

# Developing a new locality model for English schools

The purpose of the research project is to develop proposals for a set of criteria by which any revised governance model for the English school system can be justified which outlines clearly the role of the middle tier. The discussion of the role of the middle tier in education is set within the wider debate about devolution.

The research seeks to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1 How do we define a 'successful school system'?  
Are there principles of system design against which any model of national, regional and local system governance can be evaluated?

RQ2 What solutions and challenges exist for resolving the tensions between decentralisation and standardisation, excellence and equity?  
What are the key learning points on the implementation of 'place-based' reform?

RQ3 What is the role of the 'middle tier'?  
Using a functional analysis the research seeks to identify at which level of the system a number of system functions (F1 – F7 below) might be undertaken (national; regional; sub-regional; local; individual school).

The research is also interested in discovering how good practice is identified in some areas and shared. Whose leadership role is it to ensure consistency of practice across the system? Is the issue one of knowledge sharing, or changing practice and, if the latter, how might this best be achieved in areas of greatest challenge? Are leaders working across schools trained to do so? Is the commodification and selling of practice developed with public money justified?

The Project is designed to engage key stakeholders in a dynamic process leading to some clear outcomes. It has three phases:

- A literature review which has two main sections. Section one summarises literature on four high-performing systems to explore how they organise 7 key governance functions. The key features of these systems are identified to help develop the set of criteria. Section two summarises the place-based approaches adopted in England and evaluates how the 7 key governance functions are undertaken in England using the set of criteria derived from the high-performing systems as a frame of reference.
- Interviews with leading practitioners and policy shapers representing a broad spectrum of opinion, who are asked, in the light of the Review and their own experience, to identify what set of criteria they would adopt to re-design the middle tier in England and to respond to current challenges in delivering the 7 functions. What has been encouraging is the enthusiasm with which people have responded to the invitation to take part.
- Focus Groups with stakeholder organisations, such as the head teacher and teacher unions, the National Governors Association and Parentkind will be invited to discuss the findings from the literature Review and the interviews and comment on proposals.

The results will be written up in a final report. Some of the early findings from the 4 leading international education jurisdictions are.

### **Principles of successful system design**

1. *Alignment*  
Alignment of vision between Ministers, regions, localities and individual schools. Shared vision and purpose within partnerships and within schools.
2. *Subsidiarity and autonomy with the right sort accountability*  
Decisions are made at the level nearest to delivery. Professionals are held to account by local stakeholders and peers in regular improvement-focused activities (horizontal accountability). The focus is to improve not prove.
3. *Learning and capacity building*  
Building capacity is a priority. A focus on learning together through open reflection and honest feedback. Evidence informed good practice is shared widely.
4. *Positive framing and shared moral purpose: equity and respect*  
Professional ethics of collaboration and joint purpose are openly expressed and reinforced in daily interactions. Parents and community feel invested in schools. Mechanisms are in place to ensure all children succeed. A positive ethos is deliberately cultivated and power imbalances minimized.
5. *Whole system focus*  
'Connected autonomy'. Coordination of resources and solutions for efficiency, equality of access, cost-effectiveness, economies of scale.

### **Possible Recommendations:**

#### **F1 Teacher recruitment and retention**

1. Change the narrative from negative to celebratory emphasising the public value of teaching as a profession
2. Change from punitive monitoring by management/external inspection to supportive monitoring as in the high-performing systems, with horizontal accountability via peer-models of collaborative learning where the intention is to 'improve, rather than prove'.
3. More research into retention: differences in the retention rates of teachers in different types of school structure (Worth et al., 2017: 6 found MATs tend to have a slightly higher than average rate of teachers leaving the profession compared to other school types; in different regions (DfE, 2016); different training routes (Allen et al., 2016a).
4. Shortages disproportionately affect schools that serve more disadvantaged communities. While most countries assign teacher recruitment and retention to the top level of Government, the NFER recommend, in the light of unequal provision across the country, that shortages are best dealt with by pursuing local recruitment strategies

(Lynch et al., 2016: 5). In half of the OECD countries and economies with available data, there is extra pay for working in unpopular areas (OECD, 2020).

## **F2 Vulnerable pupils and SEND**

5. *“It is very hard, if not impossible, for teachers to move up the career ladder unless they have served in schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students”* (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2020).
6. Several studies identify the middle tier role in promoting inclusive ways of managing schools, establishing the conditions that build consensus and commitment towards equity and challenging discriminatory educational practices. Particular forms of leadership are known to be effective in promoting equity in education: a focus on teaching and learning; strong supportive communities of students, teachers and parents; and multi-agency support; early diagnosis and compensatory catchup; high quality teaching for all; challenging low expectations and strong leadership at the middle tier level. Middle tier leaders (usually experienced headteachers) act to challenge practices which increase disadvantage: e.g. the UCL/NFER study in England found subject expertise is better in higher sets; a misallocation of disadvantaged students to lower sets and a lack of fluidity (ability to move sets); less homework and a ‘dumbed down’ curriculum for pupils in lower sets. How far is a career move into middle tier leadership attractive to headteachers?

## **F3 Curriculum**

7. Give teachers more autonomy to design 10- 20% of the curriculum for their students (would need training)
8. Reduce school-based assessment to allow more time for deeper and holistic learning
9. Reduce homework and increase after school activities including sports, newspaper and other clubs
10. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as problem-solving and creativity in a subject require domain-specific knowledge; young people need to understand a concept before they can think critically about it. Teaching critical thinking skills through subjects enhances both.
11. There is growing use of evidence-based research disseminated by subject centres and the EEF, for example, in regional hubs – as well as Teaching Schools, often in partnership with Universities: how can leaders in these organisations increase ‘reach’ in an opt-in model.

## **F4 School improvement**

12. The ongoing close monitoring of schools by local authorities/municipalities has two main advantages: the first is that it is cost effective; for example, the total annual national

budget for assessment in Finland is less than \$5 M. (Sahlberg, 2015: 95). The second is that school improvement is a continuous activity rather than an intervention after failure. Do we need a review of the numerous SI funds and how they are allocated? Is the cost of Ofsted value for money and does Ofsted monitor schools regularly enough if inspections are, on average, once every four years?

13. Self and peer evaluation: trust leads to openness and acceptance of feedback. We need rigorous evaluation of the multiple peer review models currently operating in England.

## **F5 Accountability**

14. All four systems have abandoned national inspections and moved to a self-evaluation model as part of their drive to professionalise the education system. Middle tier 'superintendents' operate across a number of schools to hold them to account in a regular and supportive manner which allows speedy input if people are struggling. Should we abandon Ofsted, league tables and the publishing of outcome data – how can we avoid a loss of transparency?
15. Rigorous school and teacher performance appraisal involving the local or district level to monitor performance against the school's annual excellence plan means that accountability is tested regularly and covers all six types of accountability:
  - moral accountability (to pupils, parents and the local community)
  - professional accountability is to colleagues
  - to employers or government, is contractual accountability
  - market accountability occurs where parents and pupils have a choice of institution.
  - Hopkin's (2007) added 'system accountability', where successful leaders were deemed to owe a duty to contribute to the wider system by becoming a system leader, taking on roles such as NLE to support other schools.
  - Cousin (2019: 157) identified 'democratic accountability' as one of the important functions of the locally elected middle tier of local authorities in the English system. Numerous studies since 2010 have identified a democratic deficit in the current English system. Glatter (2017) identified a lack of governance legitimacy arising from the governance of academies via a funding contract which constitutes a direct agreement between the Secretary of State and the academy sponsor and excludes stakeholders such as parents. Greany and Higham (2018: 100) argue: *"any new arrangements for the middle tier need to have a clear democratic mandate if they are to be seen as legitimate"*. Allen and Gan suggest a system of democratic governance structures at school level nested in a system of Local Education Boards to address what they term *"a gaping democratic deficit"* (2018: 1). The BELMAS review (2020) talks of "missing voices". How do we redress this balance?

## **F6: Admissions**

16. The LA should have oversight of all admissions: a lack of local oversight and planning impedes the effective operation of the system. There should be no other admissions body, as multiple admissions bodies increases inequity.

#### **F7 Future-proofing - *thrown into relief by COVID19***

17. Finland as “*a global leader in cultivating the future capabilities*” by incorporating the use of information and information technology in their curriculum, emphasizing the use of phenomenon-based learning in upper secondary education and in so doing, strengthening critical thinking. The curriculum also includes civic education and global awareness.
18. Singapore and Estonia: technical skills such as programming into primary and secondary level education and adaptive skills such as critical thinking, creativity and sociability. The four key C2015 student outcomes in Singapore are the “confident person”, “self-directed learner”, “concerned citizen”, and “active contributor”.
19. Estonia set a target for broadband internet to cover all schools by 2022 – adopt the same for UK and provide teacher training?
20. The literature promotes future skills as a passport to global citizenship but warn that a commitment to teach these skills will need resilience as they are coming under serious and aggressive pressure from the forces of nativism and ethno-nationalism.
21. Finally, there is growing awareness of the need to support children’s well-being. Life satisfaction in UK 53%, compared with an OECD average of 67%; and English pupils in PISA reported an above average ‘fear of failure’ compared with below average in Finland and Estonia.

Thank you for listening. If you are interested in contributing to the study, please email [susan.cousin@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:susan.cousin@ucl.ac.uk)

Jonathan and Susan