School-to-school support and collaboration – a summary and discussion paper

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- ⅄ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ⅄ primary schools
- ⅄ secondary schools
- ⅄ all-age schools
- ⅄ special schools
- ⅄ pupil referral units
- ⅄ all-age schools
- ⅄ independent schools
- ⅄ further education
- ⅄ independent specialist colleges
- ⅄ adult community learning
- ⅄ local authority education services for children and young people
- ⅄ teacher education and training
- ⅄ Welsh for adults
- ⅄ work-based learning
- ⅄ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

- ⅄ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others
- ⅄ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

Contents

Introduction

In June 2015, Estyn published a report on 'School to School Support and Collaboration' in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2014-2015 (Estyn, 2015). The scope of the work did not include Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools or Schools Challenge Cymru, as these initiatives were separately evaluated, and looked mainly at self-generated collaboration models. The report gave examples of school-to-school support and collaboration and considered what works, how and why it works, and the support mechanisms that sustain it. It also discussed the impact, success factors and barriers facing these school-to-school initiatives.

This second report follows on from that first report. The report describes the main policy developments and initiatives relating to school-to-school support and summarises and synthesises existing evaluations for each development. The report is based on evidence from:

- findings from the first 'School to School Support and Collaboration' report (Estyn, 2015)
- inspection reports on the four regional consortia published in 2016
- findings from other inspection and thematic work by Estyn
- the evaluations of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools project (National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), 2014 & NFER, 2016) and the evaluation the Schools Challenge Cymru initiative (Carr, Brown & Morris, 2017 & Carr & Morris, 2016).

The report is intended for the Welsh Government, senior leaders in schools, local authorities and regional consortia.

Background

Over the last 15 years, there have been many national projects and initiatives to encourage school-to-school support and collaborative working. These initiatives include, for example, Learning Pathways 14-19 in 2004 and the School Effectiveness Framework launched in 2008. The direction of travel since 2010 has been to encourage schools to improve outcomes by sharing practice both within schools and with other schools. By 2013, the impetus was to do more to establish a structure that will result in a self-improving system. Since 2014, there has been a greater impetus at school, local and national level to encourage such collaborative working and the development of a self-improving system. The timeline below traces the evolution of some of these developments.

Timetable of key school-to-school developments

All-Wales core data sets 2009 and Families of schools 2010

1   In 2009 the Welsh Government replaced the National Pupil Database with the All-Wales Core Data Sets. The core data sets contain a range of different graphs, charts and tables illustrating:

- a school's results against local and national performance
- the difference in performance between girls and boys and between those pupils who receive free school meals and those who do not
- comparisons with performance of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks

The core data sets also introduced the concept of 'families' of similar schools.

2   In 2010, **Families of schools** were created by grouping schools according to whether the language used in the school is mainly English or Welsh, the size of the school (for primary school families only) and their score on an 'index of challenge'[1]. The families were revised in 2013 and again in 2016. Schools are expected to consider their performance against that of other members of the school family and other similar schools when setting targets for school improvement. The creation of the benchmark quartiles helped schools compare themselves with similar schools. While not explicitly intended to promote school-to-school work there was an expectation that family members seek advice and share good practice with other family members.

Professional learning communities 2011

3   A national model for the creation of **Professional learning communities** was launched by the Welsh Government in December 2011. A professional learning community (PLC) is a group of practitioners working together using a structured process of enquiry to focus on a specific area of their teaching to improve learner outcomes and so raise school standards. The basis for this development was the work of Barber and Mourshen (2007) in their report '*How the world's best performing school systems came out on top'.* They concluded that *'High performing schools help teachers improve instruction by learning from each other.'* In the guidance for the development of PLCs it states that done well PLCs:

- improve learner outcomes
- change professional practice and empower practitioners
- create sustainable change
- develop system wide leadership capacity
- have measurable impact

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[1] See Glossary for an explanation of the 'index of challenge'

Lead and emerging practitioner schools 2013

4   The **Lead and emerging practitioner schools** project was launched by the Welsh Government in November 2013. The project matched a strongly performing primary or secondary school (the Lead practitioner school) with a weaker performing school that had already started its improvement journey (the Emerging practitioner school). The intention was that developing and sharing best practice and information would be of benefit to both the lead and emerging school. This project started before regional consortia began their work to establish a self-improving system based on school-to-school support. There was a clear intention that the participants in this project were 'pathfinders' and that the evaluation of the project would seek to identify key messages about what worked and why as well as what did not work and why.

5   Evaluations of the Lead and Emerging Practitioners Pathfinder Project were undertaken by NFER in 2014 and 2016.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report 2014

6   In January 2014, a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), commissioned by the Welsh Government, evaluated aspects of the Welsh education system and made a number of recommendations. Among these was a recommendation to:

> *develop and implement a Welsh strategy for school-to-school collaboration, creating an architecture which encourages schools to select appropriate partners, in an atmosphere of transparency, awareness and support. (OECD, 2014, p.8.)*

7   In the report, OECD said that school-to-school collaboration is *'one of the most effective options for developing professional capital and especially social capital among teachers and leaders'.* (OECD, 2014 p.77). It also said:

> *School-to-school collaboration provides the means of circulating knowledge and strategies around the system; it provides an alternative way of supporting struggling schools to that of exercising top-down intervention; and it develops collective responsibility among all schools for all students' success. (*OECD, 2014 p.77*.)*

8   The report warns that much existing school-to-school collaboration was as a result of crisis, to avoid closure or when a school has a poor inspection outcome. In addition, it concludes that approaches to support school-to-school working already operating were in the early stages of development, under resourced, largely top-down and lacking in focus. OECD argued that research shows that these are not the ideal conditions for establishing thriving school-to-school collaboration.

National model for regional working and Regional consortia 2014

9   The **National model for regional working** was launched by the Welsh Government in February 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014b). In its guidance, the Welsh Government set out an expectation that all schools will follow an annual cycle of school improvement planning. It also put in place a national system of categorisation

for schools. Central to its plans is that regional consortia should challenge and broker support appropriate to the needs of a school. The guidance states that:

> *Schools that have the capacity to do so should be encouraged and empowered to lead their own improvement and deploy their own resources accordingly. For those schools that are at risk of causing concern or who cause concern, it would be the role of the consortia to help match and broker the support needed to the support available,* (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.3).

10   In 2014 four **Regional consortia** were established, the Central South Consortium Joint Education Service (CSC), the South East Wales Education Achievement Service (EAS), Education through Regional Working (ERW) and GwE.

11   The four regional consortia were inspected by Estyn in 2016.

Schools Challenge Cymru 2014

12   **Schools Challenge Cymru,** launched by the Welsh Government in February 2014, was a package of support intended to improve the performance of 40 secondary schools that are both in challenging circumstances and challenged in terms of delivery. These schools, identified through a range of deprivation related factors, received a package of support that was individually tailored to meet the school's needs and circumstances, (Welsh Government, 2014a). The initiative was funded until April 2017.

13   Evaluations of the School's Challenge Cymru initiative were carried out by SQW in 2014-2015; a first report was published in July 2016 (Carr & Morris, 2016) and the final report in July 2017 (Carr, Brown & Morris, 2017).

Qualified for Life 2014

14   **Qualified for Life –** an education plan for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales was published by the Welsh Government in October 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014c). The plan includes the strategic objective that leaders of education at every level work together in a self-improving system, providing mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools. The plan includes a commitment to ensure that the principle of school-to-school support underpins Welsh Government and consortia approaches to school improvement. Promoting school-to-school collaboration is a key strategic priority in Qualified for Life.

Pioneer schools network 2015

15   In March 2014, Professor Graham Donaldson was asked to conduct a fundamental review of curriculum and assessment arrangements from Foundation Phase to Key Stage 4. The resulting report *Successful Futures* was published in February 2015. In November 2015 Welsh Government announced the establishment of a **Pioneer schools network.** These schools will:

- design and develop '*A Curriculum for Wales, a curriculum for life'*, the new curriculum for Wales
- support schools in preparing for its implementation
- provide practitioners with professional learning opportunities to support the development of the new curriculum

Main findings

16   Inspection findings and thematic reports on secondary and primary improvement journeys (Estyn, 2013; Estyn, 2016) suggest that **schools must have a strong culture of professional learning** for school-to-school support and collaboration to be successful.

17   The evaluation of the Lead and Emerging Practitioners Project came to similar conclusions (Welsh Government, 2013). It also identified that **school needs to know and accept when there is a need to change.**

18   The emerging findings from the evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru suggest that the schools that were already on their improvement journey, recognised what needed to change and why, were able to make effective use of support from other schools (Welsh Government, 2014a). Schools with weak leadership, poor approaches to self-evaluation and a climate of blame and distrust require rigorous intervention and challenge to benefit from the opportunities provided by the funding, and **intervention is needed when a school is failing to provide an acceptable standard of education**.

19   Regional consortia recognise that a differentiated approach to the support and challenge they offer schools is necessary. In each consortium, an increasing amount of support for schools is provided by other schools. However, **school-to-school work is not monitored or evaluated** carefully enough to ensure that the support is having the intended impact and not having a detrimental effect on the school providing the support.

20   Based on the above findings, it is possible to identify common success factors and barriers that need to be overcome before school-to-school collaboration can be effective. Schools do not benefit from working with others until most success factors are in place and barriers removed. The lists below build on those published initially in Estyn's first report (Estyn, 2015).

Success factors:

- The school needs well-trained and effective leadership
- The school needs to know and accept when there is a need to change
- School-to-school support should arise from a clear identification of need, have a clear rationale and be based on a strategic objective
- The focus must be on the core business of teaching and learning and on improving outcomes for pupils
- Schools need a strong culture of professional learning
- The participants should experience the collaboration as mutually beneficial
- The participants should be at similar stages of their journey of improvement – it is less likely that the support will be successful if the difference in effectiveness between the schools involved is too great

- The relationships between schools needs to be equal, trusting, open and transparent
- Activities should be evaluated for impact on the core business
- intervention is needed when a school is failing to provide an acceptable standard of education

Obstacles and barriers:

- Lack of commitment by the school leadership
- Lack of shared interests
- Lack of trust and openness
- A belief that others have nothing useful to offer
- A concern that time spent away from school by leaders and teachers will have a negative effect on one's own school and pupils
- Lack of capacity to release staff without detriment to pupils

Estyn inspection and thematic survey findings

21   In the first Estyn report, where we looked mainly at self-generated school-to-school support (Estyn, 2015), we found that school-to-school support works best when:

- it arises from a clear identification of need, has a clear rationale and is based on a strategic objective
- the focus is on improving outcomes for pupils
- the participants experience it as mutually beneficial
- the schools are at similar stages of their journey of improvement because, if one is good or very good and the other is weak, it is less likely that the support is effective as the distance between the schools involved is too great
- the relationships between schools are equal, trusting, open and transparent

22   The barriers identified to effective school-to-school working include:

- lack of commitment by the school leadership
- lack of shared interests
- lack of trust and openness
- a belief that others have nothing useful to offer

23   Excellent leadership makes a significant contribution to individual school improvement and is a key element of system-wide improvement. In our reports on school improvement journeys, we identified that effective leaders recognise the need to adapt their leadership styles and adopt different strategies according to a school's position on its improvement journey. In order to improve from a low starting point, schools normally require direct leadership to establish expectations regarding the quality of day-to-day work, particularly the quality of teaching and learning. In schools in greatest need of improvement, the headteacher is usually the main driving force in establishing a base for improvement.

24   As schools start to improve, headteachers begin to hold staff more accountable for the quality of their work and the standards that their pupils achieve. As the momentum for school improvement increases, headteachers adopt a more collaborative style of leadership. They enable senior and middle leaders to become more influential in securing improvements. In schools that sustain high standards of teaching, learning and wellbeing over extended periods, leaders keep standards at the forefront of their thinking at all times and there is a culture where all staff contribute consistently to improving outcomes for pupils.

25   A self-improving system is one that has professional learning at its heart. Inspections and our two reports on the improvement journeys of schools (Estyn 2013 and Estyn, 2016) suggest that in the most successful schools there is effective collaboration between staff both from within the school and with other schools. In these schools, there is a strong culture of professional learning, and staff are reflective and work effectively as a team to ensure that pupils achieve well. They are willing to share their practice with and learn from others. The leaders have a very strong commitment to collaborative working and develop ways of working that make this shared responsibility for professional learning possible.

26   Estyn's improvement journey reports (Estyn 2013 & Estyn 2016) show that a key condition for practitioners' successful professional learning in all schools is the development of relationships that extend beyond the school. Building a culture of school-to-school collaboration involves a genuine commitment to being open to learning from others and is most effective when practitioners have the opportunity to work together to achieve a specific goal.

27   Almost all schools that are placed in a statutory category (in need of significant improvement or requiring special measures) do not have these collaborative relationships. These schools and their staff are isolated, and it is difficult for them to gain a realistic assessment of the school's outcomes and the quality of their teaching and learning. Often school leaders use pupils' backgrounds as an excuse for poor performance because they have not worked with schools in similar situations that perform much better.

28   High-performing schools always work closely with networks, clusters and family groups of other schools. This helps them to understand the different factors that contribute to effective practice and to assess the quality of their teaching and learning accurately. They benefit from working with other schools on activities such as joint scrutiny of pupils' work or joint lesson observations with advisers from the local authority or regional consortium. These joint projects help staff to reflect on their practice and build their confidence.

Lead and emerging practitioner school pathfinder project

29   This project was launched by the Welsh Government in May 2013. It matches strong performing schools with schools that are beginning to make progress. The initiative was intended to last 18 months. There have been two tranches and there is also a special schools programme. The project has been evaluated by NFER and they produced two reports.

30   The mid-point evaluation by NFER in 2014 found that the Lead and Emerging Practitioner School Pathfinder Project 'has already had a meaningful impact on some teachers' professional practice, on some schools' ethos and culture, and on most Emerging Practitioner Schools' capacity to lead their own improvement' (NFER, 2014, p. 7). The main impact had been to make staff more reflective, more aware of different approaches to teaching and had encouraged the sharing of practice and joint continuing professional development. The evaluation concluded that the foremost requirement for effective school-to-school partnership working is that both schools have to be convinced that they can learn from each other. Lead schools need to be prepared to contribute to the success of others and emerging schools have to be convinced of the need for change.

31   In preparing the second tranche, the Welsh Government applied lessons learned during the first tranche: the importance of matching schools carefully, making sure that the schools had clear priorities for improvement and a precise plan of what needed to be done. The evaluation of tranche 2, published in March 2016, found that the quality of the partnerships was better than those of tranche 1 (NFER, 2016). NFER made a number of recommendations to the Welsh Government.

- Ensure that there is a co-ordinated strategy for school improvement based on a tiered approach that responds to the different level of need shown by schools in Wales.
- Build on the positive gains made by staff who participated in the Pathfinder project by embedding effective professional development activities into continuing professional development opportunities across Wales. In particular, there is a need to ensure that school leaders develop the skills of working with other schools, by looking at leadership requirements and the content of leaders' professional qualifications.
- Facilitate the sharing of the good practice identified in the Pathfinder to ensure that it has maximum impact on schools across Wales.
- Encourage further school-to-school collaboration as the Pioneer Schools begin the work of reforming the curriculum and professional development arrangements in Wales.

32   There were also recommendations for schools:

- **Ensure that improvement work results in a 'joined-up' approach to school improvement.** Schools should consider the support being received from different sources and draw this together to avoid duplication of effort.

- **Continue to evidence and share the findings from their own research and evaluation activities relating to their school improvement work with other schools.** These findings could be shared through their own school networks as well as through the existing national resource sharing tools such as the 'Hwb' and the Learning Wales websites.

33   The evaluation was not able to provide evidence of any sustained impact of the pathfinder projects because it was carried out during the life of the projects. However, its recommendations identify useful preconditions and non-negotiables that can help guide the consortia in their work.

Schools Challenge Cymru

34   This initiative was launched in June 2014 to support 40 Pathways to Success (P2S) schools and their wider clusters (Welsh Government, 2014b). The Welsh Government committed to providing £20 million to support these schools, identified as facing significant barriers to improvement.

35   P2S schools have been encouraged to reflect on the quality of their leadership and management, teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of their work with the wider community. The hope was that by making improvements in these areas there will be an improvement in pupil learning outcomes. The programme includes a range of measures including provision for external support and guidance to help P2S schools more accurately assess the challenges that they face, and put in place strategies to address these challenges.

36   The P2S schools have been encouraged to develop partnerships with other secondary schools where appropriate. Promoting school-to-school collaboration is a key strategic priority in *Qualified for Life* (Welsh Government, 2014c).

37   The P2S schools have adopted a range of approaches that have included a number of common elements including in the development of self-evaluation processes, the skills of the senior leadership team, IT equipment to support the development of a modern learning environment and the recruitment of additional teaching and non-teaching/support staff.

38   The majority of P2S have worked with other secondary schools. Senior leaders in schools that had no formal school-to-school partnerships disputed whether investing management time in such arrangements was appropriate and that relationships should be developed on a more *ad hoc* basis based on the needs of their school. However, that does not mean that collaborative work with others was taking place. The evaluation of the first year of the project found that the main reason for this was the attitudes of the senior leaders. An insular inward-looking culture existed in a few.

39   In those P2S schools that appeared to be engaged in collaborative working one-third were developing relationships with schools that were seen as having excellent practice in an area that the P2S school wanted to improve. A further third had collaborations with other P2S schools. A few had collaborative arrangements with other local schools that were seen to face similar challenges. However, the evaluation at the conclusion of the initiative found that the:

> *'wide variability in the aims of **partnership working** and the informal manner in which much of this work was conducted meant that there was limited evidence of the benefits of this work in helping P2S schools to achieve their school improvement objectives'* (Carr, Brown & Morris, 2017, p. 7).

40   Those P2S schools that were working collaboratively with others identify a number of factors necessary for the work to be effective:

- A **shared understanding about aims/objectives** of the collaborative partnership. Where partnerships had been effective, schools took time to identify what they could expect from partners and what, in turn, partners could expect from them. This made it easier to sustain engagement. It was important that the collaboration was seen to be mutually beneficial.
- **The relationships needed to be based on trust and confidence**. Developing a trusting relationship was very important where one school was providing and one school receiving support. Furthermore, it was important that those in need of support were confident to be open to scrutiny.
- A **shared language** for improvement. It is important that the school needing support can understand how an approach might work for them and for supporting schools to have the necessary skills to help them explain how an approach should work.

Regional consortia

41   Regional consortia have recognised that to achieve a self-improving system it is necessary to have a differentiated approach to the support and challenge they offer schools. Schools cannot benefit from working with others until certain preconditions are in place and barriers removed.

42   Each of the consortia was inspected during 2016 and the full reports are available on Estyn's website. Common conclusion are that all consortia have a clear improvement strategy, but that it is too early to judge the relative impact of the specific approaches. An increasing amount of support for schools is provided by other schools, which is arranged by the consortia. This is helpful for building capacity in the education system in Wales. However, school-to-school work is not monitored or evaluated carefully enough by the consortia to ensure that the support being provided is having the intended impact and not having a detrimental effect on the schools providing support.

43   While the approaches taken by the consortia vary, they share a number of common features:

- A differentiated or tiered approach is used. Those who are in need of the most support are provided with targeted intervention packages.
- Challenge advisers have a support role alongside their 'challenge' role. This requires them to work with schools to encourage them to work collaboratively.
- A strategic approach to changing cultures ensures that there is a strong commitment to system leadership and understanding of what it means to be a self-improving system.
- Structures have been established to encourage and support schools to work in partnership to develop a self-improving school system.
- The 'Challenge' approach that emerged from initiatives such as the London Challenge, and on which the Schools Challenge Cymru (Carr, Brown & Morris, 2017 & Welsh Government 2014b), is based has been influential in guiding the approaches in the consortia.
- The Lead and Emerging Practitioners model has also guided the strategies in consortia.

Glossary

P2S	Pathways to Success – the name given to the schools that are receiving support through the School's Challenge Cymru initiative
'Index of challenge'	The index is calculated as follows.

- 50% x the proportion of pupils of statutory school age eligible for free school meals; plus
- 30% x the proportion of pupils of statutory school age who live in an area classed as in the 20% most deprived parts of Wales using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD); plus
- 10% x the proportion of pupils of statutory school age subject to school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs (SEN); plus
- 10% x the proportion of pupils of statutory school age who are either new to the English language (or Welsh where relevant), at an early acquisition stage or developing competence

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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