
progression needed at each phase of education and to enable continuity and preparation for lifelong learning.

The report also contains examples that point to the potential of school collaboration as a strategy for raising standards. Many of these describe how relatively successful schools, in both the state and private sectors, have been effective in supporting improvement in poorly performing schools. However, there were also warnings from those who gave evidence, such as the Association of Schools and College Leaders (ASCL) and Ofsted that collaboration is not a panacea and ‘the success of the collaboration will ultimately depend on the quality of the leadership in identifying an ambitious vision for improvement’ (Ofsted evidence). It was also emphasised that collaboration is complex and time consuming and needs long term commitment, enthusiasm and skills if it is to make a real difference.

Some of the evidence received by the select committee focused on the mutual benefits for partnerships where high-performing schools were supporting others. In some cases, concerns were expressed about the potential adverse impact on the performance of those schools, particularly from their governing bodies. However, the Committee’s conclusion was that though these inherent risks exist for highly performing schools, most of those schools giving evidence had confidence that they could manage them. Respondents argued in some cases that both schools in these partnerships were on an improvement journey involving mutual respect, and that the improved relationships ‘should not been seen as one sided and paternalistic’. Others made a distinction between the co-operative model and the kind of support needed for a failing school, though evidence from City Challenge ‘demonstrates that more intensive partnerships are often effective in bringing about rapid improvements in such schools’.

Written evidence received was sharply divided over the issue of whether inter school competition creates problems or can co-exist. Generally it was felt that the two could co-exist, with partnerships helping schools to rise to the challenges created through competition though in some cases it was felt that there needed to be a better balance between the two, which is not there currently.

The Committee was also concerned about the lack of definitive evidence of impact in relation to school partnerships. While Government statistics support the case for their contribution to raising standards, identifying the underlying cause of school improvement is complex, as demonstrated by researchers giving evidence to this inquiry.

**Diversity and desirable features**

During the inquiry, the Committee heard about the range of ways in which schools are working together and the many models of school partnership and co-operation that support this. Witnesses argued that diversity was important to the success of the approach, and that autonomy of choice was critical. Evidence was given of different schools' rationales for their particular model, which was often related to a particular institution's history and ethos. There was no support expressed for rationalising the 'messiness' of the provision. However, common threads emerged from successful models that were based on the premise that the advantages of collaborative working are best realised through the establishment of formal arrangements in which the lines of accountability are clear.
A further theme of the evidence was about the need for school partnerships to be based on an analysis of data that invite schools to compare their performance with schools serving similar populations. This was in line with the ‘families of schools’ data as used in the City Challenge programmes. This was seen as crucial as it resulted in schools progressing beyond cosy relationships and ‘talking shops’ that have no impact on outcomes as well as helping the identification of areas of relative strength that can be used for the purpose of mutual improvement.

The report stresses that the Government has itself recently introduced ‘similar schools’ data grouping secondary schools in groups of 55 and primary schools in a group of 125 similar institutions, based on prior attainment of their intake, and the DfE has compared this to the use of data in the London Challenge. The Committee rejected this parallel, regarding the similar schools data as being more limited than the ‘family of schools data’ which included GCSE results, with and without English and Maths, a contextual value added measure as well as additional contextual information focusing on EAL and mobility that enabled schools to compare themselves and share experiences with schools in their family. Doubts were also expressed about the rationale of changing the name from ‘families of schools’ to ‘similar schools’.

The issue of locality or geographical coherence was highlighted in the inquiry as being a key factor in creating effective school partnerships. The report advocates the importance of bottom up partnerships which may or may not emerge on a geographically coherent basis, but also stresses that it would not be right to circumscribe schools’ options on geographical lines. Even in partnerships containing ‘forced academisation’, it is seen as important that geographical coherence is taken into account. The report also flags up the issue of travelling distance which during the inquiry had been agreed as being up to an hour's drive. In contrast, the 'similar schools' data provided on schools' performance tables highlights 'better performing schools in each group that are located within 75 miles of the focus school'. The Committee concludes that a Government definition of a reasonable travelling distance has not been sensibly applied here.

Incentivising partnerships

The Select Committee inquiry explored the potential for the use of Ofsted's inspection frameworks to provide a better incentive for schools working in partnership. Currently the recognition of outstanding leadership beyond an individual school is only occasionally referred to in Ofsted reports. The Committee discussed a proposal to introduce a new Ofsted category to recognise school to school support with the Schools Minister, who believed it would be a confusing addition for parents in the context of the existing judgements. Instead, the report expresses support for Sir Michael Wilshaw's proposal for an excellent leadership award to be given to school leaders rather than the school themselves. The school accountability system as a whole provides no recognition of schools' efforts to help other schools to improve, and some would argue that its focus on schools' own results acts as a positive disincentive for embarking on partnership work. The committee concluded that it was concerned by the idea of a more widely based accountability system that could dilute a school's focus on improving their own outcomes. However, it regretted that no workable model of school accountability had been developed that balanced the incentive for school partnering with school level responsibility for maximising pupil performance.

Evidence to the inquiry suggested that a more direct incentive for collaboration could be a financial one. The 2010 Schools White Paper included a Government commitment to a new collaboration fund worth £35 million each year to reward schools which 'support weaker schools to
demonstrably improve their performance while also improving their own'. From the DfE responses to requests from the Committee for an update on this issue, the report concludes that the ‘department is unable to quantify exactly how much has been spent on rewarding school to school collaboration...’. The Committee concluded that the Government should provide funding to help schools meet the costs associated with taking part in collaboration, with a particular focus on primary schools.

Coordinating collaboration

The report highlights the fact that the debate over whether there is a need for a middle tier in the new school system as a result of the academies programme has been going on for some time. Evidence to the inquiry reflected a view that ‘a middle tier is an important part of a self-improving system’ and the Committee cites the McKinsey report, How the world's best education systems keep getting better that supports a mediating layer to provide targeted support to schools and act as a buffer between central government and schools. The majority of witnesses pointed to local authorities as having this unique role, which was characterised in evidence to the Committee as being about creating ‘an enabling environment’ within which schools could find the support that they need. Recent NFER research also cited in the report, shows that LAs are already ‘adopting a more adaptive style of leadership, and were prepared to move radically to enable school to school support’. The Committee argues that Ofsted and the Government have recognised this new role for LAs and emphasises that the City Challenge expert advisers provide the model for it via their coordination of school-to-school support that was essential in making partnerships effective.

There were concerns expressed to the Committee about parts of the country where little school improvement was taking place. In some areas, the absence of outstanding schools meant that there were no teaching school alliances and few national leaders of education to stimulate partnership activity. The DfE's evidence to the Committee claimed that in respect of Teaching Schools, 'national coverage has increased by 16% to 89% and there are now 360 Teaching Schools with 136 LAs now seeing a Teaching School operating within their boundaries'. However, it is concluded that some LA areas are very large and that there are concerns about the limits on the scope of the National Leaders of Education Deployment Fund to match NLEs with areas of need. The debate on system leadership left MPs with a commitment to the need for a greater oversight of school partnerships and cooperation, possibly on a regional basis.

Academies and collaboration

The report identifies that Ofsted can inspect schools within academy chains, has recently begun to inspect LA school improvement services, but has no power to inspect the academy chains themselves. The DfE has dismissed the proposal because it claimed that inspecting the chain would not add any further significant information, though the Committee's conclusion was that it would be providing public interest information for parents in particular.

Some giving evidence to the inquiry expressed concern about schools being able to leave hard partnerships, and if movement between different partnerships became more widespread, the lack of a formal process would become more problematic. The question of schools being able to leave chains under certain circumstances was also raised, even when this was against the wishes of the sponsor. The Committee's conclusion was that more clarification was needed about the formal procedures for leaving hard partnerships with mutual consent and for greater school movement between partnerships.
During the inquiry, the Committee reported that it had received overwhelming evidence that 'converter academies' (schools judged by Ofsted to be outstanding or good with outstanding features that convert into an Academy to commit to supporting at least one weaker school in return for Academy status) have not been pulling their weight in supporting other schools. The factors behind this were seen as various including: a lack of clarity about the minimum expected from converter academies; and a lack of reference to the geographical dimensions of school performance. The Committee remained unconvinced by the DfE’s survey of converter academies used in its evidence and the report advocates an urgent review of the DfE’s monitoring arrangements.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Select Committee’s overall conclusion is that a school-led improvement system has great potential to continue driving improvement to England’s education system, not least in finding more effective ways of breaking the link between home background and poor levels of achievement.

The Committee supports the steps the Government has already taken towards allowing schools the freedom to innovate and work together for the benefit of all pupils. It stresses that its recommendations aim to support and extend these steps, to encourage the continued development of a self-improving system, and to help it to be as effective as its many advocates believe it can be. It believes that the Government should have ‘the confidence of its conviction that teachers and schools, supported by, rather than controlled by, local authorities and other middle tier organisations, hold the expertise to develop a world-class education system’. This means accepting that an effective self-improving system needs a degree of coordination and such arrangements should be about enabling and facilitating, rather than command and control.

Committee conclusions and recommendations are therefore:

- Properly handled, school collaboration offer benefits to all schools involved. The Government should continue to promote this message ... and propose quality of esteem among all participants;
- We believe that while there are tensions between competition and collaboration; these are largely creative tensions;
- Given the importance of a school-led improvement system to its vision, we recommend that Government embed evaluation into further initiatives ... and collect systematic evidence on 'what works';
- Schools should be able to adopt models of partnership and co-operation that suit their needs within a legislative and policy framework that is as non-prescriptive as possible.
- We believe that school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration;
- We recommend that the DfE review the presentation of similar schools data in consultation with schools in order to provide richer and more easily accessible information on possible partners;
- It is regrettable that, in establishing the similar schools data system, the DfE did not adopt a model more like the original 'families of schools' and then use the familiar name to help achieve buy-in from schools;
- The DfE should ensure that the advantages of geographical proximity are set out in relevant guidance on school partnerships and cooperation more general;
We are concerned that the Government's definition of a "reasonable travelling distance" has not been sensibly applied to the similar schools tables and recommend that the definition is altered to become "within an hour's drive" (ie 30 to 50 miles depending on location). We also recommend that the Government set out how the similar schools model applies to schools in rural and coastal areas;

We strongly support Sir Michael Wilshaw's proposal for an excellent leadership award to be given to school leaders rather than schools, as the highest accolade available to head teachers and only for those who support underperforming schools in disadvantaged communities;

We regret that no one has yet devised a workable model of school accountability that incentivises schools to form partnerships whilst preserving school level responsibility and encourage further efforts to generate an appropriate model;

We are concerned that the existing funding incentives are concentrated too narrowly on the academy sponsorship route. The Government should widen this funding to help meet the costs associated with formalising other partnerships. In particular, we recommend that the Government widen eligibility for the Primary Chains Grant to help schools cover the cost of forming federations;

We recommend that the Government re-introduce targeted seed corn funding to encourage the establishment of sustainable Independent State School Partnerships.

We recommend that the Government set out clearly the role of local authorities in helping to broker school-to-school partnerships and acting as champions of all parents and children, with particular reference to academies in their region;

Coordination of system leadership may well be better achieved at a sub-regional or local level than at the national level and we recommend that DfE and NCTL explore such an approach;

The Government should set out how organisations in the middle tier will be held to account for strategic oversight of partnership working in all schools and how they will ensure that gaps are not allowed to develop or remain unfilled, particularly in rural and coastal areas;

London Challenge and City Challenge, two of the most successful school improvement initiatives of recent years, both relied heavily on the use of expert advisers. We recommend that the Department for Education make an assessment of the quality and capacity to provide this expertise within a school-led improvement system;

We recommend that parents should be provided with information about the performance of academy chains, as well as individual schools and therefore Ofsted should be provided with the powers it needs to inspect academy chains;

We recommend that the procedures for schools to leave academy chains by mutual consent are formalised and published;

We recommend that the Government explain how a school consistently judged 'Outstanding' would be able to leave an academy chain where this is against the wishes of the chain management;

We recommend that the DfE urgently review its arrangements for monitoring the expectation that converter academies support another school and implement more effective processes as soon as possible; and

We recommend that the Government ensure outstanding converter academies are able to support other schools in the ways they think will bring about the best results.
Comment

This Select Committee Report is very welcome and it makes a series of helpful recommendations. To some degree it challenges the Government’s advocacy of schools having the freedom to innovate with its argument for the ‘the creation of a self-improving system (needing) a degree of coordination and strong incentives to encourage schools to look beyond their own school gate.” The report also provides an update on partnership policy that has been in development over a lengthy period of time and gives a glimpse of the diversity of school relationships and cooperation.

Three areas of conclusion/recommendation are of particular note. Firstly, the issue of insufficient research evidence and ongoing evaluation about the role of school collaboration in institutional improvement. Without the knowledge to understand fully how inter-school partnerships contribute to improvement and the transfer of effective practice, the Government is missing the opportunity to build further capacity. Secondly, is the continued absence of partnership from the accountability system, a timely recommendation in the annual Ofsted report (briefing to follow). This is an important long-term recommendation, which Labour has picked up in its recent pledge that schools will not be able to be deemed ‘outstanding’ without having been collaborative. The committee’s support for the Ofsted excellent leader award is insufficient; it is more than creating ‘superheads’: it is developing leadership across a wide range of professionals in partnership across the system.

The third area is around academies and the lack of government scrutiny of their role in school partnership. As the report stresses, parents have the right to public information on the effectiveness of academy chains. In addition, the DfE needs to enforce the expectation that converter academies will be expected to support other schools. Without that assurance, there is the danger that academies will contribute to the risk identified by Graham Stuart, chair of the committee that schools could ‘operate in isolation rather than cooperation’. It is regretted that in implementing a system of regional commissioners, DfE is limiting their role to “monitoring the performance of academies” and not any chains to which academies may be joined.

External Links

House of Commons Education Committee, School Partnerships and Cooperation

Related Briefings

What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier (May 2013)


Schools White Paper – The Importance of Teaching (November 2010)

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