CSE CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC EDUCATION
Leading educational thinking and practice

Learning together: The power of cluster-based school improvement

Maggie Farrar

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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.

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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.

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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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