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Learning together: The power of cluster-based school improvement

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Introduction

Much has been written about how schools can take responsibility for their own improvement, as education systems around the world move to greater autonomy and simultaneously introduce the requirement for greater accountability.

At the same time there is a growing recognition that unless there is an equally strong driver for the building of mature and effective collaboration, and the development of the leadership needed to broker and facilitate this, then there is a danger that education systems, driven by competition and choice, and backed up by autonomy, will not only become more diverse, they will become more unequal.

In this paper I outline some of what we are learning from clusters of schools as they begin to work to create a highly ambitious, equitable and ethical school system within a government drive to continue the 'high autonomy – high accountability trajectory' outlined by Greany (2015a) in his recent CSE Seminar Series paper.

I will explore some emerging practices, drawing on examples from England and Australia. I will examine how and why some clusters get stuck and fail to achieve the impact they expected, as well as some of the characteristics of successful partnerships.

I will examine the emergence of models of cluster-based peer review and the potential this has to build 'accountability rich cultures', based on a collective commitment to enquiry, learning and growth. I will argue that this approach, which is capable of building 'trust-based and shared accountability' within a competitive market-led system, has the potential to create truly sustainable and improving school-led systems.

Autonomous and accountable school-led systems

The level of accountability and autonomy experienced by schools varies widely around the world. However, evidence from the OECD, the World Bank and others tells us that the best-performing systems are those in which school autonomy is high – in terms of resource allocation and decisions about teaching and assessment – but where accountability is also rigorous.

Accountability can be achieved in various ways, most often through the publication of test results and other school data, or by inspection, overseen by central government departments. School improvement activities are then made available through a range of providers – often central or local government agencies, private sector suppliers, or universities – driven by the findings of external or self-evaluation.

In some countries, however, increasing autonomy is influencing the methods of accountability. Policy makers, academics and schools themselves are promoting systems in which schools self-regulate but also self-support. Schools hold each other to account but also provide the professional development, coaching and other forms of support, which lead to improving outcomes. This is what is commonly referred to as a school-led, self-improving system.

> the best-performing systems are those in which school autonomy is high ... but where accountability is also rigorous.

The early work done by Hargreaves (2010) for the National College for School Leadership in England, on the building of self-improving systems, made it clear that giving schools freedom and making them more accountable would not, by itself, create a self-improving system. Nor would merely putting in place the necessary architecture, systems and structures – such as designating schools to take specific responsibility for system support and improvement – and creating roles for high-performing headteachers, senior leaders and teachers to act as system leaders.

The missing element is culture change. Experience tells us that this is by far the most difficult to achieve. It requires a collective commitment within and between schools to improvement, demonstrated by the willingness to

- share data and resources;
- be honest about weaknesses;
- share the best practitioners; and
- hold each other to account for outcomes.

Without this a self-improving system could very easily become a complacent and cosy system, a self deluded system and a disconnected system – with some clusters and alliances deliberately distancing themselves from others in a desire to retain their 'competitive edge', or through a fear of exposing their inadequacies in a market-led competitive environment.

We are beginning to see the danger of an exclusive focus on autonomy and accountability, without this additional focus on capacity building and culture change. Schools can become more isolated, either due to over-confidence or insecurity, or just because they are too busy. They can become more competitive and therefore are less likely to share and collaborate and to learn from each other. As a consequence, those schools with capacity get better and others do not, thus creating a bigger gap between the good and not-so-good schools and creating greater variability within the system.

A paper by Toby Greany on the restructuring of schooling in England (2014) recognised this when it reported the following.

> *Well positioned head teachers tended to take a logic of action that could be characterised as aiming to accumulate prestige, taking charge of their own destiny as far as possible, and being graded by OFSTED as at least Good and preferably Outstanding was what mattered most. The head teachers we interviewed thought it was inevitable that the weak would get weaker and the strong stronger. They felt that increasingly competitive local fields are creating winners and losers.*

England is not an isolated example; the dangers of decentralisation, which can lead to schools being unwilling to share, has also been noted by Wylie (2003) who, when studying New Zealand as a decentralised system, noted that

> *while there were some exciting pockets of change they remained pockets.*

What is a self-improving system? What exactly are we trying to achieve and what might it look like? Greany (2015b) outlines the four criteria set out by the previous Coalition Government in England, as follows.

1. Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement.
2. Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads.
3. The best school leaders and schools extend their reach across other schools so all schools improve.
4. Government support and intervention is minimised.

At locality and school level these criteria are beginning to emerge through practice with characteristics that include

- collective responsibility, for success and underperformance;
- a culture shift from 'my school and community' to 'our schools and communities' and a governance model that supports this;
- great use of data, knowing where the best teachers and leaders are and having both the will and the capability to move them to where they are most needed;
- engagement in research and 'joint practice development', with structured peer learning focused on improvement;
- joint accountability for outcomes, backed up by peer scrutiny and review;
- investment in capacity building for a new generation of system leaders; and
- behaviour that demonstrates professional generosity, reciprocity and collective moral purpose.

> Leaders need both the capability and capacity to work within and across schools, acting as system leaders.

Leadership capacity is central to an effective system. Leaders need both the capability and capacity to work within and across schools, acting as system leaders. The OECD (2011) takes a similar view of the characteristics of system leadership in its study of effective school leadership, drawing attention to

- in-school capacity to sustain and share high-quality teaching and learning;
- between-school capability – the glue needed for schools to work effectively together;
- mediating organisations that support and build capacity and capability;
- critical mass required to make system leadership a movement – not just the practice of a small number of elite leaders; and
- cultural consensus – to give school leaders the space, legitimacy and encouragement to engage.

Or, put simply, and to repeat the OECD (2011) recommendation, 'let leaders lead'.

Of course, as we know, it is not quite as simple as that. Having worked in the English system for many years, my view is that we are still in the foothills in our aim to create a school-led and self-improving system. This should not be a cause for despondency; such a significant transformation will take time.

What have we done to date?

In England the value of school-to-school support has been recognised for some time by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the regulator on school standards in England, as is evident in the following statement from its Annual Report for 2011/12.

> *School-to-school support structures will become increasingly common and their effectiveness will be a critical determinant of school improvement.*
>
> (Ofsted, 2012)

There is currently some debate about whether or not a school can achieve an outstanding rating if they cannot demonstrate that they have helped another school to improve.

It is now a feature of the National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers in England (DfE, 2015), which state that

> *Excellent Headteachers within a self improving school system create outward facing schools which work with other schools and organisations in a climate of mutual challenge to champion best practice and secure excellent achievements for all pupils.*

Despite these powerful endorsements, however, progress is patchy. Some schools and clusters of schools remain isolated. There are pockets of effective practice but the school-led system has some way to go before it engages the majority of England's 21,000 schools. One way of incentivising and accelerating the move to greater maturity would be to use the leverage provided through regulation. While there is clear recognition that a school-led model is inevitable, Ofsted has not yet committed to influencing schools' behaviour through the inspection framework. There is currently some debate about whether or not a school can achieve an outstanding rating if they cannot demonstrate that they have helped another school to improve. Recognising this as part of the Ofsted framework would send a strong message to the system about what is valued and what is expected.

In England, Teaching Schools are designated schools that work with an alliance of schools and other partners, and which take responsibility for a range of improvement priorities, including

- initial teacher education;
- school-to-school support;
- continuous professional learning;
- leadership development and succession planning; and
- research and development.

Currently, Teaching Schools are not evenly distributed across the country. Some parts are well served by them and are able to access the support they provide, while others are less so. This was an almost inevitable consequence of making an 'outstanding' Ofsted judgement a prerequisite for designation, as some parts of the country have fewer schools with this judgement.

System leadership capacity is also mixed. Initiatives such as the National Leader of Education designation and the role of consultant headteachers in, for example, the rapid improvement of London's schools, are

a clear success. However, we face, yet again, a headteacher recruitment challenge in England. Greater autonomy and more responsibility, not only for the improvement of your own school but also for others, makes headship a serious and compelling career choice, but also daunting.

Many of the Teaching School Alliances and Multi Academy Trusts (groups of independent state schools who come together under one Trust, as a legal entity), are led by individuals who helped create the very system they now lead. They are the pioneers. As they get older there needs to be a serious commitment to building the capability and leadership skills of the next generation, who will take over from them.

More broadly, system capacity is a concern – do schools, teachers and leaders have the time, skill and willingness to support their peers? In the early days of the development of Teaching Schools Alliances in England, Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education, would ask the National College for School Leadership senior team 'are we supporting schools to deliver or stretching them to fail'. It is a question that the system needs to continue to ask of itself. Without a focus on capacity building, 'being stretched to fail' is a very real possibility.

In assessing the maturity of the self-improving system in England, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned a 'Temperature check' study (Sandals and Bryant, 2014). The findings of this study give us some indication of where our efforts must now be directed. Interestingly, most of these recommendations (as listed below) are not about systems and structures but remind us, yet again, of the importance of trust, relationships and the primacy of culture change.

1. Look out for each other: who is lost and isolated?
2. Sign-post support: are the 'best bits' known and available to those who most need them?
3. Maintain dialogue: debate and resolve issues – take responsibility.
4. Foster innovation and distribute leadership: provide space for others to lead and innovate.
5. Inspire trust: lead by example – tackle lapses.
6. Follow through with action: the hard graft of implementation.
7. Hard-edged school-to-school accountability will take time to develop.

Greater autonomy and more responsibility, not only for the improvement of your own school but also for others, makes headship a serious and compelling career choice, but also daunting.

So will we get there?

I, and many others, sincerely hope we will 'get there', but it requires all parties to strive for coherence around the reform effort. It requires government to be steadfast in maintaining the direction of travel and prioritising the necessary capacity building to generate sustainability. Above all, it requires the top decision makers to have the confidence not to revert to the relative safety of greater centralisation, should improvement trajectories not be maintained as expected. Greany (2014), sadly, concludes that this is currently not the case in England, citing tensions and contradictions with the overall reform strategy.

Cluster-based improvement

In England there is a growing view that the era of the 'stand-alone' school is over and that the unit of school improvement has moved from being the school to the cluster.

How far will a cluster-based approach to improvement support our efforts to align autonomy, accountability, capacity building and culture change? How far will a focus on effective collaboration deliver the gains the system desires? Is it a warm and woolly solution or a serious endeavor to deliver on the 'bottom line' of faster rates of improvement and closing achievement gaps?

The emerging research evidence is promising (but not yet unequivocal), as outlined by Hill (2014) in his research into the practice and impact of collaboration in small schools.

> *School-to-school support was at the heart of the Excellence in Cities, London Challenge and City Challenge programmes. All three of these programmes were subject to rigorous academically led evaluations that were able to demonstrate that pupils made greater progress than similar pupils in other schools. Similarly a study of federations and collaborations found that primary school federations/collaboratives started to outperform similar pupils in non-federation schools after approximately two to four years of partnership working. These improvements were not uniform across all types of partnerships but taken as a whole demonstrate a strong empirical base for schools working together.*

The power of this form of 'inter-organisational property' is noted in the most recent progress report on Teaching Schools, from the Department for Education in England (2014).

> *The building of person-to-person and school-to-school relationships permeates the everyday leadership work of teaching schools and their alliances. The benefit of such relationships is that they provide both the conditions and the necessary social basis for communities of learning, and through these, for joint practice development to take root within the alliance.*

Hargreaves (2012) calls this kind of inter-organisational property '*collaborative capital*', which in turn '*enhances the collective capacity on which a self-improving system depends*'.

The recent Mitchell Institute study (Bentley and Cazaly, 2015) that explored the impact of collaboration on educational outcomes, also noted that the improving clusters in their study consistently demonstrated a shared purpose in their commitment to better learning outcomes for young people within a locality.

> *Strength of commitment to student learning is a distinguishing feature in the schools we studied. This commitment spurs people at these schools to seek out and develop new collaborations, in order to achieve more and transcend the limitations of school organisation, resourcing and location.*

Fullan (2014) reminds us of the universal value of peer motivation as a spur to improvement. He recommends that we '*use the group to change the group*', and urges policy makers to '*bite the bullet on this one*' and invest in building collaborative cultures and purposeful peer learning.

He also pointed out (Kirtman and Fullan, 2015) that a failure to consider seriously the power of collaboration to transform systems has consequences.

- Failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless.
- Failure to focus on others renders you clueless.
- Failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided.

So, the research on cluster-based school improvement is promising; but we all know of many cluster-based initiatives that have not achieved this promise – where impact has been weak, where any gains made have not been sustainable, and where substantial investment has been provided but it is difficult to know exactly what difference it has made.

A closer look at accountability

Work with any cluster of schools on navigating the autonomy/competition/collaboration landscape and it can be guaranteed that the issue of accountability will be raised within the first few minutes. Too often it is cited as an obstacle to greater collaboration, a fear of risking too much in relation to one's own school and, in England, an all-too-familiar refrain of '*What will Ofsted think?*'

Increasingly however, I hear these concerns now balanced by serious consideration of school and peer-led forms of accountability that can be as rigorous, if not more so, than an external form of accountability. I work with school principals who want to build a culture of collective improvement, where asking for help from a peer is a sign of strength not a sign of weakness, and where the issues leaders and teachers are facing can be openly acknowledged and addressed, before they begin to slide into serious weakness.

Professor Sir Tim Brighouse, formerly Schools Commissioner for London, speaking at an event in Scotland in September 2015 (no print or internet reference available at present) echoed what many school leaders feel when he said the following.

> *At the moment our accountability systems, which focus on 'proving', deplete energy; we need accountability systems that focus on 'improving' and generate energy.*

This requires us to build school-led and rigorous accountability systems, focused on professional scrutiny, learning, support and improvement, and avoid falling into those that could be based more on judgement and 'proving'.

Gilbert (2012), quoting work done by the National College for School Leadership, explored such an approach that would hold the elements of a devolved system

> *in creative tension, with checks and balances to make sure that autonomy does not lead to isolation, that diversity does not become a barrier to collaboration and that accountability does not slip into regulation.*

Similarly, Robert Hill (2015) when looking at the next 5 years of education reform in England has asked the following questions.

1. Will accountability continue to be too dominant a force, and so skew and undermine the intention behind collaboration, because inspection and performance tables focus only on individual schools?
2. How can the accountability framework be adapted to maintain rigour, whilst promoting a development rather than a compliance culture

Hill concludes that

> *taken together the drivers of self interest, fear and compliance have the potential to stunt the maturing of a self improving system whilst still in its infancy.*

> I work with school principals who want to build a culture of collective improvement, where asking for help from a peer is a sign of strength not a sign of weakness

Munby (2015), in his recent article about the future role of external inspections, has proposed that their only role should be to judge schools as 'adequate' or 'inadequate'. Support and intervention would be required for the schools in the latter group, whilst those in the former could continue to strive for even greater improvement, by holding themselves and their peers to account through a rigorous process of peer review.

These discussions are starting to line up with the intelligent, collaborative and trust-based accountability model outlined by Sahlberg (2010), which is characterised by increased networking, the building of trust and the strengthening of collective responsibilities within and between schools.

Mature clusters of schools are beginning to grasp the importance of a commitment to outcomes-focused collaboration, so that accountability works in the service of collaboration and improvement, not as a detractor from it.

Cluster-based school improvement – what works

I have had the privilege of working with clusters of schools in England and internationally and, through them, exploring what the 'journey to maturity' looks like. Together, we have debated and devised a simple quadrant (see Figure 1), which could provide the beginnings of a route map. This is far from complete and so it should be. It is for the clusters themselves to enhance and improve it as they work through the journey to greater maturity.

The quadrant has two axes which give clusters the opportunity to explore

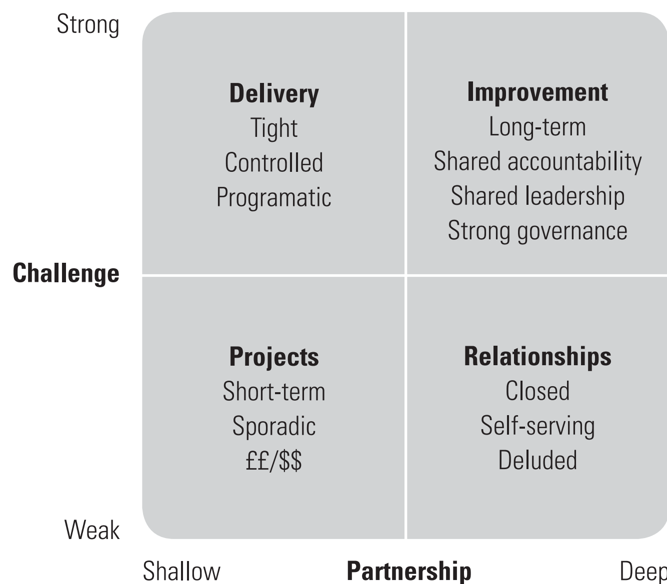
1. the depth of their partnership – the quality of their relationships and the compelling core purpose that binds them together; and
2. the strength of their challenge – the commitment to improvement and to practising peer-led rigorous forms of accountability, and their willingness to open themselves up to challenge within and beyond the cluster.

Although this is relatively simplistic, clusters have found the quadrant a useful basis for reviewing their current practice as a cluster and for asking how effective it really is.

In reality, clusters may well exhibit aspects of each of the quadrants but, increasingly, they know that unless they start to build the features embodied in the top right-hand quadrant they will not fully achieve their ambition.

1. Clusters defined by **projects** are generally short-term in relation to their time horizon and their ambition – generally 2–3 years. Their identity comes through collaboration around projects, and meetings between senior staff. Quite often they come together when money is made available, but collaboration is a criterion for being awarded funding. When the money dries up, the purpose for the collaboration is lost. Generally, evidence of impact is weak and there is no long-term sustainability built in. In general, the schools' individual identities and priorities are more important than the cluster's.
2. Clusters defined by **relationships** may have been together for some while. They will have defined ways of working and may well have started to build a 'culture of collaboration', which could include the sharing of staff

Figure 1. The 'journey to maturity' – towards a route map



between schools and engagement in action learning, or 'joint practice development' between schools. However, a focus on maintaining the 'good' relationships that they currently have can mean they are resistant to holding each other to account for outcomes. These clusters are in danger of becoming complacent; they can be deluded as to how good they really are. They do not generally open themselves up to hard-edged and professional scrutiny within their cluster; and they are generally closed to external challenge, or indeed to other schools joining them.

3. Clusters defined by **delivery** are held together by systems and structures, and by a (sometimes impressive) suite of delivery programs. They deliver these Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs and support not only to schools within the cluster but, increasingly, to schools outside their cluster. Many of the relationships are transactional. They are usually led by a Chief Executive and are strongly business-oriented. Much of what they do is innovative. They are often in receipt of Government funding to deliver support on behalf of the system and, in many cases, their reach extends beyond the locality.
4. Clusters defined by **improvement** have long-term horizons – as long as 10 years or more. In order to define this ambition, the families and children they serve are involved in the building of the vision. They have strong governance and, increasingly, portfolio leadership where each senior leader has responsibility for leading on an aspect of the work of the cluster. They have agreed their priorities and the metrics by which they hold each other to account. They have agreed a system of peer review within the cluster that requires them to share data and involves senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers. They are committed to building a culture of 'trust-based' and shared accountability across the cluster. Increasingly these clusters are now looking to team up with other clusters, to enable them to learn alongside a more diverse community and to invite scrutiny from an ever-greater range of peers. They are beginning to embody the core features of a school-led system, as outlined previously.

Clusters I have worked with on reviewing their practice, and plotting their next steps toward maturity, have begun to articulate the features of this journey. They are focusing on the 'why', the 'how' and the 'what'.

The 'why'

They start with a focus on 'the why'. In other words, they ask what is their shared and compelling purpose? Why do they exist? Their response is not *'to improve outcomes for all children'* – that is a result. The 'why' is an articulation of what they are passionate about, and what will keep them working together even in the 'white heat' of holding each other to account for outcomes.

The 'how'

They then look at their values; what binds them together in this shared purpose? What behaviours will they adopt, and what will they not tolerate? How will the way that they work together deliberately manifest their values? For example, if they say one of their values is 'inclusivity', then how much attention are they paying to who is lost and isolated in the cluster? Who is excluded or excluding themselves? What role do the children, young people and families play?

The 'what'

Finally, they agree on what they will do together; in other words what will be the 2–3 priorities they will all agree to work on together. It is at this point that focus is critical; once the priorities are decided on, these will form the basis of peer review, of action research and joint practice development, of CPD and leadership development, and of cluster-based investment.

These three steps are then backed up by a commitment to work on

1. a focus on joint accountability for outcomes, with agreed metrics that all members of the cluster hold themselves to account for, backed up by a system of peer review and follow-up school-to-school support;
2. a focus on professional learning, so every leader and teacher has the chance to see an outstanding peer in action, and every leader and teacher has an opportunity to coach and be coached, either within or between clusters. Mature clusters are also committed to growing their own teachers and leaders, and deliberately invest in 'learning on the job'. Those clusters that are investing in approaches to 'portfolio leadership', where leaders take on responsibility for an aspect of work across the cluster, are deliberately investing in succession planning and in growing the next generation of system leaders;

Rigorous peer review that involves senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers, is one of the core practices of a mature and improving cluster.

3. a strengthening of alliance architecture, through the building of strong governance and portfolio leadership, so that decision making is clear, and where all members of the cluster can be held to account for the actions they have taken and the impact they have had as a result of peer review. Strong clusters need a business and investment plan, which usually includes all schools paying into a central pot (most commonly in relation to the number of pupils on roll), which is then used to fund the agreed cluster priorities.

The power and potential of peer review

Rigorous peer review that involves senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers, is one of the core practices of a mature and improving cluster. It has the potential to build a culture of trust-based accountability, backed up by a focus on improvement, and a commitment to school-to-school support. Done well, it reduces the risk of complacency and promotes transparency, openness and honesty within and between schools.

CfBT is currently working with over 400 schools, operating in clusters across England, on the development of peer review. The peer review process is based on the belief that the best form of support is rigorous and timely, provides valuable challenge focused on improvement, and is led by trusted and highly regarded peers.

As Hargreaves observes (2012), peer review in mature collaboration requires school leaders to develop the skills of analytic investigator and skilled coach, if the school system is to be truly self-improving. He goes on to note that

> *Peer challenge is possible if sufficient social capital (mutual trust, transparency and reciprocity) and collective moral purpose has developed between the partners.*

The CfBT model of peer review is deliberately designed to

- build the technical skills of peer review and school improvement – so all members of a cluster can engage in regular scrutiny of each other's practice, can give and receive feedback, and can provide and accept effective and focused improvement support;
- develop a culture characterised by a commitment by everyone in the cluster to continuous improvement, a climate of openness, trust and honesty, and a willingness to hold each other to account for agreed outcomes.

It is underpinned by a three-year peer review maturity model, which focuses initially on building the skills of senior leaders, followed by middle leaders and then teachers.

It is essential that any approach to peer review engages all personnel within the cluster.

Teachers in particular are critical to the building of a self-improving cluster and system. This has been powerfully articulated in the ASCL (2015) blueprint for a self-improving system, which involves

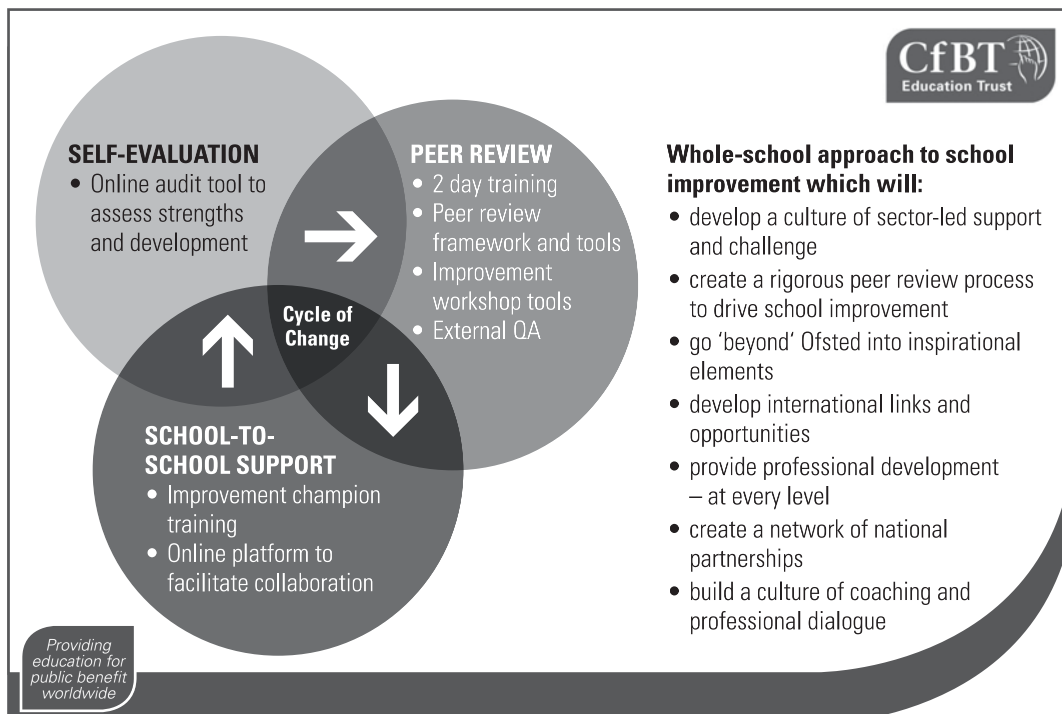
- developing teachers so that they are agents of their own accountability, committed to professional learning – improving their pedagogical skills, accessing and using best evidence, innovating, evaluating and improving learning;
- aspiring to having teachers initiate conversations about what needs to improve, rather than middle or senior leaders;
- building teacher confidence to focus on developing professional knowledge and skill, rather than a narrow compliance culture; and
- building a culture of learned resourcefulness, optimism and hopefulness.

The blueprint works through a three-part process – a 'cycle of systematic improvement' (see Figure 2) – involving effective self-evaluation, rigorous peer review and the defining of an improvement priority; then follow-up action, and support from other schools in the cluster if required; and the monitoring of impact.

Experience to date has shown us that school leaders engaging in peer review find the process extremely beneficial. For many of them it is the first time they have been in each others' schools, with the permission to scrutinise and give honest feedback. They describe it as the best professional development they have had.

This is only one part of the process, however. If schools in the cluster practise peer review, but do not work through a follow-on process to scrutinise the outcome of the review and agree an improvement priority, and if the other schools in the cluster do not have the will or capacity to offer support when it is requested, then the peer review is no more than a 'health check' on a school.

Figure 2. The cycle of systematic improvement



Source: Adapted from the CfBT Education Trust original diagram

It is essential that a focus on improvement, rather than just the 'outcome' of the review is embedded into the whole process. This requires a commitment to a follow-up action plan, where school-to-school support is clearly defined and there is an agreement to report on the impact of the peer review within six months of the review taking place.

Our experience is that this needs facilitating, through a defined role within the cluster. In the CfBT model, aspirant senior leaders are encouraged to take on the role of 'Improvement Champions', whose role it is to

- facilitate peer review improvement workshops;
- develop evidence-based improvement strategies and school-based research; and
- monitor the impact of peer review.

There is a powerful 'drumbeat' underpinning peer review. It is not episodic; not something that is done and ticked off on an annual calendar. It is fundamentally a way of being for groups of schools that will change the way in which they work together.

At its best, it looks like the following experience reported in an internal document from the Centurion Partnership, a cluster of small schools in the East of England.

> *Through peer review staff teams have been encouraged and supported to have an 'open door' approach. This has enabled the reviews to shine a light into all aspects of the school, and we have found that staff have been very honest with reviewers. This has led on to the teams being more open with each other, their Headteachers and governors – the review has had an enabling impact on the relationships within the schools, improving the social and decisional capital of the group. We see this as far more powerful than the more visible impact on the school improvement plan for example, as this development of professional capital will drive a fundamental shift in the improvement dynamics of the schools across the cluster.*

A closer look at practice

The Kyra Teaching School Alliance, England

The Kyra School Alliance is a partnership of over thirty schools across Lincolnshire, England. The alliance's vision – which was shaped by leaders and teachers from across its schools – states that

> *We will work together to ensure that* ***all*** *children across our schools benefit from the highest standards of teaching and learning and are inspired, supported and prepared to fulfil their potential.*

This is achieved through the alliance's main strands of work, namely:

- high-quality continuous professional development;
- school-to-school support and improvement;
- school-based initial teacher training; and
- school-led research.

The alliance has been established for four years and has achieved significant impact during that time. In 2015, 97 per cent of those head teachers and teachers responding to the alliance's annual survey rated their experience working with Kyra as 'very positive' or 'positive' and 89 per cent stated that Kyra had a 'very positive' or 'positive' impact on teaching and leadership practice in their school.

Currently, its work includes an emphasis on building greater capacity for school-to-school support within Lincolnshire, drawing on head teachers and other expert practitioners with a strong track record of supporting improvement in other schools. The alliance also continues to develop its work in recruiting and training trainee teachers, which it considers to be a key strategy for ensuring the long-term success of schools and pupils. Kyra is also committed to harnessing the ideas of children themselves in order to achieve improvement across schools. Our Kids' Council, which includes student representatives from schools across the alliance, provides a key school improvement role, through their learning walks and constructive

feedback to head teachers and teachers across the alliance.

In 2015–16 the alliance is committed to building its own sustainability – including through schools paying an annual membership subscription (with lower fees available for those schools making a deep and sustained contribution to the wider work of the group). It is also building networks amongst practitioners in the early years sector (those serving children under five years of age) to ensure that best practice is developed and shared widely amongst these professionals. Kyra has also developed a CPD and case study 'journal', through which it shares learning, expertise and best practice amongst its own schools and with the wider education system.

The hallmarks of Kyra's approach are that it

1. is **ambitious for children** – always setting the bar high, even if it makes us feel uncomfortable, because by working together anything is possible;
2. is **a learning community** – constantly understanding our needs and identifying best practice and research to generate a professional learning community. We are not afraid of asking for help, nor are we reserved in offering support and expertise wherever we can;
3. is a **builder of social capital** – starting with the premise 'what can we give?', rather than 'what can we get?' generates a rich community of mutual support and professional generosity;
4. provides **quality and impact** – holding ourselves to account with clear aims and targets that clearly link to children's outcomes. As contributors, we will be open to the scrutiny of others, knowing that accountability and review is key to the continued success of any learning community;
5. **celebrates diversity** – respecting the diversity of schools and members across our alliance. Seeing this as a strength whilst ensuring no one is excluded or left behind;
6. has **moral purpose** – committed to the success of children and adults in all of our schools. Our opportunity is to achieve something truly transformational that translates into a better education system for all. We celebrate the successes of our partners as we would our own.

The Nathalia Learning Community Alliance, Australia

A recent article (Topsfield, 2014) in the Australian daily newspaper, *The Age*, featured the Nathalia Learning Community Alliance and opened with the words 'imagine if there was no ideological warfare between public and private schools' and went on to describe the work of the alliance in Nathalia, a small rural town in northern Victoria, comprising four schools from the Catholic and State sectors and a community population of approximately 3,500 people.

The partnership means that the two secondary schools are able to offer more than 50 VCE subjects. According to the school principals 'it keeps kids in the town' – kids who might otherwise have to go elsewhere for their education.

The work of the alliance is underpinned by the moral belief that 'all the kids in a community deserve the best possible education, regardless of which school they attend'. Over the past four years, the Nathalia Learning Community has strengthened its focus on collaborative practice, with education opportunities and outcomes beginning to improve. For example, the VCE Mean Study score has increased steadily over this time and their Year 12 students are now above the state average. Internal feedback states the following.

> *'We have focused on linking the best teachers to students across the two secondary colleges, which has facilitated this improvement' one principal said. It is great to see that our classes have a mixture of uniform colours within them, and the students engaged in their learning regardless of their home school.*

Through the Learning Community, senior students are also able to study five vocational education courses provided through the partnership. Without the partnership they would need to travel to a regional centre, half an hour away, to access such programs.

The approach has been so successful that they are using a similar model to address the challenges within the middle years of schooling, especially in relation to student motivation and engagement, and specifically the need to increase the literacy skills and knowledge of students within the Year 5 to Year 8 levels. Staff with responsibility for literacy within the primary schools have been working together across the two schools and can already see the benefit.

They are also aware of the dangers of isolation for teachers living in a small town, knowing that if teachers feel better connected they are more likely to stay in the community – something the local community places a high value on.

Cluster-based improvement is not warm and fuzzy; done well it is sharp-edged, characterised by professional toughness and by an unwillingness to accept anything less than excellence for all children.

This commitment to collaboration has not been without difficulty. Initially there was resistance, particularly from parents. Those parents who had chosen a secular school for their children were uncomfortable about them being in a Catholic environment, others who were paying for a Catholic school education were unhappy that the state school pupils were getting similar at no cost. As the positive impact on the students is now obvious this has become less of an issue. Similarly the heads of the Catholic schools and the government schools know this issue needs careful handing but are committed to saying they will do 'whatever it takes' to give their children, collectively, the best possible education they can – and that means working together.

A key approach within the Nathalia Learning Community is building the capacity of their teachers to ensure that quality teaching and learning occurs within all their classes. While this is an ongoing approach, all staff have been

- involved in high-quality professional development initiatives;
- supported to participate in professional study tours to see great education models elsewhere, and
- involved in professional learning discussion groups across the schools, focusing on key areas of improvement.

Another important contribution to their professional learning is the facilitation of a range of 'learning walks', which involve small teams of staff walking through classes where good teaching and learning is taking place, and then reflecting on what they observed and the implications it has for their own practice.

Conclusion

These clusters are very different, yet both are addressing the specific needs of their context, and are demonstrating that they can use their assets better and improve more quickly when they work together in a mature collaboration.

At its most basic, but most powerful, these clusters are characterised by people getting together with other people to do something of value that they care about. In the words of Wheatley (2002),

> *There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.*

Cluster-based improvement is not warm and fuzzy; done well it is sharp-edged, characterised by professional toughness and by an unwillingness to accept anything less than excellence for all children.

There will always be reasons why it is just ‘too hard’ to make it work, when so much in the current system appears to conspire against it. The following comment in internal project feedback provides one example of this.

> *My school is inspected and judged as a single institution, my parents don't understand why my best maths teacher is working in the school down the road, my governors won’t let me support another school – they think I am here exclusively for the children of this school. If I share my data with the other schools they will use it against me when we compete for children.*

Whilst not ignoring these very real fears, when school leaders are asked *‘what do you want to define you as a system and what legacy do you want to leave?’*, it is collective moral purpose and collaboration they talk about.

As more clusters move towards maturity, the evidence we have of the impact of collective approaches to improvement is strengthening. We are beginning to see that the practice of reciprocity, of collective moral purpose and the building of joint accountability for outcomes generates greater improvement for all schools.

It is possible to do better, as Gawande (2008) states so succinctly.

> *Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity.*
>
> *And above all, it takes a willingness to try.*

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Additional reading

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About the Author

Maggie Farrar is based in the UK but works internationally. Earlier in her career she worked in senior leadership positions in schools and local authorities and, more recently, was the Director for leadership development, research and succession planning at the National College for School Leadership, as well as interim Chief Executive. She has a particular interest in team leadership, community leadership and schools as organisations that work together to transform children's life chances and close gaps in achievement. She was awarded the CBE for services to education in the 2014 New Year Honours list.

About the Paper

This paper is based on work done by Maggie Farrar during her time at the National College for School Leadership in the UK and, more recently, work undertaken in England on cluster-based school improvement through peer review, with the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and, in Australia, with Catholic Education Melbourne, The Queensland Leadership Institute (QELI) and the Country Education Project (CEP). She discusses the nature and relative merits of autonomous and accountable school-led systems; explores the benefits of cluster-based improvement; and uses examples from England and Australia to take a closer look at practice and to focus on peer review. She concludes that, although we can improve further, we are already beginning to see that the practice of reciprocity, of collective moral purpose and the building of joint accountability for outcomes, together generate greater improvement for all schools.

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