

PROMOTING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

THINK PIECE 6

SYSTEM-LEVEL CHANGE

'WE CALL FOR A STRENGTHENED 'MIDDLE' OPERATING THROUGH NETWORKS... WITHIN AND ACROSS LOCAL AUTHORITIES.' OECD (2015)

The creation of a system for improvement that is driven by schools themselves, and that involves cooperation between schools and other community organisations, begs questions regarding the roles of local authorities. Indeed, it raises the possibility that the involvement of a middle level administrative structure may not even be necessary. On the other hand, there is international evidence that underlines the importance of some form of area coordination of efforts to promote equity.



A MEDIATING LAYER

Having analysed *how the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*, the authors of an influential McKinsey report express their surprise at the critical role that what they call the 'mediating layer' plays between school delivery and central government. This leads them to conclude that sustaining system improvement in the longer term requires 'integration and intermediation' across each level of the system, 'from the classroom to the superintendent or minister's office'.

The authors of the report go on to suggest that the specific functions the mediating layer plays are: providing targeted support to schools; acting as a buffer between the centre and the schools, while interpreting and communicating the improvement objectives in order to manage any resistance to change; and enhancing the collaborative exchange between schools, by facilitating the sharing of best practices, helping them to support each other, share learning, and standardise practices.

Relevant to all of this, a recent report noted that four of the most successful national education systems – Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and Ontario – each has a coherent middle tier, regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision-making. In particular, they all have district level structures that offer a consistent view that, to maintain equity as well as achieving excellence, there needs to be an authoritative coordinating influence with local accountability.

NEW ROLES

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authority administrators and support staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led by and for schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, district level staff can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.

Having analysed two relatively successful large-scale improvement initiatives in Canada and the UK, Andy Hargreaves and I recently suggested a way of supporting local authorities in responding to these new demands. We argue that,

in taking on new roles, districts can provide a valuable focus for school improvement, be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and data analysis across schools, supporting schools in responding coherently to multiple external reform demands, and being champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal.

The problem is, of course, that not all local school systems or districts are strong. Therefore, a way to reduce variation amongst school districts is to promote collaboration among them so they share resources, ideas, and expertise, and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In adopting this 'leading from the middle' approach, local authorities can work together to become the collective drivers of change and improvement together. The aim is to move knowledge around, crossing borders between local authorities, and involving maintained and voluntary aided schools, academies, free schools and colleges.

IMPLICATIONS

Finally, of course, all of this has significant implications for national policy makers. In order to make use of the power of collaboration as a means of achieving both excellence and equity in our schools, they need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- **What forms of local coordination exist?**
- **How well do these arrangements work?**
- **How might they be strengthened?**

FURTHER READING

- Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2020) *Changing education systems: a research-based approach*. Routledge
- Bubb, S., Crossley-Holland, J., Cordiner, J., Cousin, S., & Earley, P. (2019) *Understanding the middle tier: Comparative costs of academy and LA-maintained school systems*. London: Sara Bubb Associates
- Fullan, M. (2015). *Leadership from the middle: a system strategy*. North York, Ontario: Education Canada
- Hargreaves, A. and Ainscow, M. (2015) The top and bottom of leadership and change. Phi Delta Kappa, November, 2015
- Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C. and Barber, M. (2010) *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*. McKinsey & Company