

*****Headline***The dangerous vacuum between schools and government**

*****Stand***** The McKinsey Report argues that ‘The best school systems seemed to have relied increasingly on a Middle Tier’, a lesson we need to learn in the UK.

The Middle Tier, defined as a body that operates between central government and schools, is a key instrument of Whole School Reform. The McKinsey Report shows it to be a fundamental feature of each of the 20 most improved education systems across the world. Michael Fullan, an endorser of the McKinsey Report, states, “Whole system reform is the way forward. Its purpose is to mobilise and engage large numbers of people, who are individually and collectively committed and effective at getting results relative to the core outcomes that society values”¹. The McKinsey Report argued that the Middle Tier becomes increasingly important as the Education System improves, envisaging whole school systems going through four stages – ‘Poor to Fair’; ‘Fair to Good’; ‘Good to Great’ and ‘Great to Excellent’. It identified the English system in 2010 as being at the third stage, ‘Good to Great’, that is, very much in need of an effective Middle Tier!

Michael Fullan draws particularly on his work over many years with the Canadian province of Ontario, which is the central government regards education and performs very well by international standards. It was ranked fifth in the 2009 PISA assessment and rated by the Mckinsey Report as being a ‘Great’ education system. Fullan also reviewed extensively the US progress in school improvement. He argues that significant improvement occurs when ‘school culture, district culture and government culture align’¹. The Middle Tier is a key component of the toolbox to make that happen.

The need for an effective Middle Tier is a particularly urgent debate in England because there is strengthening consensus that the major barrier to improving school performance in this country lies in the large number of schools (45% of secondary and 39% of primary - 2009/10 OFSTED) where the teaching is judged as ‘satisfactory’. This was flagged up by Christine Gilbert, then Chief HMI, in her commentary on the 2008/9 Annual OFSTED Report and by Andreas Schleicher (Special Advisor on Education Policy to the OECD's Secretary-General and Head of the Indicators and Analysis Division) - who Mr Gove has called ‘the most important man in English Education’ – in his visit to England in October. It is stating the obvious, but it is nevertheless often overlooked, that there have always been far more pupils underachieving in this group of schools than in inadequate schools, currently judged to be 8% (2009/10 OFSTED).

Andreas Schleicher also went on to say in an interview published in The Independent (22nd September 2011), that he was not clear what levers the Government had in place to support the improvement in this group of schools. On the basis of international best practice, an effective Middle Tier needs to be one of those levers. The question is therefore: have we such a Middle Tier in England and if not what options have we for creating one? Outside education we can see that a Middle Tier - around 150 GP Consortia - is central to the NHS reforms.

*****x-head***McKinsey Report: Most improved systems**

Sir Michael Barber was one of the authors of the McKinsey Report, then the Chief Educational Adviser and author of Labour's literacy and numeracy strategies of the late 1990s. The Report identifies three key roles: to provide targeted hands on support for schools; to act as a communication buffer between the school and central government and to share and integrate improvements across schools. The Report also acknowledged that as Educational Systems reach the 'Good' stage, where England was assessed to be, there needed to be a greater emphasis upon bottom-up strategies, which enhanced the professionalism of teachers and empowered schools. The Report identifies the Middle Tier taking three main forms: geographical (typically an LA), a coordinated cluster of schools or a theme such as a subject focus.

*****x-head***Michael Fullan and Ontario**

Michael Fullan is still wrestling with how to strike the right balance between top-down and bottom-up strategies, but he does see the effective engagement of schools and teachers as the key to releasing the collective capacity of all involved in reform, especially teachers. He stresses the importance of the Middle Tier in providing a clear focus on a number of school improvement priorities - to improve instruction, ensuring data is available to support the monitoring and identification of good practice; the marshalling of resources to support reform, ensuring effective school leadership development programmes; and effective two-way communication up and down the system, including the involvement of parents and the wider community ¹.

*****x-head***An English Middle Tier**

Given the challenges the Education System now faces and recognising that we need a much more engaging and cost effective approach to Whole System Reform, we can now identify nine roles of the Middle Tier in ensuring an effective Whole School System approach.

- To provide a focus on a small number of key priorities for the schools to be followed through relentlessly, which are drawn from local evidence and agreed with the member schools.
- To intervene in the small number of schools that has consistently demonstrated that they do not have the capacity to change.
- To provide an improvement framework for schools - a common language drawn from international best practice, to help them to develop their own outcome-focussed reform in a way which engages all staff and students and promotes communication with other schools in the group.
- To establish a strongly led, professional school-to-school support network, incorporating training schools, to provide a choice of proven strategies to respond to identified priorities and run events to promote school-to-school learning and peer-to-peer challenges. Support in responding to the new curriculum would be a case in point, as well as the continuing challenge to embed sustained improvement. To work with the National College for School Leadership or other partners on an effective programme for developing school leaders with member schools.
- To reduce to a minimum the number of distracters in the system, to help schools create the capacity to focus on improvement. This requires removing silos and integrating services that support schools.
- To ensure schools have the data they need to monitor performance and support teaching and learning.

- To facilitate partnerships and operational links with local stakeholders and agencies, which prefer to deal with one body rather than hundreds.
- To enhance communication between schools and central government.

x-headWays of working

There are a number of effective Whole System Approaches being used, for example, by some of the more effective Academy chains and there are also some key lessons from international best practice to be considered:

- The need to move away from top-down strategies, except where there is consistent school failure and lack of capacity to drive change in favour of a model that links self-review, external review and school improvement to empower school leaders, their staff and communities to take charge of their school improvement journey. The effective engagement of teachers is particularly important. Marc Tucker, who led the PISA study assessment of US school improvement, was highly critical of the reliance on top-down strategies and identified the failure to fully engage teachers as the single most significant weakness in US education 5. Douglas Reeves' US-based research supports this view in demonstrating that 'deep implementation', or the embedding practice in a school, requires 90% of the teachers to be engaged 4. Are these not issues for us here in England as well? A recent survey of 1,922 teachers by the Guardian, revealed the deep levels of disempowerment at the hands of the Government and, even more worryingly, their own school leaders. A shocking 81% complained of teacher bullying!
- The importance, as Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley have stressed, of schools paying attention to the planning of short, medium and long term strategies alongside each other to ensure sustainable change. 2
- The focus on data to personalise teaching and learning to each student and to monitor progress.
- The crucial role of Middle Tier leadership to make the 'club' something schools want to join to give credibility to challenge and the assurance of good practice. The Raising Achievement and Transforming Learning (RATL) Programme is a case in point. Government funded through the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, it was designed and led for four years by David Crossley, a very experienced secondary Head teacher. 700 secondary schools took part voluntarily, the majority were previously rated 'satisfactory' and 150 were performing below floor targets. One of its attractions in the current climate is that the central leadership team was very lean and the level of funding to schools to support their participation was low at £10,000 per annum per school and could be lowered. RATL was externally evaluated by Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley in their book *The Fourth Way* (2010) as one of 'The Exemplars of Hope' for school improvement internationally'.
- Moral purpose – a passionate commitment to all students achieving and to working together to maximise collective capacity.

x-headWhat form should the Middle Tier take in the English system

The first thing to recognise is that, unlike Canada or many other parts of the world, England is not going to adopt a Middle Tier based on traditional local government structures, administratively tidy and sensible as that may seem. What makes most sense, given the increasingly devolved nature of

the system, is to build on what we have and to look for a mixture of solutions and a significant element of choice for schools over which Middle Tier they join.

However, if the DfE accepts that a Whole System Approach is essential, as the evidence suggests that it is, it will surely still need to ensure that there is an effective Middle Tier and to support it in its various forms by providing a legal and policy framework; access to best international school improvement practice; training for Middle Tier leaders; adequate resources and possibly accreditation. One of the features of the best Education Systems internationally is that Middle Tier and school leaders systematically study together so they develop a shared language and common understanding of what works best - a feature that has been missing from the English education system.

There is also a strong argument for the inspection of all Middle Tiers given their importance and the need to monitor effectiveness and value for money. This is reinforced by the fact that there has been no attempt anywhere else amongst leading systems to develop a Whole System Approach akin to this. The closest example is perhaps New York but even here it was confined to a limited number of districts. Christine Gilbert's suggestion to include the inspection of Academy chains in the revised remit was rejected but it is hard to see this decision being sustained even if another body other than Ofsted undertakes it.

There are currently two main current candidates for the new Middle Tier role:

1) The new Academy chains are an emerging Middle Tier and it is clear that the DfE and their sponsors see them as performing this role for a large number of schools as they expand. However, as even the most openly expansionist of the leaders of the Academy chains, Sir Bruce Liddington acknowledges, they are a long way from being able to provide the whole system approach over the next 2-3 years that the 'satisfactory schools challenge' requires. They will probably cover at the most about 200-300 of the 33,000 schools in England by the end of this year.

2) Local Authorities are now largely reduced to tackling failing schools. Very few feel able to take on the Middle Tier role as described above. However, there is a strong argument for accredited Local Authorities being one of the Middle Tier options for schools, operating within the kind of DfE framework outlined above. It is probably one of the quickest ways for the DfE to achieve the kind of spread it needs and the geographical model is the one most widely used by the outstanding education systems. It would be perverse not to include a number of them given the localism agenda and their ratings in external assessments. The 2009/2010 Ofsted Annual Report identified 50% of LAs as being 'good' or 'better', however, DfE officials are known to state privately that they rated 25-30% of LAs at this level. Even the lower figure would provide significant coverage.

The National College for School Leadership and the network of Training Schools provide services that can support the new Middle Tiers.

There are two further options that the DfE could consider to increase the coverage:

1) Establish a Mark 2 RATL programme, or programmes, which could focus on a geographical area or category of schools.

2) Invite leading schools to form themselves into Social Enterprises and bid to provide a Middle Tier. This could embrace Free Schools and Independent Schools. They could be commissioned in part by Local Authorities if they were taking over some of their functions that would provide additional funding.

The objective would be for all schools to be covered by a Middle Tier and for the schools outside Academy chains to feel that they have chosen their Middle Tier 'club'. RATL achieved that feeling amongst the schools that they selected to join, with the exception of two or three that the DfE wanted to include. It comes down to schools' needs, peer pressure and the quality of leadership.

*****x-head***What can we hope for?**

The evidence is quite clear. There is a consensus amongst leading thinkers on school improvement, that Whole System Approaches are the key to achieving sustained improvement across large numbers of schools. Furthermore, the mature and successful education systems, like England's, require an approach which engages all in driving the reform, especially teachers, and one which moves away from top-down strategies. There is also a consensus that this will not happen without an effective Middle Tier. It is clear that we need a range of options for schools to choose from. Two are already in place: Academy chains and reformed LAs, but other options are required to obtain the kind of coverage we need. RATL is one model worth revisiting and so is inviting schools to come together as social enterprises to provide a Middle Tier.

The Guardian survey is an alarming indicator of teachers' feelings of disempowerment and disengagement. England will never have a great education system if that survey truly reflects teachers' views in general. It is time to try a different approach, with a commitment to a moral purpose and the enjoyment of being part of a dynamic educational community.

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Reference

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