

MPs release report into school partnerships

The House of Commons Education Select Committee has released its report into school partnerships. It makes a number of recommendations, including:

- That academy chains should be inspected by Ofsted with parents provided with information as to their performance;
- Headteachers who support underperforming schools in disadvantaged areas are given an excellent leadership award;
- The government should widen its funding for partnerships beyond the sponsored academy route; specifically, the Primary Chains Grant should be extended to federations;
- That the government ensures that outstanding converter academies are able to support other schools in the way that they feel best. Some schools may not wish to sponsor an academy and other types of partnerships should be actively encouraged; and
- That the government should formalise and publish the procedures for an academy to leave a chain by mutual consent. This could be modelled on the procedure for leaving a federation and should also explain how a school consistently judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted would be able to leave an academy chain where this is against the wishes of the chain.

Education Committee - Fourth Report

School Partnerships and Cooperation

Here you can browse the report together with the Proceedings of the Committee. The published report was ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 30 October 2013.

7 Conclusion

99. In conducting this inquiry we have heard many impressive examples of school partnership and cooperation from across the country. We believe that a school-led improvement system has great potential to continue driving improvement to England's education system, not least in finding more effective ways of breaking the link between home background and poor levels of achievement. To reach this outcome, the right policy framework must be in place.

100. We applaud many of the steps the Government has already taken towards allowing schools the freedom to innovate and work together for the benefit of all pupils. Our recommendations aim to support and extend these steps, to encourage the continued development of a self-improving system, and to help it to be as effective as its many advocates believe it can be. The Government should have the confidence of its conviction that teachers and schools, supported by, rather than controlled by, local authorities and other middle tier organisations, hold the expertise to develop a world-class education system. This means accepting diversity of models and structures as a strength and as proof of the vitality of the school system. It also means accepting that an effective self-improving system needs a degree of coordination, not least to ensure that no schools and no groups of students are overlooked. Such arrangements should be about enabling and facilitating, rather than command and control.

101. Our inquiry has raised particular questions about the role of academies. There is no doubt that academy chains will play an increasingly important part in a self-improvement system and it is important that the issues we have identified regarding academy chains

and monitoring convertor academies are addressed. The overall picture is a rapidly developing one but we are confident that the expertise and drive is there within schools to raise standards for all.

Conclusions and recommendations

Potential for school collaboration

Importance of mutual benefit

1. *Properly handled, school collaboration offers benefits to all schools involved. The Government should continue to promote this message so as to reassure reluctant governing bodies and promote equality of esteem among all participants.* (Paragraph 31)

Competition and collaboration

2. We believe that while there are tensions between competition and collaboration, these are largely creative tensions. Collaboration between schools is growing in many forms within a competitive school system. (Paragraph 35)

Evidence of impact

3. *Although evidence on the impact of school partnerships seems positive, it would still benefit from robust evaluation, particularly aimed at identifying what works and why. Given the importance of a school-led improvement system to its vision, we recommend that the Government embed evaluation into further initiatives relating to school partnership and collect systematic evidence on 'what works'.* (Paragraph 39)

Diversity and desirable features

Diversity of models

4. We believe that, in common with the Government's view of the education system, schools are best placed to identify the most effective ways to work with other schools, based on their particular history, ethos and challenges. Schools should be able to adopt models of partnership and co-operation that suit their needs within a legislative and policy framework that is as non-prescriptive as possible. (Paragraph 45)

5. We believe that school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration. (Paragraph 46)

Families of schools

6. *The Government's publication of similar schools data is a useful first step but much more needs to be done to make this an effective resource for schools. In particular, the data should highlight schools' strengths and weaknesses so that schools find it easier to form partnerships where both parties can challenge and be challenged to improve. We recommend that the DfE review the presentation of similar schools data in consultation with schools in order to provide richer and more easily accessible information on possible partners.* (Paragraph 50)

7. It is regrettable that, in establishing the similar schools data system, the Department for Education did not adopt a model more like the original 'families of schools' and then use the familiar name to help achieve buy-in from schools. (Paragraph 51)

Geographical coherence

8. *The preponderance of the evidence we received suggests that partnerships in which all members are located within close proximity are most likely to be effective. The DfE should bear in mind the significance of this when identifying sponsors for academies and should ensure that the advantages of geographical proximity are set out in relevant guidance on school partnerships and cooperation more generally.* (Paragraph 54)

9. *We are concerned that the Government's definition of a "reasonable travelling distance" has not been sensibly applied to the similar schools tables. We recommend that the definition is altered to become "within an hour's drive" (ie 30 to 50 miles depending on location).* (Paragraph 56)

10. *We note that in rural and coastal areas the number of suitable partner schools within an hour's drive may be very limited. We recommend that the Government set out how the similar schools model applies to schools in rural and coastal areas and assess the applicability of the collaborative model to remote schools.* (Paragraph 57)

Incentivising partnerships

Ofsted

11. *We agree with the Government that it would be incorrect and confusing for Ofsted to label outstanding schools differently according to their excellence in supporting other schools, when they deliver just as good levels of education to the pupils in their care. We strongly support Sir Michael Wilshaw's proposal for an excellent leadership award to be given to school leaders rather than schools, as the highest accolade available to headteachers and only for those who support underperforming schools in disadvantaged communities.* (Paragraph 61)

School accountability measures

12. We regret that no one has yet devised a workable model of school accountability that incentivises schools to form partnerships, whilst preserving school level responsibility and retaining the impetus to maximise their pupils' performance. We see the potential of such an approach and encourage further efforts to generate an appropriate model. (Paragraph 63)

Financial incentives

13. *We believe that the Government should provide funding to help schools meet the costs associated with taking part in collaboration. We are concerned that the existing funding incentives are concentrated too narrowly on the academy sponsorship route. The Government should widen this funding to help meet the costs associated with formalising other partnerships. In particular, we recommend that the Government widen eligibility for the Primary Chains Grant to help schools cover the cost of forming federations, since many would benefit from working in partnership without leaving local authority control.* (Paragraph 67)

Funding for Teaching Schools

14. We recognise the challenges posed by the nature of funding for Teaching Schools but the take-up rate of the Teaching School Programme suggests that concern about the limited period of funding has not deterred schools from participating. We believe that the DfE has adopted the right approach in providing funding only to help with start up costs with the expectation that they become self-sustaining organisations thereafter. (Paragraph 70)

Independent State School partnerships

15. *Independent schools and state schools have much they can do for and usefully learn from one another. We welcome the Government's steps to promote closer links between the independent and maintained education sectors, but consider that academy sponsorship is not always the right engagement model for such partnerships. We recommend that the Government re-introduce targeted seed corn funding to encourage the establishment of sustainable Independent State School Partnerships.* (Paragraph 73)

Coordinating collaboration

The middle tier and the new role of local authorities

16. *Local authorities still have a critical role to play in a school-led improvement system, in particular through creating an "enabling environment" within which collaboration can flourish. We welcome Ofsted inspection of local authorities' school improvement services which has acted to highlight the importance of this role. We also support the new system which is emerging with recognition that the expertise lies within schools but with local authorities as part of the picture. The role of local authorities is still evolving and some clarification of what is expected of them is needed. We recommend that the Government set out clearly the role of local authorities in helping to broker school-to-school partnerships and acting as champions of all parents and children, with particular reference to academies in their region.* (Paragraph 80)

Strategic oversight

17. *We recommend that the DfE and NCTL take steps to identify and designate system leaders, such as National Leaders of Education and Teaching Schools, in areas where they are currently lacking. This should be coupled with increased incentives for existing system leaders to work in the areas of greatest need. Coordination of system leadership may well be better achieved at a sub-regional or local level than at the national level and we recommend that DfE and NCTL explore such an approach.* (Paragraph 83)

18. *The Government should set out how organisations in the middle tier will be held to account for strategic oversight of partnership working in all schools and how they will ensure that gaps are not allowed to develop or remain unfilled, particularly in rural and coastal areas.* (Paragraph 84)

Role of advisers

19. *London Challenge and City Challenge, two of the most successful school improvement initiatives of recent years, both relied heavily on the use of expert advisers. We recommend that the Department for Education make an assessment of the quality and capacity to provide this expertise within a school-led improvement system and ensure that schools are aware of where they can access such advice.* (Paragraph 87)

Academies and collaboration

Inspection of academy chains

20. *We conclude that parents should be provided with information about the performance of academy chains, as well as individual schools. We recommend that Ofsted be provided with the powers it needs to inspect academy chains. (Paragraph 90)*

Moving on from partnerships

21. *We recommend that the procedures for schools to leave academy chains by mutual consent are formalised and published. The Government should consider modelling them on those already in place for federations. (Paragraph 92)*

22. *It appears logical that in a mature education market, schools should have the flexibility to move between partnerships where this is the right thing to do for their pupils. We recommend that the Government explain how a school consistently judged 'Outstanding' would be able to leave an academy chain where this is against the wishes of the chain management. (Paragraph 94)*

Monitoring converter academies

23. *We recommend that the DfE urgently review its arrangements for monitoring the expectation that converter academies support another school and implement more effective processes as soon as possible. We recommend that such processes include surveys of the schools which were promised support on converter academies' applications forms, since this would give a more accurate picture of the support being provided. (Paragraph 97)*

24. *We recommend that the Government ensure outstanding converter academies are able to support other schools in the ways they think will bring about the best results. Some schools will wish to support others through models other than that of sponsoring another academy and this should be positively and actively encouraged by the DfE. (Paragraph 98)*