



The middle tier in education

a policy position from Prospect



PROSPECT is a trade union and professional association representing professional workers across the civil service, energy and communications sectors of the economy.

The Aspect group of Prospect is the largest single grouping of Educational Improvement professionals in the UK. Our members advise and mentor schools and colleges to produce successful outcomes for pupils across the whole ability range.

This paper reflects their collective expertise and experience. While the paper often refers to schools, this should be taken to include all educational settings from early years to further education. Its main focus is on the English educational system, but the general principles would apply across the whole of the UK.

National and international research

The research is clear that the most successful systems of education benefit from a strong middle tier which works in close partnership with both national government and individual schools. The evidence from the American Charter School system and the Swedish Free School system is also startlingly clear. These systems have in some cases produced improvement for the pupils in a particular school, but have not produced a general rise in educational achievement.

Principles and ambitions

- the school system should aim for the highest possible achievement of all our children whatever their starting point on the educational ladder
- although improvement takes place in individual institutions, improving achievement for all children has to be delivered across the whole school system in all settings. Otherwise some children will be given advantages denied to others. There is overwhelming evidence of the link between economic deprivation and low educational achievement. Giving advantages, resources and privileges to individual schools at the expense of others will undermine the system as a whole and make this problem worse.
- the education system should enable children and young people to learn and develop in a safe, secure, healthy and stimulating environment so they can grow in knowledge, confidence and independence as learners and stakeholders in society at large
- the education system should produce outcomes for learning and achievement that can be favourably compared to the best achieving nations

- all pupils should have access to high quality teaching and learning suited to their needs by way of a common curriculum that is delivered in all publicly funded schools
- all teachers employed in publicly funded schools must be appropriately qualified having achieved QTS
- schools should be led and managed by high quality school leaders and governors who are accountable for the achievement outcomes for all pupils in their school to the statutory authorities and the local community
- maintained schools, academy chains and free schools must be subject to the same consistent quality assurance procedures as must the group management and governance
- the funding available to all schools should be based on fair and equitable assessment of individual pupil needs
- all pupils should have access to, and opportunities for, high quality sports, recreational and cultural development within the school and/or local community
- schools must develop close links with the local business community and the community at large and make a contribution to life in that community
- the Nolan Principles must be rigorously applied to the recruitment and appointment of those responsible for school management and where procurement of goods and services involves the use of public funds, it should be fully transparent
- the not for profit basis of all publicly funded schools should be enshrined in legislation

- the aim should not simply be to align educational achievement to a traditional academic model, but also to equip pupils with the skills and knowledge to ensure their future employability and participation in society. Educational outcomes – both academic and vocational - should suit the needs of children and the wider public interest in terms of technological developments and economic and social goals.

The role and value of school improvement

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are vital to the life chances of the children in their care and the quality and development of the communities they serve. A high quality education system is essential both to the success of individuals and the health of a democratic and participative society which is economically resilient in the face of greater pressures from globalisation. While education is delivered in individual schools, the rest of society has a major stake in

its success or failure. Not all schools are good and not all good schools remain so. Addressing this cannot be a matter for the judgement of head teachers and governors alone. School improvement is neither simply a function of market forces nor the product of individual leaders alone. Rather it is a collaborative and structured pursuit of excellence in which knowledge and expertise are applied to national, local and individual school needs to produce the best for all our children. It cannot be managed by central government. It is a complex and ongoing process best managed locally which demands expert, independent intervention over long periods of time. The current fragmented school system and the marginalisation of local authorities frustrate a holistic and systematic delivery of school improvement and risk too many schools falling through the gaps in local provision.

Recent educational changes

The last Labour Government instituted a number of positive initiatives in education including the SIP programme, the Every Child Matters agenda, the London, Manchester and Black Country challenge trials and the rolling out of the National Challenge programme. The original academies programme grew out of these initiatives and was designed as a remedial measure to be used in limited and carefully defined circumstances, not as the dominant model of school governance. In sum, these initiatives were a clear acknowledgement of the need for improvement to be an activity which both looks at the educational system as a whole and underpins and complements individual institutional development.

School improvement as a function requires a different skill set from that needed to run a school. Of course high quality school leaders are essential to the success of individual schools. But they do not in themselves guarantee a high performing school system. Moreover school leaders do not exist in isolation, but draw upon, work with, and are supported by a variety of educational experts. Good school leaders work in partnership with a range of local institutions and stakeholders to harness, direct, and leverage expertise and capacity. In short, they depend upon and use a network of support and experience.

The Every Child Matters agenda still infuses the work of Local Authority Children's Services and produced a real debate about the broader purposes of the English education system. The "Challenge" systems were a shining example of the collaborative nature of school improvement. National financing and expertise, working hand in hand with local government knowledge and drive, along with committed school based leaders produced real and sustainable systemic improvement.

Changes since 2010

The changes in the education system since 2010 have

- created a democratic deficit in the way schools are governed. Ofsted reports increasingly find cases where governance has failed to hold professionals to account. Local Authorities are the body to which parents turn with complaints, but they have been left with little or no power to intervene in non-maintained schools. Governors are busy people whose training has been a matter of contention for years. A fragmented and atomised system which isolates schools and governors from their community will increase this deficit.

- frustrated the ability to plan school places against forecast demand as the role and practical powers of local authorities have been reduced. There is a coming crisis in primary school places, yet free schools are being established with public money in areas where supply already exceeds demand.

- created a disconnect between schools and the local community as federations and academy chains lose their geographical focus. There is a tendency to adopt a "one size fits all" model irrespective of local needs. Often the individual schools do not have governors in the conventional sense as all decision making lies with boards separate from and unaccountable to the communities in which they exist. Their decisions may reflect different priorities driven by different imperatives rather than the needs of a community.

- brought about the deregulation and marketisation of the school improvement function which frustrates a system-wide approach as buying in improvement expertise becomes a matter of choice for individual schools .

- fatally undermined a middle tier which can combine the delivery of central government policies with democratic community based initiatives in order to produce improvement for all pupils in all schools.

- side lined and diminished the National College For School Leadership which has reduced the level of ongoing support for teachers.

- focussed too much on narrow academic standards and targets at the expense both of a vocational and more rounded education. The move to change the way in which schools are judged will hit schools working in deprived areas most. The best eight GCSE system has a narrow academic base not well suited to the needs of pupils in the modern world.



Other shortcomings of the present system

Academies

There is constant pressure for maintained schools to convert to academies - either because they are rated as good or because they need improvement. In the first case they are expected to become single academies, and in the latter, to become part of a chain. Academies are subject to a much lower programme of monitoring and inspection. This should change so that all schools face a common inspection regime. Precisely what happens to failing academies has become an ever more urgent question. Recent events in Birmingham, Derby and elsewhere expose the weakness of a system where the school is accountable to no-one but the Secretary of State.

The creation of the National College for Teaching and Learning

The abolition of the TDA, NCSL and GTC and the amalgamation of their functions into one executive agency together with the loss of school improvement capacity in local authorities has led to a significant loss of knowledge and expertise.

An atomised system

The 20,000+ schools in England cannot be micro-managed from Whitehall - particularly given the reducing number of civil servants. Equally, to leave the future of schools simply to the market ignores the fact that market failure will damage thousands of children. There must be a middle tier which can intervene and regulate in the wider public interest.

What should the system look like?

We do not wish to describe a specific structure for the middle tier. Rather we would wish to clarify its role and characteristics. We believe that a successful middle tier must:

- enable communities to exercise an appropriate level of democratic oversight of the schools which have the care of their children
- plan for and build the capacity of the whole educational system for the long term in a synergistic manner
- share a moral purpose with pupils, parents and communities that has pupil achievement and school improvement for all at its core
- focus upon the development of the whole person in preference to an overemphasis on academic standards
- provide the same level of support to all publicly funded schools in all communities
- maximise the use of educational capital to improve the learner experience
- work with partners and stakeholders to promote collaboration and school to school support
- be adequately funded to carry out the outlined functions
- encourage and enable genuine parental engagement and choice

We do not believe the educational system as it is structured and develops is able to perform these functions. Its failure will result in failure for all our futures.

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