



Lessons from London

Insights on improving schools

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Foreword

by Cllr Peter John

We must never forget that London's children and young people face very tough challenges growing up and when they leave school they enter a world of employment where they will compete against some of the world's best, not just the best from our city.

The education system which supports them in doing so has transformed itself out of all recognition over the past 25 years. It consistently outperforms all other regions in the country against national performance indicators. The scale of that transformation is staggering. As Professor Tim Brighouse points out in his essay, in 1989, the year before the boroughs took over their responsibility from the Inner London Education Authority, less than 9 per cent of pupils in inner London secondary schools achieved 5 or more higher grades at GCSE compared to 17 per cent nationally. Today the comparable figures are 70.5 per cent for London, and 63.8 per cent nationally.

The new challenge for everyone with a stake in London's education – the boroughs, businesses, parents, teachers, the Mayor of London and central government. – is to transform London's education system again. It is not good enough that London's children are better served than their parents were. They need schools which equip them to survive and thrive in the environment they find themselves in today.

Like all global cities, London presents challenges as well as opportunities to its young people. My own borough of Southwark is not unlike others in London. The lives of the children and young people are characterised by high concentrations of deprivation, a high proportion of workless households and a high number of families with English as a second language.

Despite this, disadvantaged children and young people in London are more likely than their peers outside of London to do well at key stage 2 and key stage 4 and our schools are now seen as the destination of choice for parents across the income spectrum, including the Prime Minister himself. The transformation and success of the London education system is a subject of great interest for researchers, policy makers and political parties all of whom are looking for the mystery ingredients.

London Councils commissioned this collection of articles from a range of education experts to delve deeper into the role played by the London boroughs. It is not a policy document. Rather it offers insights into the local leadership provided by London boroughs and other partners to improve the education system. We hope that by doing so it offers lessons as to how London might transform its education system again to meet the challenges of today.

These articles remind us of the importance of local leadership across the education system and what has worked well for London. Although the theme of this publication is unashamedly local, I hope we have avoided the pitfall of producing an inward looking and retrospective collection. Instead, we have brought together contributions from key players from the classroom to Whitehall, all of whom write freely about their experience and lessons learned from their involvement in the improvement journey. We have also looked forward to the challenges we have not yet overcome.

At the same time, system leaders must also adapt to external changes whether they be government reforms, parental expectations or stiffening international competition for jobs, the type of leadership needed must evolve too, to meet the emerging challenges. In many respects, London must also measure itself by a different standard, and our achievements to date mustn't diminish our determination to do even better for our children and young people who are competing for opportunity in an ever expanding pool of global talent. To be at the forefront of this debate, the publication sets out not only what has worked well, but how this can be built on going forwards to support the London education system to continue to be the education powerhouse of England and equip our young people to be a success in the 21st Century.

Peter John

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Local authorities and the London Challenge

by Tim Brighouse

When the London Challenge was announced in 2002, some London boroughs and their leaders probably felt, as they so often do about central government initiatives, 'Oh here we go again, another solution to a problem we haven't got.' Indeed when, as Commissioner of London Schools, I first attended a meeting of the ALC Education Committee I was told as much by one councillor who was so unimpressed that, after a bit of a polemic and some personal remarks, he swept up his papers and left the room.

Thankfully all his colleagues were pragmatic enough to give the Challenge the benefit of understandable doubt. I say 'thankfully' because with a long career in local government administration behind me, I knew that without the goodwill and co-operation of the London boroughs and the City any real success in transforming standards in London schools was remote. Without the 'shining and focused bright light of ordinariness' which the best local councillors bring to matters and particularly the local knowledge of context, not to mention in this case the considerable officer expertise, especially in school improvement, very little would have been possible.

If the London Challenge was a success it is of course the schools and their teachers

who played the greatest and vital part, for without their skill, commitment and energy nothing would have happened. That the London Challenge coincided with considerable and nationally exceptional improvements in pupil outcomes is not now disputed. What is disputed is why it happened.

Some, for example the Bristol University economist Professor Simon Burgess, put it down to a single issue – in his case a change in the ethnic mix of the pupils in London schools with disproportionate gains from having the children of parents who have travelled from other countries seeking a better future for their families. Quite apart from the flaws in the research which fails to acknowledge the differential impact of migrants from different countries or for example, the extent that 'English as an Additional Language' needs of different groups at different ages will impact on outcomes, it seems unlikely that one factor alone will be the main driver of change in a matter as complex as education of the young. At the start of the London Challenge we assumed that many factors were involved among them what teachers and their leaders do on a daily basis in schools and it was on that factor and how we could influence it for the better that we focused. First therefore it might be helpful to set out what we tried to do.

In essence the London Challenge involved an exercise in bringing about change for the better in a very loosely organised schooling system. At its heart was a 'culture change' at various levels but principally in schools and their classrooms and in at least part of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) which was funding and orchestrating the change.

To be successful, complex cultural change of this sort needs to be underpinned by a grasp of three elements. First, to be successful any intervention needs to allow for *differences* in context. What will work in one place – whether school or city or part of a city – will need to be tweaked to work in another. That requires a deep understanding of what are the key differences and how to allow for them. Secondly, it is helpful to have a *shared map and language*, in this case of 'school improvement', so that there is less chance of misunderstanding when people are trying to learn from each other in order to improve their practice.

Thirdly, there is the need to recognise that change often falters because of failure in *communication*, which is the hardest part of leadership and management in any organisation, especially one in the case of the London Challenge which involved over 400 secondary schools and 32 boroughs, the DfES and a whole set of separate stakeholders such as politicians, headteachers, teachers, support staff, governors, civil servants and, of course, pupils/students and their parents. To this array must be added the organisations which represent or act as the gatekeepers to some of these groups, such as the teacher unions, the churches, employer groups and a whole range of other agencies

which could and do contribute to school success, including universities, employers, the churches and faith groups and an array of organisations in the rich world of the arts. It is small wonder that communication looms large as a perennial issue for improvement. Any leader of complex change, especially complex cultural change, has calmly to accept that communication will fail from time to time and that it needs constant attention.

In the London Challenge we thought long and hard about these three elements of change. But we also recognised a fourth element of successful change, namely the need to get the right people in the right place doing the right things at the right time. This last factor would affect the running of all aspects of the Challenge including of course vitally schools themselves.

It might be worth reflecting for a moment on why the government launched the London Challenge.

The then Secretary of State, Estelle Morris, first suggested some special initiative for London in early 2002 when a civil servant pointed out to her that 13 per cent of secondary aged children living in the capital attended private schools whereas the comparable figure for the nation was 7 per cent. This factor tipped ministerial thinking, which was already concerned that there seemed to be a general consensus among politicians and journalists that London schools, particularly secondary schools, were places to be avoided if you wanted a good education for your children. This feeling was nothing new and over the years had been reinforced by real and exaggerated stories of school failures and

scandals reported in newspapers especially the *Evening Standard* which is read by most commuters. London also suffers from the national press being located there and journalists finding it convenient to illustrate issues by finding London cases to back them up. And bad news sells newspapers.

This negative perception of London schools was well entrenched. It had been the case at least since the 1960s and 70s when first Michael Duane's progressive methods at Risinghill Comprehensive School and then the approaches to schooling at William Tyndale Primary School, both of which led to widely reported school failure, had contributed to a lasting impression that it was difficult to find a good state school, especially a good secondary school, in the capital. Extant statistics showed that at age 16 in 1989 in Inner London Secondary Schools, less than 9 per cent achieved 5 or more higher grades at GCSE compared with 17 per cent nationally. It is important to mark this figure for although of course, there is no reliable way of measuring *overall* standards over time, there is if you wish to measure the progress of different areas of the country by comparing their performance with each other and with national averages, since all will have been affected by any change in measured outcomes of standards over time.

Estelle Morris, who was the MP for Yardley in Birmingham and a former teacher in inner city Coventry, was conscious of general perceptions of schooling in the capital and felt that some focussed effort on London secondary schools would pay dividends. She first secured the agreement of the Prime Minister, whose own difficulties in securing a London state

school secondary school place for his eldest son, had attracted some adverse attention: he probably therefore needed very little persuading that her idea was a good one. As Minister for Schools under David Blunkett, Estelle Morris had already played an influential part in the 'Excellence in Cities' initiative launched in 1991. Blunkett and Morris's interest in special policies and resources focused on the inner city had therefore preceded the London initiative. Moreover as Chief Education Officer in Birmingham I had been closely connected with their growing interest, first in the run-up to the 1997 election and then as a member of the Standards Task Force and as adviser to the 'Excellence in Cities' initiative. They claimed – at least to me - that they were influenced in making national policy by what they perceived as the apparent success of policies and practices in Birmingham and in particular by our approach to school improvement.

So when the idea of doing something special in London and the job of London Schools Commissioner was advertised I had just retired at the age of 62 after 10 years in my post in Birmingham.

The civil service was well prepared for running the London Challenge. A small unit of five 'fast track' young staff led by Jon Coles had already begun work on how to spend and organise the budget earmarked for the Challenge. Jon Coles was outstanding among his generation of civil servants: a Cambridge maths graduate who had trained to be a teacher, he knew his way around the Department and was widely respected. His analysis of the data and the socio-economic background of London together with a mutually agreed approach to school improvement across all the

capital's secondary schools formed the basis of what was to become the prospectus for the London Challenge. By the time it was officially launched in April 2003 by the Prime Minister at The Globe, it had gone through many iterations and much work had already begun.

Jon Coles believed that whatever ministers could afford as extra for the London Challenge should, where possible, be aligned with the existing national programmes and strategies to support our efforts.

As we put the prospectus together, I argued strongly that there needed to be a change in language. It was vital to realise in everything we said, wrote or did we were conveying an impression either positive or negative to staff in schools on whom we relied entirely to achieve anything. If we could energise and upskill them even marginally, improvement would happen. To keep talking of 'zero' tolerance of 'failure' was to emphasise the wrong thing. Successful teachers know that when they are successful with a pupil's failure to learn, they use three parts of 'appreciative enquiry' – genuinely assessed of course – for every one part of 'problem solving' in feedback to pupils. The same is true of adults. The New Labour mantra of 'challenge and support' needed to be inverted.

I was all for challenge but more in the spirit of speculative questioning in the context of being supportive of what schools were doing. It isn't that you shouldn't confront failure: of course you should, but surely in the context of giving those in schools, at least initially, the benefit of the doubt, you should assume they start from the position of wanting to succeed.

'Name and shame' should be replaced by 'no blame' – at least in public.

In the final prospectus there are two examples, one illustrating this change of emphasis and another failing to do so. First there was a group of schools across London whose headline results on 5 or more, higher grade GCSEs were unacceptably low. Many of these schools were in a 'special measures' Ofsted category. To call them 'failing', or in conversation refer to them as 'sink' schools, as was happening, would be unlikely to give them the energy to improve. It was arguable that they were in fact 'keys to the success' of the London Challenge since if they could succeed, given the challenges they faced, including being at the bottom of the pecking order when it came to parental preference, then any school could and should succeed. They needed and deserved our support based on the initial assumption that they had within them most of the capacity to improve, if they were given extra well targeted support. So they were to be referred to as 'keys to success' schools and, as such, represented an example of something important but easily overlooked as part of the success of the London Challenge. Not so the five London boroughs whose overall headline figures were unacceptable. Despite my arguments to the contrary, they were labelled 'failing boroughs' presumably because the principal audience in that category were politicians rather than schools. Nevertheless I shall not forget the discomfort I felt at the launch in meeting the eyes of their Chief Officers. For me it was a minor defeat.

We had realised, as I outlined at the beginning of this piece, that the support and input of intelligence and expertise from boroughs was essential in every aspect of

the programme. Initially I was involved, with Jon Coles, in attending the monthly meetings of the London Chief Education Officers outlining ideas and using them as a genuine sounding board for what we were going to do. I thought they would recognise me (from my background as CEO in Oxfordshire and Birmingham) as 'one of them'. It would be invidious to pick out any individual for all were extremely co-operative and supportive but their chair at that time Paul Robinson was incredibly helpful. Jon Coles saw the group as a 'must' in his busy diary.

Both of us (Jon Coles and myself) were also fortunate in our ministers Stephen Twigg and then Lord Adonis who were in their very different ways so willing to form links with the councillors and cabinet members in the various boroughs, defusing crises or solving potential barriers.

We invested in studies of tricky pan-London issues by funding two or three boroughs in each case working together to find solutions to tricky issues such as parts of SEN provision or a common admissions system. Those studies were invaluable in outcome but tended to happen below the radar of press and media attention.

As the London Challenge was above all a school improvement exercise much of what made the most difference was going on at the level of schools and the school improvement services, with their different strengths in each borough which still existed at that time. They would liaise with the small group of part-time advisers. I later came to refer to them affectionately as our gnarled advisers. Each could point to long and successful experience in schools. An essential common factor in their

approach was that they recognised that there was more than one way to lead schools successfully and that the context of time, place and people was a key determinant in how to go about things and what to do in any particular school. The, at first informal, and then more formal leader of this group was David Woods with whom I had worked in Birmingham where he was Chief Adviser before he had taken up a role at DfES with Michael Barber at the Standards Unit.

This group of advisers would meet weekly, sometimes fortnightly, along with Jon Coles and some of his small team, where we discussed progress of individual schools and 'school improvement' more generally. It was there therefore that we would share what I have referred to earlier as the second element essential to 'cultural change' namely to establish a *shared language and map* in this case of school improvement. For me it was learning ever more about seven processes which are the everyday life of schools, namely *leading creatively; managing effectively; reviewing creatively, developing staff imaginatively: creating an environment fit for learning; involving parents and the community; and of course first and last teaching, learning and assessing.*

Backing these processes was the use of a statistical device we had used to promote school improvement in Birmingham. It had been created there by the statistician John Hill. Schools were put into 'families' according to the socio-economic background of their pupils. Then all the schools in the family were compared on a graph with the vertical being rate of improvement and the horizontal points per pupils with the intersect representing the average for the whole family. So a school would be in one of four quadrants – low rate of improvement

and low points per pupil; high rate of improvement and low points per pupil; high rate of improvement and high points per pupil; and low rate of improvement and high points per pupil. To be really useful the figures used should be three-year rolling averages. Then all the results in all subjects in all schools are shown. The hope was that schools would be prompted to visit apparently similar schools achieving very different results both overall and in individual subjects.

It was interesting that in Birmingham and in London there was an initial reluctance to use the data in this way for fear of heads objecting that it would create adverse publicity. It was my view such reservations were misplaced since the media were sated with data. In both cities that proved to be the case and a device was created which, in the hands of creative heads hungry for improvement, could prove an invaluable aid.

Coupled with the London element of the National College's work, it was possible to bring about 'school to school' learning and support well beyond borough boundaries. It says much for the London boroughs that without exception they welcomed the advantages which such activities created for teachers, school leaders and, through them, pupils.

There is much else that could be said about the London Challenge – the establishment of a better supply of better qualified teacher and their subsequent retention, the way in which teacher professional development was brought centre stage with the Chartered London Teacher initiative, the Student Pledge. All had an impact.

The questions to be answered are fourfold. Is there any which was an *essential* ingredient? Are there other factors which acted as exceptional catalysts? What part did the unique governance arrangements in London play in the success? Are their factors which if addressed would have allowed even more success?

The answer to the first is surely that teachers and their school leaders have to be driven by a moral purpose and certainty of pupils' success that brooks no denial. Without that nothing exceptional will happen. How that is communicated and shared is elusive. But the focus we had in the London Challenge on establishing cultural change to support that surely bears some closer examination.

The answer to the second – were there exceptional factors – must include the Family of Schools Data base, the carefully tailored work by the Challenge advisers and their partners in the boroughs with individual 'keys to success' schools, the focus on professional development, the work on teacher recruitment (particularly 'Teach First') and retention, the leadership strategy backed by the National College, and the extra resources to lubricate all these changes.

The third question is more complicated. To make the best of 32 boroughs, the GLA and the Mayor, not to mention the various silos within the DfE, requires a problem solving skill analogous to solving the Rubik's-cube. Nevertheless there was a goodwill from all parties that carried us through the various misunderstandings bound to occur.

As for the last – was there something which could have made it even more successful? –

the answer must be yes. I, at least, am only too keenly aware of opportunities I missed and of not getting the right people in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing, in the right way. Some school communities suffered as a result. The fault for all that went wrong is hard personally to avoid. The credit for what went right – and there was much – must lie with the school staff themselves and those working closely with them not just the advisers in the Challenge team but in the London boroughs themselves.

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Collapse the levels of the system: the local authority role in London Challenge

by Jon Coles

London is a great and complex city. Globally, perhaps only New York rivals it for diversity, cultural wealth, influence and its extremes of wealth and poverty. It is at once the country's centre of politics, government and the legal system, a major global financial centre and a centre of the creative industries. It has at the same time disproportionately many of the poorest wards in the country and particularly of children growing up in poverty.

The impact of place on the nature of public services is under-discussed and under-analysed. London creates a unique challenge. In the first place, it has all the complexities and problems of any large UK conurbation – the inner urban issues of deprivation, worklessness, crime, family breakdown and substance misuse, for example. Simultaneously, it is the powerhouse of the national economy – the wealth-creating centre of the wealthiest part of the country.

If families in the top quintile of the income distribution are disproportionately likely to opt out of public services – to use private schools and hospitals, for example, as many do, so the already larger than average group of poorer families are even more concentrated in the capital's state-funded schools. And such is the level of residential intermingling of rich and poor in inner

London (with very valuable owner-occupied houses directly adjacent to very deprived estates in many places) that the 'middle class comprehensive' seen in most other cities was largely absent there – reducing further the likelihood of some wealthier families choosing the state system.

Perceptions of London schools in 2002

When we started London Challenge, this contributed to an already well-established narrative about local London schools. Headlines had been generated repeatedly by the decisions of senior London-based figures in the government to send their children to private schools, grammar schools or other schools far from home in preference to local state secondary schools. These headlines resonated naturally with a national view that London schools were particularly poor. And this perception was easily reinforced by a largely London-based media.

On a range of measures, London schools were indeed doing worse than those elsewhere. Results were lower in Inner London than anywhere else; Ofsted ratings of schools, of their leadership and of behaviour were worse than elsewhere; there were proportionately more schools below government floor targets than anywhere

else; and more in special measures than anywhere else.

As we look at today's schools London, it is undeniable that there has been dramatic change. Its secondary schools are the highest performing in the country; Ofsted judges schools, their leadership and behaviour, to be better than in any other region; there are fewer below floor target than anywhere else; and fewer in special measures than anywhere else. Too often the word 'transformation' is used; but in relation to London schools, it is used correctly. London schools have genuinely been transformed.

However, even in 2002, the schools were not quite as much worse than others nationally as was commonly thought. In fact, close analysis of the evidence showed something perhaps more alarming than the story that 'London schools are awful'. In fact, London schools were not all that much worse than similarly deprived schools nationally – there were just many more schools with high deprivation and low-achieving groups in London than elsewhere.

It is easy to forget that before 2002, we did not have pupil-level data, so couldn't see detailed results by gender, poverty and ethnicity. The 2002 dataset was treated as experimental and never published, though the patterns it showed were confirmed by the coming years' data. What it shows is that London pupils didn't do all that much worse than pupils with similar characteristics in the rest of the country. There were just more of the lowest achieving groups in London than elsewhere.

The critical issue to address was the shocking and indefensible difference in

educational outcomes between different groups of young people. While more than four out of five girls of Chinese origin not eligible for free school meals achieved five or more good GCSEs, fewer than one in five white and Black Caribbean boys on free school meals did so. London wasn't so different from the rest of the country on this measure; but it was particularly unacceptable in the most diverse city on the planet. Changing this pattern for the better would change the performance of schools.

And so, we formulated our goal: that London should become the world's leading city for learning and creativity, and that critically, it should break the link between deprivation and low educational attainment.

Insight

On examining the evidence, talking widely to people involved in London schools and visiting schools, some things stood out very strongly. First, there were indeed schools facing acute problems. At the extreme, schools where a visitor, let alone a pupil, might not feel very safe, and where the quality of education was very poor. Second, that there were parts of London which had concentrations of schools with low attainment; often in very central parts of London and in places where 'opinion formers' disproportionately live, whose views of London schools (and schools nationally) were strongly influenced by what they saw around them.

Third, though, that the individuals leading those schools were often struggling to control much bigger forces which also affected other schools, albeit to a lesser extent. Schools at the bottom of a local

'pecking order' were unappealing to both pupils and teachers because of their reputation. With continuing teacher shortage in London, attracting good staff was particularly difficult for these schools. Retaining them was just as hard, when success in a tough school might easily lead to opportunities nearby in a less tough one. 'Middle leadership' appointments were often 'battlefield promotions', as able but inexperienced staff took on leadership tasks before they were really ready, in the absence of any alternative. Meanwhile, unattractive to pupils and therefore not full, these schools faced high levels of turnover and of in-year admissions – taking in many new arrivals to the country, excludées from other schools and other vulnerable children.

If these were some of the challenges, then the fourth key insight was critical. There was extraordinary practice in London. In a vast city of extremes, it was perhaps unsurprising that we ended up concluding that everything we needed was already there – all of the ideas and the energy and the extraordinary capability of London was enough. We just needed to create better conditions to allow it to flourish.

The strategy

The strategy that we developed was intended to work at three levels simultaneously: addressing the London-wide factors which had an impact on all schools, in order to enable all schools to succeed better; working across London with those schools facing the most difficult challenges; and working to create dramatic change in areas which faced the most difficult combination of low historic attainment and deprivation. Figure 1 sets this out.

Figure 1: The London Challenge Strategy



The language of 'Key Boroughs' and 'Keys to Success Schools' was carefully chosen. It reflected a general stance of wanting to 'get behind' schools, rather than join the chorus of criticism. The words 'Keys to Success' were Tim Brighouse's, reflecting his personal commitment to an ethos of energising rather than problematising.

But these were not empty words – they also reflected the real ambition of the strategy. If the key goal of London Challenge was to break the link between deprivation and low educational attainment, then the schools facing the greatest challenge of deprivation and historically low attainment had a critical role – they genuinely were the keys to the success of the strategy. Likewise, schools in the five boroughs initially chosen for intensive focus needed to succeed in ways in which few schools in those circumstances succeeded nationally if London Challenge's goals were to be reached.

At each stage, an important consideration was how to use the knowledge and resources which already existed within

London. If what was currently seen as unusually good practice could become the norm, then improvement could be rapid. If the wider wealth of resources of London could be brought to bear, then there was great potential for something exceptional to happen.

London local government

Nationally, local education authorities had been facing many years of policy ambivalence about their role. In the preceding Parliament, the post-1997 Labour government had abolished Grant Maintained schools, replacing them with Foundation schools, funded on the same basis as other maintained schools. At the same time, however, the Code of Practice on LEA-School relations had made clear that the local authority role in running schools was to be sharply curtailed, restricted to 'intervention in inverse proportion to success'. Meanwhile, a policy of intervening in the weakest local authorities had been developed, using private sector providers to replace poorly managed authorities. And the first 'City Academies' had been proposed, though none were yet open.

In London, it was visible that the local authorities were contending with some of the same problems as the schools. Ofsted assessments of London LEAs had been much more polarised between the very strong and the very weak than was normal nationally – there had been government-enforced external intervention in four of the five Key Boroughs. Specific local authorities had repeatedly been singled out for criticism. Meanwhile, the cost of living in London and the pressure created by pay increases in other parts of the public sector (including for head teachers) meant that some local

authorities faced difficulties in attracting and retaining the best staff. Once again, the most challenging authorities faced the most acute problem, as talented staff could be attracted by a nearby authority with equally interesting roles but slightly less intense problems.

At the same time, there were excellent examples of local authorities which had led significant improvement in schools after a period of severe criticism. By 2002, Tower Hamlets, for example, was already being recognised nationally for the quality of its work to engage the community and improve standards in one of the most deprived parts of London. As with schools, however, it was very easy for excellent practice in one local authority to be trapped within its borders, unknown even to its neighbours.

Collapsing the levels of the system

I came to characterise one aspect of the approach of London Challenge as aiming to 'collapse the levels of the system'. I should explain what I mean by that.

In debates about education reform in this country and abroad, it has been common to talk about a 'middle tier' – what lies between the 'top layer' of the jurisdiction – the national, state or provincial government – and the 'operating layer' of the schools and other educational institutions where children and young people actually learn. Indeed, the legal framework of the English education system had been predicated on precisely this model since the 1944 Education Act put the relationship between church and state in the provision of schools on something close to its current footing. The Minister or Secretary of State had certain key powers to set the overall

framework, within which local education authorities secure sufficient school places. Schools established by local authorities were then 'maintained' by them to provide 'efficient' (understood in the jargon of the Act to include 'effective') education.

A system with multiple levels is a standard part of the design of education services across the world – the most and the least effective. The specific features of the system, including precisely what is done at what level, differ in different jurisdictions, but the 'levels' can be seen even in relatively small countries or jurisdictions. A similar approach can be seen in many other public services, in this country and abroad. The rationale for this approach and its advantages are fairly clear. There are things about which we might want clear national policy: funding of schools and their governance, rules about who may and may not teach in schools, what is to be taught, the qualifications system and so on. Equally, there are aspects of a school system which cannot easily be determined at a national level – where new school places are needed, how local arrangements for admission and exclusion are to work in the interests of all, for example – but which are not matters which can be decided by individual schools.

However, there are system effects which recur very persistently wherever there is a system with a 'top', 'middle' and 'bottom'. This is as true of an organisation with senior and middle management layers as of a large system with multiple layers of organisation. Those at the top tend to have moments of frustration – 'why can't they see what we want them to do?' – those at the bottom tend to feel an equal and opposite frustration – 'why don't they know

what the real world is like?' Those in the middle are consistently pulled in both directions and blamed from both sides.

In a range of ways, in a complex system of this sort, the layers of the system can get in the way. In the first place, if agreements need to be passed up and down a chain, the process can be slow. If each layer deals only with the adjacent layer or layers, it can be difficult to get a contribution from all the relevant actors and difficult to develop creative solutions which have the ownership of all parties. And where a solution would require input from every layer, it can be difficult to achieve this.

We wanted to take an approach which recognised and took advantage of the fact that government has some unique capabilities – it has resources, access to knowledge and skills, and the ability to convene, for example, which no other body has. On the other hand, as Hayek points out, it suffers from information asymmetries – it knows much less about local circumstances and conditions than other people do. As a result, it easily does stupid things. Central government needs to draw in other parts of the system in order to use its powers wisely.

So, the approach we took consistently was to try to collapse the levels of the system: to get in a room with local authorities and schools and sort out joint solutions which were better than any of us could achieve acting alone. For government, this requires a dose of humility and therefore a high level of confidence: to be able to acknowledge what it doesn't know and cannot do alone, while remembering its unique contribution. It requires high levels of trust, and it relies on partners

who themselves are unusually open about their strengths and weaknesses in the same way, unusually willing to admit fault and to challenge government constructively in areas where government's performance isn't good enough.

Establishing the necessary trust requires a strong sense of shared purpose and commitment to a higher goal than the institutional interests of any organisation. It was this shared determination to achieve something together which was most important in opening up a different way of working.

In the remainder of this piece, I describe why this approach was an important ingredient of success.

Developing strategy jointly

Early in the life of the London Challenge in 2002, we held a big event at the Renaissance Hotel, to which all London's Directors of Education were invited. Tim Brighouse and I presented – Tim inspirationally, I at great length with a lot of data. But the main event was the discussion which followed at tables, between the boroughs and the central team.

We looked hard at the themes and the evidence, the key areas for action and the impact of these on schools and local areas. We considered the impact of pupil mobility, the patterns of pupil migration, the diversity of schools and the achievement of different groups, the very steep hierarchy of schools, the imbalance between boys and girls in mixed inner London schools, the demands of vocational education, the performance of schools serving the

most deprived, the impact of admissions and exclusions policies and a whole range of other issues. We debated our proposed prioritisation and refined it. We agreed in principle that we would identify London-wide projects which small groups of local authorities could lead on behalf of the whole of London.

At a subsequent meeting of the Association of London Chief Education Officers (ALCEO, later ALDECS), we put forward a list of projects which could be led in that way and agreed it. Within a few months of starting London Challenge, and before the strategy was even published, groups of three London Education Directors were leading projects designed to contribute to the London-wide strategy. Working with Anna Paige in the central team, serious contributions were made over time to improving transition from key stage 2 to 3, transition to post-16 education, pupil mobility, education of the lowest achieving ethnic minority groups and other key London issues.

The Renaissance Hotel event began a broader pattern of collaboration across the city. A crucial part of this collaboration was the routine meeting of ALCEO, chaired for a long period by Paul Robinson of Wandsworth, who provided a crucially measured and effective conduit, never shirking the difficult conversations, but always making sure that they took place in the right way.

An early ALCEO meeting after that event was turned over more or less entirely to discussion of London Challenge, as the range of concrete actions to be proposed in the strategy became clearer. Those discussions were an important factor in shaping action, making sure it was tailored to the different

circumstances and contexts of different parts of the city.

From then on, I was invited to every ALCEO meeting and (although London Challenge was a standing item on every agenda) included in all the wider discussions of the group on a very open and trusting basis. It meant that projects already being led by local authorities (such as the London Grid for Learning and the pan-London Admissions System) could be factored into our thinking – and we could be brought in to support as necessary. The rhythms and routines of collaboration may be mundane but become an essential part of communicating, monitoring progress, hearing feedback and making sure that concerns are addressed.

The equality of the relationship was, in my view, important. I was included in discussions which ordinarily I wouldn't have been, because it was understood that my interest was in improving education in the city. I likewise openly shared things we were doing which weren't directly affecting the boroughs' responsibilities or which wouldn't always have been shared with local authorities at such an early stage, because I felt a similar level of trust in colleagues.

As a result, our strategy from the start was informed by feedback and the involvement of local authorities and could constantly be refined in the light of experience and feedback. Likewise, Directors of Education were as well placed as possible to take advantage of things we were doing.

This approach was mirrored and intensified in the five Key Boroughs.

The Key Boroughs

In the Key Boroughs, we had a simple idea of what we wanted to do: establish a vision for the next five years of how the pattern of education would be transformed in each area, publish it and then implement it. Simply stated, but impossible to do without the full involvement and engagement of the people concerned; and without that participation being committed and wholehearted, the chances of it being wrong, damaging or ineffective were high.

We sat down with each of the boroughs in turn – directors and key members of their senior teams. Tentatively at first, we began to explore the options for the future. We talked about government programmes that could be used locally and encouraged expansive thinking. We began to hear about what would and wouldn't land well locally, about why some programmes were working for them and others weren't. We talked about how it could be possible to make major changes to the building stock and about how we could most rapidly change the underperforming schools.

We began to talk about how government programmes could be adapted to fit local circumstances. We encouraged more expansive thinking and tried to introduce a governmental perspective of 'what could be', going beyond normal expectations. At the same time, we found ourselves becoming better grounded in the operational realities – how things are now, what could and couldn't be done in what timescale. We were, in short, working together at the same level, bringing together our unique capabilities to achieve something that neither of us would have managed alone.

Less intensively, but equally importantly, we were keeping in touch at political level, ensuring that our messages remained consistent and political problems were addressed. Stephen Twigg's visibly open, listening, trustworthy approach played a vital role in reassuring politicians and making sure that everyone had a shared understanding of the issues.

We produced a series of published vision documents – one for each of the five boroughs – setting out a five year vision and some concrete milestones for what would be achieved within one, three and five years. Uniquely in my experience, these were joint publications between the DfES and the borough concerned, with the leader or lead member of the council alongside Stephen Twigg in the foreword and at the launch.

This model of joint working intensified in the implementation phase. The arrangement we wanted to establish was to agree a joint implementation plan and timetable, and then monitor its implementation through half-termly 'round tables' held in the Department, through which we would look at what was and wasn't on track and course-correct as necessary.

More controversially, we wanted there to be a dedicated project manager in each borough, whose role it was to ensure that the plan was on track, reporting to the round table on progress internally and externally. We would pay for the project manager, and there was understandable unease from all of the boroughs – was this a spy in the camp? The level of resistance to the idea ranged from moderate to very high. It took all of Hannah Woodhouse's considerable diplomatic skills, as lead

official in the team, to persuade the last two boroughs to agree.

I felt that we'd used up all our capital with the boroughs in one go in getting this model agreed. We now had to make it work. In the first implementation round table post-launch, we looked very honestly at progress. In each borough there was progress and there were surprising breakthroughs; in each borough there were unexpected problems: some in the authorities, some in schools, some in the Department. We dealt with each honestly, practically and with as much imagination as we could muster. I fear I began a pattern of being at least as hard on my colleagues from other teams in the Department as on the local authorities.

Hannah with Anfal Saqib and the project managers made sure that actions were followed up rapidly, even where complex, difficult or requiring policy adjustment by the Department. And so we established a routine of half-termly meetings, honesty and directness, constant action-focused communication with project managers, Directors and senior teams, and genuine sharing of problems and solutions. On each issue we shared the problem and considered equally what we could or should each do differently to change things.

The result of this working arrangement was a relationship of honesty, trust and productive impact as good as any I have ever known between government and local authorities. Bill Clarke (then leading Islington's education service) later said to me: "When you next see Hannah Woodhouse, tell her from me that although I gave her a hard time about the project management arrangement, it was the best thing we ever did."

I don't think I appreciated at the time the level of courage it took for local leaders – particularly Bill, Alan Wood, Phyllis Dunnipace and Sharon Shoesmith to work with us in the way that they did. It was so typical of their outstanding and committed local leadership that I never doubted that they would. Each of them, and their teams, deserves great credit for the very rapid improvements to schools in their areas on their watch. Of political leaders who made important contributions, I would single out James Kempton's impact over a long period in Islington as particularly important.

Their collective work and the work of some extraordinary schools leaders and teachers in those areas has seen some of the most dramatic improvement in standards in any area of the country – consistently being identified in the 'most improved' local authority areas by DfE for several years in succession. Each has GCSE results above national average – having been on average 15 percentage points behind in 2002.

The Keys to Success

The second element of the strategy – the Keys to Success schools – has been much more widely discussed. The impact in moving the number of schools in London below floor target from the highest in the country to the lowest, and the proportion of schools in special measures from the highest to the lowest, are well-documented.

The model was developed and led in the Department by Anna Bush and then successively Amy Collins, Hannah Sheehan and Natalie Abbott (now Yeo). It relied on very high quality London Challenge Advisers (a team led throughout by the brilliant David Woods), many of whom

were attracted to the role by the prospect of taking a very different role in the final years of their career, working with government and particularly working with Tim Brighouse. Former heads, senior local authority staff and HMI like Victor Burgess, Hazel Taylor, Andrew McAlpine, Kate Myers, Doug Trickett and later Heather Flint brought a depth of recent, relevant experience and insight in a way which won instant credibility with colleague head teachers.

The role of the London Challenge Advisers was to diagnose (understanding the issues), prescribe (understand what needed to be done to address them) and coach (recognising that school leaders need to lead). They worked closely with excellent colleagues in the Department, who developed a series of relationships, interventions and resources which could be deployed rapidly to support schools and address different issues. One of the strengths of this model was the pace at which resources could be deployed and solutions implemented. Another was the bespoke nature of intervention – focused on the precise diagnosis of the issues, not on a generic solution to a specific problem.

In theory, all this could be done without local authority involvement. We took the view from the start, however, that it would be counterproductive to ignore existing local knowledge and expertise or to risk having different messages going to schools from different sources.

So we decided to begin in 2002 by holding 'case conferences' with each local authority, looking at their schools in detail – considering the ones we were concerned about, sharing knowledge and trying to

reach agreement about which most needed the support we could offer. Counter-intuitively to my mind, but very cleverly, Tim Brighouse persuaded us that doing this with small groups of local authorities together would get a more open, less pressurised, less defensive conversation.

It was another moment when local authorities could have chosen not to engage. One local authority did make that choice. In truth, we worked around them, went in to support their schools anyway (who were grateful) and waited for a new Director of Education a year or so later in order to engage more formally. Every other local authority came – some very openly, some warily. All spoke with knowledge of their schools, helped us to get to the right list of schools which needed support, understand the priorities and identify what forms of support would be needed. In each conversation, we got into joint problem-solving mode.

Overwhelmingly, over the time of the London Challenge, we managed to stay in this mode. Difficult issues arose – there was sometimes a shared recognition that there needed to be a change of leadership, for example. Contrary to general perception in the Department, we found in several cases that it was neither lack of money nor lack of will that led Directors of Education to be cautious about addressing weak heads – rather, concern about the availability of better replacements. Being close enough to local authorities to see what was really happening allowed us to open up routes to appointing new heads which a single local authority didn't have access to.

We aimed to be in the same mode with Keys to Success schools. By being alongside

them, not in an accountability relationship, London Challenge Advisers had more open access to the real concerns and problems of school leaders than the Department had probably ever had before. The practical, on-the-ground information we received allowed us to see patterns more clearly, both within a locality and across the city. We could sometimes resource an intervention at school-level, local authority level or across the city which the LEA couldn't resource itself. In several critical examples at school level, joint action by central and local government with the school itself fixed problems easily and elegantly which probably none of the parties could have solved alone.

Conclusion

There is not space here to discuss at length the other aspects of the strategy – some of which, like the 'London Teacher', 'London Leader' and 'London Student' aspects of the pan-London part of the strategy, were absolutely crucial to the success of London Challenge. There are many other lessons from that work and indeed from the work described above.

The focus of this piece has been on what I see as one key lesson of the London Challenge: collapse the levels of the system. By working with and respecting the other key actors in the system, government can add significant value and dramatically improve its own impact. Government can never hope to have perfect information and a single local authority or school cannot have the same access to resources or expertise as government, but by working in genuine and respectful partnership, they can significantly improve the impact they each have.

There is a risk that this message – and indeed other messages about London Challenge – could be seen as ‘soft’, compared to a hard-nosed world of direct intervention. The opposite is true. Working in this way requires a willingness to stay in the difficult conversation, to hold others to account while looking them in the eye and to be held to account in the same way. It assumes that success against the measurable indicators is necessary and cannot be ducked – but refuses to accept that this alone is sufficient.

It is an approach which requires risk-taking and trust, and therefore courage and integrity. It involves commitment to a higher, shared goal; and agreement on a mechanism for holding one another to account and solving problems, an operational approach and a set of behaviours. In short, it entails discomfort as everyone has to move away from their established way of doing business – so cannot simultaneously be done in every area of activity. It is justified by a great enterprise of the highest public interest.

It was our great good fortune that underneath many differences of view and feeling, many practical problems and a multitude of political differences, central and local government found sufficient common cause to seize the opportunity of London Challenge and do things very differently for a time.

*Since 2012, **Jon Coles** has been Chief Executive of United Learning, a group of independent schools and academies established 130 years ago.*

Prior to this, his career in the Department for Education included four years on the Board as Director General, first for Schools and then for Education Standards, responsible for a wide range of policy areas, such as the review of the National Curriculum, the Academies Act 2010 and National Challenge. As Director of 14-19 Reform, he led the drive to raise participation post-16 and attainment at 19, reduce NEET numbers and reform curriculum and qualifications. As Director of London Challenge, Jon was responsible for developing and implementing the strategy to improve secondary education in London, which also led to similar approaches in other parts of the country.

Jon was responsible for various Green and White Papers and took the 2002 Education Act through Parliament. A qualified secondary teacher, his previous jobs included implementing the infant class size pledge, and a period of cross-government strategy work at the Cabinet Office.



Heathmere: a London primary school

by Emma Lewis and Ben Cooper

Introduction

For anyone even vaguely familiar with school improvement and the tricky business of improving children's chances in life, it's obvious that there is no silver bullet; it's not one thing that transforms a school but a combination of different things, at different times, and to different degrees. That was the case at my school, Heathmere Primary, where 'what worked' was the interplay of a passionate and motivated team, good and great teaching, extra investment in the school building, a knowledgeable and committed governing body, support from parents and, of course, a wonderful group of children who strive to meet our rising expectations. Added to this, the local authority provided an essential mix of strategic challenge and day-to-day support.

As a result, in November 2014, for the first time in its history, Heathmere Primary became a good school. For us, that was a significant moment and an important milestone. This article sets out the journey to good and focuses on the role of the local authority. It is written with two important caveats. First, Heathmere is a good school but we are still a long from where we want to be – it's still not 'job done' and, in writing this, there is no sense of complacency. Second, what worked for

us may not work somewhere else. But in the busy business of school leadership and school transformation, it is only by sharing our stories, talking about our professional successes, and reflecting upon them, that we begin to understand exactly what does make a difference.

The school context

Heathmere Primary is located on the outer edges of Wandsworth. Although the school is literally a stone's throw from the open spaces and green trees of Richmond Park, it is very much an inner-city, urban environment. The school is one of two primaries which serve the Alton Estate in Roehampton, built during the 1950s when high-rise blocks were the height of architectural sophistication. The estate itself, bordered on three sides by Richmond Park, the busy A3 and a dual carriageway, feels self-contained, almost cut-off. As such, Heathmere is very much a school of the community: our catchment is close to the school.

Like many schools in our position, we have a large number of children who speak English as an additional language, a high proportion of children who are eligible for pupil premium funding and a considerable number of children who join school during the year or stay for only a short period of

time due to family circumstances. Equally, there is a very settled community on the estate who have long, deep and wide roots within the local community.

The school is between a one-form and two-form entry, in some year groups there is a single class and in others there are two classes. Class sizes are small. The teaching staff tends to be younger and will typically be in their first school or very early on in their teaching career. The leadership team is similar in the sense that nobody brings bags of experience – this is my first headship, the same for my deputy and all of the senior leaders are in position for the first time.

In addition, when I took over as head, 42 per cent of children were on the SEN register – most for Behaviour, Social and Emotional Difficulties. By any measure, behaviour was not good and it was having a negative impact on learning and on pupils' progress. In 2010, Ofsted identified only one in four lessons as being 'good'. There were children who were starting in Year 4 at a lower level than they had left Year 2. The projections for attainment at the end of Year 6 were dire across the whole of KS2.

Added to this was the totally unacceptable state of the school building – both inside and outside. I felt very strongly that if we were expecting children to learn and be the best that they could be, there should not be paint peeling off the walls in the classrooms, the children in Nursery and Reception should not be playing with broken toys and there should not be rain coming in between the window frames and the panes of glass.

The governing body had some capable and committed members on the team but found

it difficult to be effective. Needless to say, the school had a poor reputation in the area and with the local authority. Standards were low and many local residents simply didn't want their children to come to Heathmere. Unsurprisingly, we were not the school of choice for many local parents.

Up to 2012, every Ofsted inspection at Heathmere had resulted in the school being categorised as 'satisfactory'. After this, the descriptors were changed and 'satisfactory' was replaced with the more stringent category of 'requiring improvement'.

In many ways, this category, requiring improvement was invented for schools such as Heathmere. The very description of 'satisfactory' was a misnomer for Heathmere; it was anything but satisfactory. There were children who had spent the whole of their primary school years receiving a satisfactory education. As a young teacher, I remember hearing the phrase 'satisfactory isn't good enough'. This stayed with me and became a guiding principle.

Working with the local authority: two choices

Prior to my arrival the local authority had set up a Task Group in school. This group was made up of governors, senior leaders in school and local authority representatives, including the link inspector. The purpose of the group was to affect change; to raise standards across the board. However, the relationship between the school and the Task Group was difficult. This made it hard for the Task Group to really understand and 'get under the skin' of the school and its challenges. In turn this made it difficult for the school to accept support.

The new categorisation as 'requiring improvement' (RI), along with my appointment as acting head in January 2013 and a new chair of governors in September 2012, gave the impetus to shift the school from its long history of underperformance. Critically, a change in culture within the school was instigated which was one of being more open to external support and challenge. In turn, the local authority, through the Task Group, became firmly entrenched into the leadership fabric of the school. This group, and the work streams they identified, became the 'engine room' of school improvement.

Another feature of the relationship between school and local authority was that we were only the second school in Wandsworth to become RI and, with no schools in special measures, we were very much the main focus. In time, the other RI school took a different path and soon converted to an Academy, leaving Heathmere at the centre of the local authority's school improvement priorities. The benefit of this was a 'direct line' – clear, priority access to support and resources. The flip-side was the level of scrutiny; Heathmere was very much under the spotlight and there was a sense, unwritten and unspoken, that this was the last chance to change the school for the better.

Fast forward two years and Heathmere is now the first school in Wandsworth to have come out of RI and therefore can be used as a model to support other schools that have since gone into this bracket. However I do often reflect and think how different the situation would have been if there had been several other schools in the local authority in my position or in special measures. Although this did mean the level of scrutiny

was intense (the spotlight burnt very bright!), it did also mean that we were the beneficiaries of capacity within the local authority that simply would not have been there if more schools were in our position.

It is hard for me to envisage the journey if the local authority had not been able to provide the level of support. What path would I have taken? What other options were available? On a personal note, I was 35 years-old, had been at the school as Deputy for one term only, was new to the Wandsworth area, and had no substantive Deputy at the time. None of the above is helpful at the best of times, but particularly not when preparing for an HMI visit four weeks after taking over as acting head. I didn't know a single person in London who could have helped me with school improvement; my professional network, which I had spent the last 10 years building, was in the West Midlands. Suddenly the NPQH that I passed five years ago seemed like a distant memory!

So, if the local authority had not been present and so integral to supporting the school, we wouldn't necessarily have failed but the journey would undoubtedly have been longer and harder. I could, for example, have got the school directory out, phoned headteachers who were nearby, introduced myself and asked them to help signpost me. I could have searched the internet for consultants and advisors. I could have gone on courses about school improvement and learnt new strategies. But how would I know who or what was effective? How would I know who the right people for my school would be? It was my first month as acting head and the stakeholders were closing in. Governors meetings, local authority meetings, local

councillors wanting to visit, a budget that needed to be set, parents wanting answers and, above all, children needing a better quality of education than they had been receiving. I always maintain that I knew innately what needed to be done at that school, but I needed a sounding board and also a sense of validation to help keep me motivated.

At this point, I found myself in the position where I had two choices. One was to do it on my own and pay lip-service to the local authority; the other option was to totally embrace the local authority, be entirely transparent with them and be receptive to their advice (this is not the same as taking all their advice!). The second was the only realistic option. I just wouldn't have had the time to source, filter and broker the levels of support that I needed. Of course taking this option came with its challenges but as time went on I became more confident to select the help that I requested and to say 'no' when I felt that 'no' was appropriate.

What worked

As mentioned above, every school is different and what proves successful in one school may not work in another. With this caveat in mind, the following is a summary of 'what worked' at Heathmere.

First, above all else, a focus on behaviour for learning ensured the school could quickly move in the right direction. It was very obvious to me that until we sorted behaviour out, there was very little point in focusing on anything else. The irony of the situation at Heathmere was that the only 'good' judgment the school had received at the previous inspection was for 'Behaviour

and Safety' and yet my deputy and I were spending the majority of our time dealing with behaviour issues. So the local authority commissioned a 'Behaviour Review' and also signposted me in the direction of schools that had faced similar challenges with behaviour. The review was helpful as it gave us the evidence upon which to make some much needed changes and the visits to other schools were critical. The local authority had thoughtfully matched me up with some like-minded heads and their support was invaluable. This was quickly followed by an SEN review which again, gave us the focus to make some much needed changes. Of course, it was the sheer determination of the teachers and the staff that turned the reviews into reality by: introducing clear expectations for behaviour and a system for managing incidents; a focus on planning interesting lessons; making sure the right support was in place for children; and establishing warm, respectful relationships where children felt included. This focus on behaviour for learning changed the children's approach to school: the children now want to learn and want to be in the classroom.

Second, I established a sense of corporate responsibility. When making decisions, the net was cast wide; everyone was expected to be involved in agreeing what would impact on learning. Equally, everyone was expected to stick to these decisions and hold each other to account. This meant a degree of challenge from both the local authority and governors, but also a steady flow of difficult conversations with staff to ensure the shared expectations were being met.

Third, there was transparency with all stakeholders, with the local authority Task Group at the centre of this. Only with

honesty and clarity about the day-to-day and strategic challenges, were we able to properly solve problems.

Fourth, a sense of high expectations for all: the children, teachers and other staff, all leaders, stakeholders and also for the physical environment. Everything was about children's learning and progress. Strategically, this was driven by establishing clear and detailed action plans for the whole school, for key stages, for subjects and for other priority areas. Monitoring and scrutiny of these action plans, both 'in-house' by school leaders as well as by our link inspector, became very important in terms of managing and organising the necessary changes, as well as making sure they happened and had impact. In terms of the physical environment, I lost count of the number of people I showed around the school to express my dissatisfaction at how the building had been left. Twelve months of non-stop campaigning resulted in the local authority agreeing to invest a significant amount of money to improve the building.

Finally, there was a focus on particular areas of teaching and learning. Accuracy of assessment was one area. The marking policy was another. Improving writing across the all areas of the curriculum was also a focus of all our energies. In some areas, we began to innovate by carrying out learning studies and establishing teacher learning communities where groups of teachers investigated an area of interest and applied their findings to their practice in class.

Professional development training was also provided by the local authority and support for subject leaders and teachers from

consultants. With the support of the local authority, we put in place what I consider to be one of the key moments of change. I closed the school for half a day and every single teacher and teaching assistant went to spend the morning in another school. However, this wasn't just to any school that would take us. Instead I sat down with the primary school improvement manager and matched every member of staff to a lead practitioner in the borough, making sure that everyone would have an experience that would move them on. Professionally, I've never experienced a buzz that there was in my school that afternoon when everyone returned. People were desperate to share their experiences and talk about how they could now improve as a result. Because staff had been matched to individual teachers and also to targeted schools, they were not only clearer about how to improve learning in their own classrooms but also about how to improve our whole school. My KS1 leader suddenly saw a vision for how behaviour should look in KS2 and took a lead role in this.

Finally, there was investment in key areas with additional funding from the local authority. This didn't always require huge sums of money but it was used wisely and clearly targeted. Some of this was able to secure relatively quick and easy wins, such as much-needed money for play equipment in the Early Years. Other investment was more substantial and needed more time and detailed planning – this included a significant building project to update the outside area in Early Years. Additionally, we stepped up the pace of routine 'repair and replace' work by buying new carpets, replacing old windows and having new paintwork throughout.

The governing body remained central throughout this whole process. There was a difficult meeting initially where governors were given the choice to either step up and make a proper contribution or walk away. It is a testament to the members that every single person stayed, undertook the relevant training and started to fulfil their roles. The governing body transformed from being dysfunctional into highly effective. Total transparency and high expectations along with determination and tenacity from the chair ensured the governing body were key in strategic decision making.

The Task Group

It's worth expanding briefly on the role of the Task Group. They became my 'SWOT team' and consisted of: myself and my deputy from the school; the local authority head of performance and standards, the primary school improvement manager, link inspector, head of inclusion, school HR representative, head of governance; the chair and vice-chair of governors and the chair of the curriculum and standards committee. Meetings were half termly and consisted of discussions around all the key areas of the school. Data was presented, ideas shared and progress measured. Support was offered in terms of advice, expertise, signposting and financial resources. The Task Group was used as a sounding board to discuss ideas, problem solve and challenge. As there had been a culture of openness established, these conversations were honest, and sometimes brutally so, but they always moved the school forwards. Between these meetings, highly challenging governors' meetings and weekly link inspector visits also took place. At one point, it felt I was spending so much time either justifying what I had

been doing or explaining what I was going to do that it seemed there was no time left for actually doing anything! Looking back, however, those conversations were necessary to ensure we were focused and didn't become side-tracked.

As we moved through the RI process, we also had an EYFS review, a KS1 review, a reading review, a Year 5 and 6 review, a second behaviour review and finally, at a point where we felt we were almost ready for inspection, a whole school learning review. At each point, the relevant in-school leaders were involved with the process and the local authority, via the Task Group, helped me to select external advisors and consultants to be involved, all of which were provided free of charge. This meant that my middle and senior leaders were involved in excellent CPD and had very clear targets of improvement.

It's not possible to talk about the impact of the local authority without discussing the role of my link inspector. A few weeks after becoming head, I requested that the school had a new link inspector as I knew that if I was really going to make the change, it needed to be a complete reversal with no excuses. We were both able to start with a clean slate and move forward. My inspector became my sounding board. I always felt like I knew how to get to where I wanted the school to get to but I often didn't have the experience or ability to get there. I had the vision but not always the structure behind it. And my belief remains as strong today as it always was – I refused to deliver a 'quick fix'. I would only ever work on something that was sustainable and therefore if it wasn't going to benefit in the long term, we weren't going to do it.

Conclusion

While I am positive about the relationship I had – and have – with the local authority, there are clearly questions to be asked about the role and purpose of a local authority, particularly when the wider political context is in a constant state of change. When I look at my school, the local authority had been involved with the school for a while but it had always been a difficult relationship. What is the power of the local authority when the headteacher doesn't wish to engage? And in particular when both the headteacher and the chair of governors don't wish to engage? Also, at what point should the local authority get involved? If I take a very cynical angle of the history of Heathmere, I wonder why it took an Ofsted judgment for things to really start to change. Is the local authority role one of prevention or cure? Is it a safety net or is it there to cultivate and develop best practice?

Sometimes it concerns me how much power a headteacher has. In the current climate, heads have more and more power. This is all well and good if the school is providing a decent level of education but what happens when the school of this very powerful head isn't providing the standard of education required? Where is the check? My governing body are very challenging to me and I don't think would let me pull the wool over their eyes. However I am sure this isn't the case in all schools. The local authority has the capacity to act as a moderator.

My view of politics is that it is best kept separate from school management – education should be 'best practice' and not politically biased – but the reality for all schools is that we work in a political

context and one in which the only certainty is that there will be more change. With the General Election looming it's hard – if not impossible – to predict what the educational landscape will look like in a year, let alone in two years or three. The direction of travel in recent times has pointed towards ever greater school autonomy and to a more diverse range of school systems and structures, including free schools, trusts and academies. As a head, it would be perverse to argue against autonomy; I want to decide what happens in my school. I instinctively and professionally dislike being told by someone else what to do and how to do it. But equally, autonomy is a bit of a smoke screen in that it is impossible to make changes in a school, particularly one with a deeply entrenched culture that is at odds with getting the best outcomes for children, without the support, advice and challenge of others who have either been there, know someone who has or can help find someone that fits in to either category! For me, that 'other' was a combination of the local authority, the link inspector, fellow leaders in Wandsworth schools and my staff.

I believe that schools are like football teams – they go up and down depending on who is on the team. The challenge now is to provide long term sustainability to these changes. The process of school transformation cannot be a quick fix. If it is to be truly effective it must be built on solid foundations and we now have to continue this without the intensive support from the local authority. The systems and structures are now in place but these are useless without the right people to drive them effectively; that's what really makes the difference.

Emma Lewis

Emma has worked in primary schools in London and the West Midlands for 16 years in a range of teaching and leadership roles. She is currently in her first headship at Heathmere Primary School where she has led the school from Requiring Improvement to Good while honouring a commitment to build a sustainable model of school improvement for the children and community of Roehampton. She is passionate about the entitlement for all children to learn and the responsibility that schools have to provide opportunities for all children.

Ben Cooper

Ben has worked in primary schools in South West London for 10 years. Prior to this he worked in central government, developing policy in various government departments. This is his first deputy head position where he focuses on curriculum development, literacy and assessment. His current projects include setting up a school library and developing Heathmere as a UNICEF Rights Respecting School.



Hackney's education story

by Mayor Jules Pipe

The transformation of education in London is one of the greatest successes of public policy of the last decade, and nowhere has that success been more remarkable than in Hackney, where the education offer has gone from being probably the worst to becoming one of the best, not just in London, but in the UK.

In 2002, Hackney's Key Stage 2 results were the worst in the country, and less than a third of our students were achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C. Last year, 2014, that figure was above the national average at 61 per cent, with some schools achieving as high as 91 per cent. It is a mark of the endemic culture of low expectation that existed in the borough that in 2002, not one of Hackney's maintained secondary schools had a sixth form. Now they all do. Whereas once, more than half of our pupils leaving primary schools left the borough for their secondary education, now, despite many additional places having been created, our secondary schools are over-subscribed with more than 80 per cent of children preferring to stay within the Hackney state sector.

In some ways, the story of education in Hackney is just one part of the borough's overall transformation. After all, since the late 1990s when Hackney Council was on the brink of financial collapse,

every single aspect of public service in this borough has undergone the same radical overhaul and improvement. It is unlikely that the transformation of education would have been so complete had the rest of the borough's services not kept pace. It would be hard to operate truly excellent schools in an environment of failure. However, it is probably true to say that of all the improvements Hackney has seen, the success of our schools is the most fundamentally important, and has been the biggest driver of social change in the borough.

The local authority in Hackney, while responsible for many of the problems suffered by Hackney schools in the past, has played a vital role in the turnaround of education in the borough, and continues to lead a culture of excellence and improvement. In the late 1990s, however, the council was well into its six-year period of no-overall control, which was unique in local government history in having no political leadership appointed throughout that time. The whole council was in crisis and the fact that Hackney schools were failing badly was just one symptom of a malaise that affected every part of local services. The newly elected Labour government was keen to show its teeth when it came to failing councils, and in 1997, the then Education Secretary David Blunkett sent in inspectors who concluded that the council

was failing to meet its responsibilities with regard to education, followed by a 'hit squad' charged with raising standards. By 1999, when an Audit Commission report found that Hackney had presided over the largest fall in GCSE results in the country, the government intervened, putting Hackney's LEA into special measures, and taking direct control of education services away from the council.

At the time, some complained that the Secretary of State should be focusing his attention directly on the schools rather than the LEA. David Willetts, then Shadow Education Secretary said: "It's no good the government stomping around making these gestures... the problems in Hackney are in the schools."

Willetts was not entirely wrong. Many of the problems were in the schools, but it's also true to say that Hackney's failing LEA had a huge part to play in the decline of education in the borough. As well as poor management of the education estate, which had led to many schools falling into serious disrepair, the LEA displayed what can most kindly be characterised as a lack of leadership and a culture of low expectations. Ofsted reports at the time identified political interference and uncertainty over budgets as contributing factors to failing schools. The former Chief Inspector of Schools Chris Woodhead went further, urging the government to "rescue the education of some of Britain's most deprived children from the malign influence of Hackney Council".

Blunkett's intervention led to the creation of the Learning Trust, a bespoke not-for-profit company set up to take on the functions of Hackney's failing LEA and

report directly to the Secretary of State for Education. Other boroughs were seeing similar outsourcing arrangements being put in place, involving private companies such as Serco and CEA. The not-for-profit nature of the Learning Trust meant that it was able to establish itself without contending with the same accusations of privatisation, and immediately establish a strong relationship with heads, governors and teaching unions. Its chief executive was Alan Wood, a widely respected director of education who, since 2006, has also been Hackney's corporate director of Children and Young People's Services.

The composition of the Learning Trust's board was also a key element in this success. Chaired by Sir Mike Tomlinson, a highly respected former Ofsted chief, and involving heads, governors, and the local authority, the Learning Trust was seen to have a legitimacy of governance which would have been hard to achieve with a profit-making company. The focus of the newly created trust was on school improvement and the creation of a new culture of achievement. There was an emphasis on pride, on supporting pupils and on making every child feel they were entitled to succeed. The Learning Trust ran campaigns to motivate and support students at exam times with the slogan "Hackney's with you all the way". For the first time, Hackney students were being encouraged to feel proud of who they were and where they were from, and to feel that they could succeed.

Despite the autonomy given to the Learning Trust, as the council itself became increasingly more functional, and then high-performing, a strong partnership relationship was forged between the two

organisations. The year in which the Learning Trust was created was also the year in which I was elected as Mayor, and education was a priority for my administration from day one. In some ways, having the day-to-day running of schools removed from the picture proved to be an advantage for those of us who were focused on fixing all the borough's other failing services, as it was one less big problem for the organisation to deal with on its own. Certainly the Learning Trust's focused singularity of purpose worked in its favour. However, as Mayor I knew that we would never make an impact on Hackney's deep-rooted social problems and inequalities without transforming the schools, and I always felt that this was in part my responsibility, even if the day to day management was not under the council's control.

What remained the council's responsibility, and where we could make a big impact, was the fabric of the education estate, the bricks and mortar of Hackney schools. While the Learning Trust focused on school standards, the council undertook a comprehensive programme of capital investment across the primary and secondary estates. Over 10 years we entirely renewed the infrastructure of Hackney's schools. As early, and highly efficient, adopters of the Building Schools for the Future programme, we achieved complete renewal of all our maintained secondaries and special schools – the success of our initial schemes at the point when the coalition government decided to scrap BSF nationally in 2010 resulted in Hackney being one of the few authorities allowed to complete its programme.

Our education estate is now one of which we can be very proud, with new spaces to learn and play alongside first-class facilities to inspire students and teachers alike. Through our stewardship of BSF we have seen six schools completely renewed, and four new schools built from scratch. In addition, we commissioned 19 new children's centres to the highest design standards, and five new youth centres. We have renewed the fabric of almost every educational building in the borough to an exceptionally high standard, and this has undoubtedly had a big impact on the morale and performance of teachers and students, as well as the desirability of our schools to parents.

Being early adopters certainly worked to our advantage with the BSF programme, and the same can be said of our approach to Academies. Two existing secondary schools were deemed unsalvageable and needed to be replaced entirely – no amount of "re-badging" or "fresh starting" would have succeeded. The council acted decisively in their closure, contrasting sharply with the infamous death throes of Hackney Downs in 1996 where the council's lack of leadership prompted the then Secretary of State to intervene.

The desperate need to create new, high quality school places meant we were one of the first councils in the UK to adopt the Labour government's Academies programme. Many in the Labour Party had, and still have, deep reservations about Academies – in particular, their independence from LEAs, the element of private sponsorship the original schools required, and the potential influence of sponsors. In some parts of the country, these concerns proved to be not without foundation, especially

where sponsors had their own religious or ideological agenda. In Hackney, however, we avoided these problems by being very clear from the outset about what we wanted from our new schools.

Hackney is one of those places that seems to collectively hold a certain set of values. Our residents come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and increasingly disparate economic circumstances, but a belief in diversity, tolerance and community defines the place today as much as it ever did.

Back in 2003, when we consulted residents about the kind of new schools they wanted to see in Hackney, the response came back with a clear majority in favour of mixed-sex, non-denominational, non-selective schools.

What Hackney parents wanted, in the main, were schools that reflected a belief in high-quality, locally provided comprehensive education. That is what we were determined to give them, and those were the conditions we put upon the donation of local authority land to the Academies programme, effectively delivered through the council maintaining a right of veto in the selection of sponsors.

When we set up the Hackney Academies programme, it was clear what was needed in the borough, and that was brand new schools. Not re-branded failing schools, but new schools, built to the highest architectural and design standards; flagship schools of which the whole community could be proud. And that is what we achieved. The first wave of academy schools in Hackney, which included the now nationally renowned Mossbourne Academy, designed by Richard Rogers, set a standard for new schools across the country.

Our Academy schools opened with just one year group, building up to full capacity over seven years, which allowed them to embed excellence from day one. All were mixed, non-denominational, and none exercised their right to select 10 per cent of their intake. All had to commit to being “part of the family of Hackney schools” which meant Academy chains were rejected (as have their attempts at takeovers since), along with those charities and private schools that wanted to parachute in elite “ivory towers” in order to select “a lucky few”.

Hackney’s Academies were, and still are, a magnet for ministerial visits, with successive waves of national politicians keen to bask in the reflected glories of their stellar results. Tony Blair and most of the Cabinet once arrived at Mossbourne to launch a document on the renewal of public services. At that event, Blair took me aside and suggested that I should “speak to Gordon about what the Academies programme had done for the borough”. Moments later, I was propelled across the room by the Prime Minister to extol their benefits to his Chancellor. The need for such lobbying is partially explained by the fact that Brown had no immediate constituency experience of Academies, as of course the programme did not operate within the devolved Scottish education system. It was also symptomatic, however, of the scepticism towards Academies within some parts of the Labour Party that Blair felt that his potential future successor should need such encouragement.

I have never been a flag-waver for the Academies programme in itself, as “one-size-fits-all” approaches are a mistaken approach of national governments, and too much of the debate revolves falsely around

“autonomy” being the key ingredient for success. However, when it came to building Hackney the schools it needed and deserved I was, and remain, a pragmatist. At that stage Hackney desperately needed new schools, and the academies programme was the only show in town. Those who wished to wait for a government that freely funded local authorities to build maintained schools are still waiting. Meanwhile we have seven new Academy schools, alongside those built and refurbished under BSF.

It made absolute sense for us to get involved at an early stage and the results from some of those schools have been phenomenal. But it was not their Academy status that made the difference in the case of schools like Mossbourne. After all, since the introduction of LMS, local authorities don't run any schools directly. Rather, there is a strong argument that a brand new, state-of-the-art school with the kind of inspirational leadership, ethos and discipline provided by Sir Michael Wilshaw as its Principal would have succeeded whether or not it was an Academy. I am equally proud of what many of our maintained schools have achieved over the past 10 years, and I have always been determined to ensure that we did not end up with a two-tier secondary system in Hackney, where the academies flourished at the expense of the rest – and the BSF programme was vital to achieving that.

What those early Academies did though, was to raise the bar for schools in Hackney and show that it is absolutely possible to achieve excellence in an inner-city school with a comprehensive intake and a challenging catchment area. This is what Tony Blair believed, supported by his then policy adviser Andrew Adonis, when they

ignored the views of departmental officials who counselled against implementing the Academies programme in Hackney on the basis that “the borough was a basket case and always would be”.

In 2012, after a solid decade of improving results and attainment, the Learning Trust's contract ended and any requirement on the council to renew or re-tender the service had long since been lifted by the then Secretary of State, Ed Balls. In taking the service back in-house, we created the Hackney Learning Trust, a new department of the council which would maintain the flexibility and much of the culture of the outsourced organisation, whilst becoming part of the wider local authority.

The new department would maintain the Learning Trust brand, which by now was very well known and respected across the education world, to allow it to trade both inside and outside the borough.

It had become clear to us that, at a time when education funding has been stripped away from local authorities and devolved to schools, if we wanted to keep providing a robust schools improvement service, to effectively support the Hackney family of schools and to continue to discharge our responsibilities to the young people of this borough, we had to ensure that our services were something that schools wanted to buy.

The Hackney Learning Trust is now selling services to dozens of boroughs and counties and hundreds of schools across the country. Every single state school in Hackney, including academies and free schools currently chooses to buy services from the Hackney Learning Trust, which not only allows us to generate income – in

2013/14 around £6 million – but also to maintain the concept of a connected and mutually supportive local family of schools. The new Hackney Learning Trust provides a model for an LEA for the 21st century – entrepreneurial, ambitious and self-sustaining.

I firmly believe that local authorities still have a vital role to play in education, providing leadership, support, challenge, and local accountability.

Hackney has changed a huge amount in the past 15 years, with most of that change being very much for the better. However, it is still a borough where there are high levels of poverty and need. Nearly half of our housing stock is in the social rented sector, and more than a third of our children are living in poverty. It is our job, as a local authority, and it is my job as elected Mayor, to create life-changing opportunities for the people in this borough who most need them. Those opportunities start with a first class education, from early years upwards.

It is that first-class education that is transforming the social and economic life chances of children from the poorest backgrounds which will ensure our young people have the skills and confidence to take advantage of everything that the economic growth of Hackney and East London now has to offer them. It is education that will eventually cut off the supply of unskilled and disenfranchised young men who are so vulnerable to joining criminal gangs.

I fundamentally disagree with this government's insistence that locally elected leaders have little or no part to play in this process. Rather, I agree with Sir Michael

Wilshaw, in his role as head of Ofsted, that local authority leadership has an important part to play in advancing school standards. While Hackney's experience does show what damage an incompetent LEA could do to local schools in the past, it also shows what a hugely positive impact a high-functioning and ambitious local authority can have on the education, aspirations and life-chances of every child that it serves.

While Hackney, and London as a whole, can be rightly proud of what has been achieved in the capital's schools, we cannot afford to be complacent. That is why we continue to focus on further improvement.

I was re-elected in 2014 with a manifesto commitment to achieving 70 per cent of Hackney children getting 5 or more A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths by 2018; and ensuring that every one of our schools is judged good or outstanding, as is the case with all our secondaries.

The threats to education in London now are different to those that existed in the 1980s and 1990s, where incompetence, low aspiration and political interference had such a malign influence, as well as almost two decades of desperate under-resourcing. Now the stripping away of local authority funding for school improvement and the undermining of local accountability by central government poses new obstacles to be overcome. Alongside that, London's affordable housing crisis will take its toll as it becomes more and more difficult for teachers to live even within commuting distance of the schools where they are most needed. Whereas once it was parents leaving London in search of better schools, now it is teachers in search of homes they can afford.

In that sense, London's revolution in school standards has become the victim of its own success. Alan Wood, Hackney's DCS, once said: "We will know that we have been successful when Hackney parents, instead of fighting to get their children out of our schools, will be fighting to get them in." Certainly in Hackney, the rapid improvement in local schools has been one of the single biggest drivers of house price inflation beyond the bubble that is being experienced across the capital.

Alongside widening economic inequality, the sustainability of this city and its public services is the next major challenge for London's leaders. That is why it is crucial that central government takes London devolution seriously, and also that those local leaders can continue to play a role in the delivery of all local services, including education.

***Jules Pipe** is the elected Mayor of Hackney and chair of London Councils. He was re-elected as Mayor of Hackney for his fourth term in May 2014. He has been chair of London Councils since June 2010. Before becoming Mayor, Jules worked as a national newspaper journalist as well as serving as a ward councillor from 1996 to 2002, and as leader of the council from June 2001 until his election as Mayor in 2002. He was born and grew up in east London, and has lived in Hackney for 20 years. In 2008 he was awarded a CBE in recognition of his service to local government.*



Turning around Tower Hamlets

by Christine Gilbert

'The experience of Tower Hamlets since 1998 is inspirational. It shows that improvement is not only possible but achievable, that improvement in some schools does not need to be bought at the expense of others and that improvement, once attained, can not only be sustained but surpassed. As a result, it is not unreasonable to argue that what Tower Hamlets has created are some of the best urban schools in the world. This is a genuinely exceptional achievement, worth celebrating, worth understanding, but, above all, worth learning from.'
(Wood, Husbands & Brown, 2013)

Outcomes for children in schools across London have improved significantly in recent years. As part of this positive picture, the progress of schools in Tower Hamlets over a period of nearly two decades has been recognised as a major success story.

Back in 1997, educational performance in the borough was dire. Standards of performance were the worst in the country; Ofsted's judgements were damning about the authority and many of its schools; and schools lacked any confidence in the role of the education authority. Achievements since that period have been significant due to a relentless focus on raising standards by schools, by the council and by the community.

I arrived in Tower Hamlets in April 1997 to take up the post of corporate director, education. In this article, I want to explore the main factors that underpinned the process of change in Tower Hamlets and the continuing pattern of improvement in educational outcomes. I shall finish by considering whether the Tower Hamlets story has any relevance today given the changing role of local authorities.

Over the last couple of years, Tower Hamlets has been the focus of various research studies. *Big-City School Reforms: Lessons from New York*, Toronto and London (Fullan and Boyle, 2014) identified four characteristics evident in the Tower Hamlets transformation:

- resolute leadership
- allegiance
- professional power
- sustainability.

These characteristics are rooted in a framework of improvement which uses the concepts 'push' and 'pull' (Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris, 2014). They have their origins in concepts of 'pressure' and 'support' which have featured in the language of school improvement for the last 20 years. Actions that 'push' are relentless, insistent, 'in your face' and not up for negotiation.

Actions that 'pull' draw people together, to collaborate, to work and to learn together. These characteristics provide a useful framework for explaining success in Tower Hamlets.

Resolute leadership

In 1997, Tower Hamlets languished in 149th position amongst the 149 local authorities. Only 26 per cent of students obtained five or higher grade GCSEs, compared with the national average of 43 per cent and the position at Key Stage 2 was no better with just 47 per cent of pupils attaining level 4 on the English test compared with 63 per cent nationally. Shortly after I took up my post in the borough, Ofsted (1998) found that the education service was failing, placing the responsibility at the door both of schools and the authority. Although Tower Hamlets was the best funded authority in the country, the resources were neither being used effectively to combat the high levels of disadvantage nor to raise standards in schools.

I had come to Tower Hamlets from Harrow, a top-performing London borough. In many ways, my recruitment was an interesting choice for elected members to make. Although Harrow had a diverse population, I had no recent inner city experience. Members were ambitious for young people in Tower Hamlets and for change but they did not know how to effect that change. They appointed me because I had already been a director in a top-performing borough and they thought I would know what 'good' looked like. Certainly, my five years as a director of education gave me a confidence that wouldn't have been there without that experience.

It was immediately clear to me on my visits to schools that children in Tower Hamlets were no less capable than the children in Harrow but they lacked the material advantages of many Harrow children. However, government funding for education in Tower Hamlets was far better than Harrow but needed to be better focused.

A key part of my job as director was to raise expectations and to find ways of establishing a culture of achievement across the education service. This entailed challenging the status quo and the long-standing assumption that the level of poverty in Tower Hamlets was an insurmountable barrier to achievement.

The most important task was to establish a common belief across everyone with an interest in education in Tower Hamlets that: improvement in standards was possible; schools in the borough could reach national targets and even exceed outcomes elsewhere; levels of disadvantage could be overcome and should not be used as an excuse for low attainment; and that everyone in the borough had a part to play in contributing to this.

As a new director, my first task in doing this was to engage anyone with an interest in education in Tower Hamlets in the production of a challenging strategic plan. Ofsted (1998) commented that from 1994: 'Strategic planning... largely came to a standstill'. The plan was produced over an eight month period of extensive engagement activities and with the involvement of schools, in particular headteachers, governors, members and the local community. Every meeting or discussion during the consultation period was used to raise ambitions and

expectations. The basic premise was that anything was possible for every child in Tower Hamlets if we could just find the right means to overcome the barriers to their learning. We were helped by a new government which had identified education as its top priority and had set up a Standards and Effective Unit under Sir Michael Barber to apply support and pressure to the system. This unit had identified Tower Hamlets as a failing local authority and allocated David Woods, who went on so successfully to lead London Challenge, as our linked adviser. This unit set borough targets for achievement in Tower Hamlets which were not negotiable.

Against this national 'push', the Education Strategic Plan was also used as a device to focus and prioritise. Unlike Harrow, Tower Hamlets was offered initiatives, projects and money on a daily basis. These came from the government itself or one of its agencies but also from charities, the third sector or businesses. Everyone wanted to 'do good'. This was laudable but diverting and saying 'no' became a feature of my work as director.

I was supported in my determination to prioritise by the government's focus on literacy and numeracy which became the overriding priorities for action in Tower Hamlets. We focused available resources to achieve high impact. So, for example, while we still welcomed support from businesses at Canary Wharf into our schools to help with reading, their employees were first trained in the approach we had adopted to improve literacy in the borough. Later, this focus is what prevented the local authority from developing academies. This structural solution for improvement was seen a diversion from a focus on standards and the development of good teaching and learning.

At that time, 1997/8, we needed to raise everyone's expectations, including those of officials at the DfE whom we challenged to set higher targets for Tower Hamlets than the ones they had proposed. There was an emphasis on increasing aspirations and seeking constantly to improve outcomes further even when targets were attained. The concept of demanding targets, part of the drive to embed a culture of achievement, was a real 'push' factor for schools. Honourable failure, falling short of demanding target, was seen as much more acceptable than the achievement of mediocre ones. This was reflected in one of Ofsted's findings many years later in the last of their Annual Performance Assessments:

'The council is highly ambitious for its children and young people. The determination to overcome considerable social and economic barriers, improve outcomes and reduce inequalities is shared by all with considerable success.'
(Ofsted, 2008)

This focus on ambitious outcomes also meant that local councillors were able to champion the high aspirations that they already held but had been unable to translate into practice. Although there was a huge amount of regeneration activity in Tower Hamlets, at that time, councillors started to see education as their strongest regeneration strategy for the borough. By 2000, when Ofsted made their first return visit to the borough after their damning report in 1998, they found that education had become the council's top priority and elected members had a clear understanding of the main issues needing to be addressed.

Above all, the setting of borough targets was the starting point for turning ambitions into outcomes. Back in 1997, Tower Hamlets had a small but outstanding Research and Statistics team which was universally respected by schools. When I first arrived in Tower Hamlets the team was particularly adept at showing how well we were doing compared to similar areas. They managed to do this even when we were 149th out of 149 local authorities! While I was happy to use the contextual argument with the DfE, and even other LAs, internally my mantra was no young person would ever get a job or a college place using their value added scores. They needed real results.

In the context of ambitious borough targets, the Research and Statistics team provided high quality data, benchmarked locally and nationally, accompanied with expert analysis about each school. This was followed up in various ways to create a sense of urgency. Each school was expected to translate the school-level data into target-setting for individual pupils with personalised programmes of learning. I was adamant that there could be no acceptance of what I called 'the cohort argument', i.e. 'Our results will be poorer this year as we have a weaker year group'. If the cohort was weaker, the question had to be 'What's the nature of the extra help needed by the students to make progress and achieve?' Most headteachers engaged well with this approach. This emphasis on ever-improving data analysis, ambitious target setting and increasing challenge to each school has continued throughout the past decade. The results show that schools have risen to these challenges.

In line with the 'push' aspects of 'resolute leadership', the local authority also

showed its determination to tackle weak leadership performance. When Ofsted inspected in 1998, there were far too many schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses (the Ofsted 'inadequate' categories at that time). That position had improved dramatically when Ofsted returned to inspect in 2000. Over the years, decisive action has been taken where the weaknesses of specific head teachers or governing bodies were not being addressed. The data show that, out of 48 schools in Tower Hamlets causing concern or in Ofsted categories between 1998 and 2012, 42 of the headteachers were replaced.

Allegiance

However clear and determined, 'resolute leadership' alone would not have been able to bring about sustainable improvement. That required also an allegiance to common purpose, to the community in Tower Hamlets, most particularly, to the children and young people served, and to colleagues. Moral purpose was strong in Tower Hamlets and sharpened and clarified by ambition and focus and, in particular, through the production of an Education Strategic Plan. This reflected a powerful commitment to raising educational performance in Tower Hamlets and closing the gaps between different groups.

Tower Hamlets has always had a powerful sense of place and community and this was used in active support of the actions taking place. A number of groups were long established and operated as different communities of interest. For instance, headteachers had long shared a sense of belonging to a supportive professional community. They met regularly, supported each other in a range of ways and were

united against the authority. A letter of congratulations and welcome arrived within days of my appointment as director. Having been a headteacher took me to first base more quickly than if I had spent my entire working life as an officer. However, that alone would not have been enough to sustain a relationship with them. We needed to work out our respective roles and responsibilities. Even as far back as 1997, it would have been an illusion to believe a director of education had any leadership role with schools as of right. It had to be earned by close collaboration with headteacher colleagues and through a range of activities and experiences which added value to the work of the schools themselves.

A whole host of other groups, many linked closely to different parts of the community, existed, some more active than others. The production of an Education Strategic Plan created a common sense of purpose and shared direction. It required active engagement by all partners and pulled people together. The debate wasn't just about priorities but about the objectives, actions and targets related to those priorities and that required argument before consensus emerged. Once the Education Strategic Plan was finalised, it provided the foundation for good planning and review and, most important, a clear focus for action by all the education stakeholders. It mobilised local capacity, energy and commitment. A sense of urgency was maintained by regular progress checks, involving key partners, and an annual review was shared widely with the community. The Plan was revised each year.

Considerable attention was given to building relationships and to developing

active partnerships, principally with school leaders but also with governors as a collective, with parents and with third sector groups. For example, we worked with the East London Mosque to improve the attendance of Bangladeshi pupils. Business too was involved, mainly through the Education Business Partnership which initiated a number of school/business relationships that were mutually beneficial. Partnership working engendered shared responsibility and accountability.

At the same time, every opportunity was taken to celebrate and communicate success. This might be of individual students or teachers, individual schools or the system as a whole. This recognised progress and built confidence and pride in what was being achieved.

Professional power

System-wide improvement is fuelled by professional power –in particular, by knowledge, understanding and skill in teaching and learning. Professional power combines aspects of the 'push' and 'pull' concepts underpinning the previous two elements.

As indicated earlier, literacy and numeracy were major early priorities and part of the national and local 'push'. The new government strategies were used to good effect and they had a massive impact. Tower Hamlets rolled out the strategies more rapidly than elsewhere by funding more literacy and numeracy advisers to work in schools to embed programmes. Schools appreciated the coherence and consistency of the strategies. These supported schools with a well-designed training programme and ready-to-use

materials. They gave teachers the tools to teach and those children who had come to English as an additional language not only enjoyed the programmes but found their structure and discipline helpful. Children in primary schools in Tower Hamlets began to make huge progress, particularly in literacy, and it was this, I believe that has laid the foundation for the success of later years.

One of the on-going challenges was the recruitment and retention of skilled teachers, and this was supported through the encouragement of local people into teaching. The borough had experienced great difficulty with attracting and retaining teaching staff in the mid-1990s; the improvement of educational outcomes depended upon reversing this position. We were fortunate to be able to offer access to housing for teachers. We also exploited work-based routes into teaching and increased the stability of school staffing through contracts that tied teachers to the borough for a set period.

An important strand of professional power was the action to address weaknesses where they existed in schools; in particular, there was a need to improve leadership skills and to raise standards of teaching and learning. The most important initiative was the provision of a high quality professional development programme, developed by heads themselves with the support of the local authority, to help deliver the actions set out in the Education Strategic Plan. The programme proved a real 'pull' for staff in Tower Hamlets schools. It offered a full range of courses for head teachers, those in middle management roles, classroom teachers and newly qualified teachers, but also individual support such as individual coaching and mentoring. A Masters course

was set up in partnership with a local university and the borough ran an extensive Advanced Skills Teacher programme. Indeed, professional development was so high a priority that Tower Hamlets continued to maintain its Professional Development Centre even though this was a period when other authorities were closing theirs down.

Improvements in teaching and learning also resulted from changes to the borough's Advisory Services, which were radically restructured to provide a balance between strategies for supporting schools and intervention when necessary. Previously, these had carried out inspections on behalf of Ofsted, some in Tower Hamlets itself. This had caused considerable tension between the local authority and schools who saw the Advisory Service as an arm of Ofsted. We were determined that there should be a clear separation between the roles of inspection and support. To achieve this change, a programme of regular visits to monitor and review practice was instituted. Over time, officers and advisers came to have a good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the borough's schools and, as a result, were not only able to challenge them further but came to be valued by the schools for the advice and guidance provided. This encapsulated a good balance between 'push' and 'pull' and did much to develop a strong partnership between schools and the authority.

It was also important to share good practice between schools and to ensure that everyone knew what this looked like. The local authority seconded a number of headteachers to lead this initiative, some of whom then went on to become advisers or officers. Over time, this work resulted in a more collaborative spirit between schools.

It also resulted in the provision of support from higher performing schools for those which were struggling.

Although collaboration in the borough was strong, competition was never far from the surface and proved a stimulus to improvement. In a small London borough, competition between schools in such close geographical proximity was strong. This healthy competitive spirit helped schools learn from each other and aspire to do better still. This represented schools 'pushing' one another to achieve.

Some of the issues in Tower Hamlets were difficult to fix. The culture that developed – and the money that was available – allowed risks to be taken to innovate so that change might be accelerated. Some, such as the initiative mentioned above to improve school attendance with the East London Mosque, worked but others did not. However, the positive professional culture that developed, allowed this sort of failure to happen without blame.

When Ofsted returned to Tower Hamlets just two years after their grim findings in 1998, they commented on the rigorous progress that had been made and the large number of initiatives that had been introduced to address school development priorities, especially the emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Teaching and learning were improving and leadership of schools was stronger. Ofsted (2000) commented that standards were beginning to rise; fewer schools were causing concern; and headteachers and governors had expressed their confidence in the leadership of the local authority. In subsequent assessments by Ofsted, the positive picture continued; for example, by 2005 when the number of

schools in a category of concern had been reduced from 40 in 1995 to three at the end of 2004, Ofsted highlighted Tower Hamlets' robust systems of monitoring, intervention and support in proportion to identified needs and the improved leadership of the borough's schools.

Linked to the improving standards in schools and the positive reports about what was happening in the borough, its external image was changing. Tower Hamlets could be promoted as a first-class place to teach and teachers were increasingly attracted by it. Staff in the borough had a sense of achievement and could take pride in working in its schools. This created a virtuous circle of confident teachers, improved teaching and learning in the classroom, and better outcomes for pupils.

Sustainability

Achievement in Tower Hamlets has continued to be strong. This progress relates not only to the overall outcomes for pupils in the borough but also to the gaps between the attainment of different groups of pupils. In 2013, Leunig and Wyness carried out an analysis of school attainment that took into account factors such as affluence and ethnicity. According to this report, Tower Hamlets was the best performing authority in the country. In the same year, Ofsted (2013) also found that the gap between the attainment at Key Stage 2 of pupils on free school meals and the rest of the school population was the smallest in Tower Hamlets of any authorities nationally. At GCSE, students from low income families were above the national levels, an achievement only found in two other authorities.

Ambition and confidence about performance are well embedded in Tower Hamlets. There is a 'no excuses' mind-set. Schools have recruited well with many young and idealistic teachers being attracted by the borough's reputation for success as well as its strong sense of moral purpose and community. It continues to have a particularly effective and, indeed, inspiring set of headteachers who value and resource professional learning. The community is proud of its schools and eager to support them; Tower Hamlets has more people wanting to be governors than there are places.

Nevertheless, there is a fragility to sustaining improvement in urban settings that means it demands constant attention. In an area like Tower Hamlets, continuous improvement can never be taken for granted.

How does this case study relate to the role of local authorities in school improvement in 2015?

There is no single strategic response from local authorities to a more autonomous school system but they should all have a role to play in shaping and raising aspirations for learning and education locally.

All successful system reform in education continues to be a mix of 'push' and 'pull' actions and these need to be worked out locally. The core purpose remains a moral one of raising the aspirations, the achievements and the life chances of young people leaving our schools and colleges.

The four characteristics of successful reform described in the Tower Hamlets case study

remain as important in a more autonomous system as they were in 1997:

- resolute leadership
- allegiance
- professional power
- sustainability.

Councillors know that education is important to local communities, in particular to parents at local schools and prospective parents. They know too that education can be a powerful force for regenerating and sustaining the life of the local area. So, regardless of the make-up of schools in their local area, most councillors want to play a role as community leader in raising expectations, aspirations and educational achievement. Their democratic base continues to give local authorities this leverage.

Acting as champions for children in their area, local authorities can demonstrate 'resolute leadership' by articulating a local and ambitious vision for education. For this to be widely owned and understood, there must be 'allegiance' to this vision. The 'pull' of allegiance can be stimulated by the creation of a local vision and plan for improvement that is kept alive and under regular review. This sort of attraction or 'pull' usually comes about from a process that engages people locally about the issues and energises them in the delivery of a plan. Such community capital remains an important support for change.

As guardians of children and young people in their area, the local authority can also 'push' for their interests and needs and indeed, those of their parents, by reporting publicly on local quality and provision. This can also serve as an encouragement

to schools, in particular academies, to demonstrate proper accountability to parents and other key stakeholders. Local authorities remain, of course, corporate parents for those children in public care.

The local authority's knowledge of how the needs and interests of children and young people in the area are being served has to rest on a secure data base. This will largely rest on quantitative data but might also pick up softer knowledge such as feedback from councillors' surgeries. Councils therefore need to retain a slim resource to scrutinise and capture local knowledge and intelligence about all schools, including academies in the locality. Children in academies are, after all, still local children. So, knowing how the local authority is performing remains fundamental and can be used to generate focus and urgency.

It is the quality of this scrutiny and analysis that will largely determine the effectiveness of each local authority's 'resolute leadership'. If done well, it can pick up early warnings of emerging issues and can trigger action to generate action to improve. It will determine too the impact local authority reports about local provision will have, for example, on local schools, academy trusts and even on the Secretary of State.

Of the four characteristics of change identified in the Tower Hamlets case study, it is 'professional power' which has seen the biggest shift over the last few years. Increasingly, this is located with schools themselves as the primary drivers of systemic improvement within a self-improving system. It can no longer be assumed that local authorities are the providers, nor, indeed, the commissioners or

brokers for school improvement services. It is my view that this, in any case, conflicts, or at least distracts, from their role as guardians and champions. This role needs a very clear and sharp focus.

In these early days of getting a self-improving system up and running, local authorities have a role in supporting school-led partnerships. This might entail supporting teaching school alliances, federations and academy chains, collectives of schools, and other less formal alliances and networks. Local authorities should certainly be using and commissioning these groups to exert the professional power they once held centrally. If these school-led partnerships are not strong locally, local authorities have a role in stimulating their development and brokering connections.

The success of London schools shows that both excellence and equity are possible in an urban setting. It demonstrates that poverty does not have to be a determinant of achievement. Individual schools can make a powerful difference but so can local authorities as they develop strategies and build partnerships that can accelerate change.

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How the local authority turned around performance in local schools

by Paul Robinson

“It was a typical late afternoon meeting with Pam, the head, and Geoffrey, the chairman of governors, of a primary school, the council’s assistant director for standards and schools and the director of childrens’ services – much like those held with all schools from time to time. It was scheduled as always to last 60 minutes under Chatham House rules. The briefing paper I received prior to the meeting was thorough. Attainment and progress by Key Stage broken down amongst others by ethnic group, free school meals and gender, with comparisons to borough average and national results, progress since the last Ofsted inspection and intelligence on SEN, attendance, exclusions, leadership and management, staff sickness levels and turnover provided plenty of contextual information. Pam, who was in her third year as a head, had been talent spotted as a deputy when working at another Wandsworth school. Her previous head – an excellent role model, had nurtured and supported her development – promoting her involvement in both borough and national leadership opportunities. She had needed a little encouragement to apply for headship but was now thoroughly enjoying the role. The council’s “schools’ health check” indicated she was doing well, so well in fact that she had already been approached about mentoring another head appointed from outside the borough. Pam began by running through each class – teaching in

three classes was outstanding though one of the teachers would be leaving at the end of the summer term to take up an assistant head position elsewhere in the borough. Pam believed the vacancy created would provide an excellent position for an NQT. The quality of teachers emerging from Roehampton University in the borough, an important source of potential recruits, was first class and the council, schools and university had invested a lot in deepening relationships and clarifying expectations from each other.

Support from a nearby outstanding nursery school had helped transform provision in the early years and one of the reception teachers, who had initially lacked confidence when joining the staff, was now thriving. One teacher in Year 5 continued to need a significant amount of input – his lessons tended to be dull and uninspiring and we agreed that a member of the department’s Performance and Standards team would provide some additional support. Literacy attainment had improved by 4 per cent on the previous year. Here the focus on writing and with individual targets for each pupil had paid dividends. In maths, however, performance had stagnated. Pam agreed that maths was likely to be a priority for the coming year. Geoffrey, the chairman of governors, nodded. It was not always like this. In some meetings, aspects of the head’s narrative appeared to come as a

surprise to the chairman of governors. Pam confirmed that the rest of the teaching was good, that all staff knew what outstanding teaching and learning looked like and spoke of the productive visits to some other outstanding primary schools in the borough. The chairman of governors talked about his fellow governors. Everybody, he said, rolled up their sleeves – if they didn't, they were quietly spoken to. Pam said she felt both challenged and supported by the governing body. In terms of succession planning Pam indicated she wanted to stay for at least two more years before looking for a larger school, preferably within the borough. Pam's and the council's judgement were that her deputy, though only having two years experience in the role, would with the right support make a very good candidate for headship, something borne out by her work alongside a newly appointed deputy in Battersea. The chairman of governors said he was happy to remain as chair for another 12 months but knew his vice chairman was willing and able to step up. We agreed that Governor Services would get in touch about supporting the transition. Geoffrey and Pam talked excitedly about their appearance before the council's Education and Standards Sub Committee following their last Ofsted inspection. Challenging yet fair questions had been posed which had helped engender a sense of joint corporate endeavour in raising standards between the school and the council. Pam said that the subsequent visit by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and her team had raised the morale of the whole school. The councillors' knowledge of the school and community was extensive and had resulted in some new links with a local independent school. Finally we asked about the school's relationship with the council. A tricky personnel issue was raised, as was the implications of a new housing development

on pupil numbers. Each point was noted and it was agreed that these would be followed up outside the meeting. The 60 minutes was up, the meeting finished. I accompanied Pan and Geoffrey downstairs. We would meet next with Pam and Geoffrey respectively at the Primary Heads' termly session with the DCS and at the Chairman of Governors' briefing meeting with the Cabinet Member."

In the more than 20 years that I have worked, first as Director of Education and then as Director of Children's Services for the London Borough of Wandsworth, there have been nine Secretaries of State for Education, five Permanent Secretaries at the DfE, six Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors and more heads in the borough than I can readily enumerate. During this time, despite five general elections, the political complexion of national government changed only twice in 1997 and 2010, though the direction of education reform many more times. A majority Conservative council was a constant in Wandsworth and I worked for only two council leaders and three chairmen of the Education Committee/ Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services. I chaired the Association of London Chief Education Officers for many years, including the period of London Challenge. I know what contributed to the educational success in Wandsworth and am confident that similar factors in other boroughs accounted for the remarkable transformation of education across the whole of London. The extract prefacing this article is just an example, one of many, of the use of various mechanisms for engaging with heads and chairmen of governors in the debate about school improvement and illustrates the factors which I believe are the basis for the rate of educational progress in the

borough. I argue first that there needs to be a willingness and capacity to learn from elsewhere – from other schools, other parts of London and broader afield and this was present in Wandsworth and across London. Second, there existed a relentless determination to appoint and nurture good and outstanding teachers and leaders. Third, that a pride in the locality articulated through political expectations of school and pupil achievement with some practical systems for asserting influence was present in Wandsworth. Fourth, making the provision and use of first class school and pupil data a priority. Fifth, getting right the relationship between school autonomy and responsibility for the wider education community and system. Sixth, knowing schools well is vital, clearly articulating the highest expectations and acting early to ensure the improvement trajectory remains upward together with promoting confidence in the calibre of those responsible for school improvement all contributed. In Wandsworth the quality of relationships and communication allowed the focus to be maintained on those issues that impacted on outcomes for children and young people.

Wandsworth is a borough with 24 per cent of children on free school meals and 46 per cent coming from families where English is not the first language. GCSE results have risen from 38 per cent of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades including English and Maths in 2004 to over 61 per cent in 2014. Progress and achievement in the primary phase was equally good. Over the same time period, the proportion of schools judged good and outstanding by Ofsted has risen from less than 70 per cent to just under 95 per cent - the second highest proportion in the country. The rate of improvement

in the previous decade had been similarly impressive. However, Wandsworth is not alone among London borough to achieve such positive change, so what happened?

In London where natural rivalry and striving to be the best, all reasonably commendable drives, characterised much of the relationship between councils and between schools, it always seemed logical to balance competition with collaboration and mutual support. Achieving success at the expense of others by, for example, cynically poaching good people from neighbours, though tempting was not the answer. Sustained and long lasting improvements in Wandsworth schools and consistently good outcomes for Wandsworth pupils we argued was more likely to be achieved on the foundation of London-wide success. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, though a hackneyed refrain, accurately captures one of the reasons behind London's education success story. Collaboration on a pan-London scale was by the early 2000s more than just a pipe dream. The London Grid for Learning Trust a broadband and related services procurement vehicle including curriculum content principally for the school sector was successful and thriving and supporting close to 100 per cent of schools. The newly created pan-London co-ordination of secondary admissions system provided a more efficient and fairer mechanism for managing the primary/secondary transfer process. Both initiatives were rightly promoted by Wandsworth with the universal support of all London councils. School improvement also increasingly featured as part of sub regional co-operation. Opening up to others the exceptional talent of individual leaders and schools and learning from them though not as easy as

it sounds became an emerging strand of pan-London work – one given significant impetus by London Challenge. To claim that this government sponsored initiative to mobilise London-wide capacity to improve schools and outcomes for children and young people was embraced by councils and schools is an understatement. During my career at least, London Challenge represented one of those few moments when the alignment of the aims of national and local government and schools was followed by agreement to the best means for achieving them with realistic implementation strategies. The London Challenge story can be left to another time but there is no doubt that it made not merely important but arguably a unique contribution to school improvement.

Once you come to terms with the unfortunate fact that fundamentally influencing parental behaviour, one of the most powerful determinates in the development and success of children and young people in any large scale, systematic and meaningful way is not a realistic option, it is not surprising that schools and children's centres are viewed as the main vehicle for achieving improvement. They are, after all, vehicles over which, in theory, national government and local authorities have some influence – certainly more control than over parents. Where serious impediments to learning lie in families and the external environment these can be tackled when resources permit, through for example, the Troubled Families programme, but the reality is that the funding for such programmes, even though often effective, waxes and wanes.

In Wandsworth the formula for securing high standards in schools and in so

doing raising attainment was seen as a straightforward one. The council wanted all classrooms in every school in Wandsworth populated with outstanding teachers. Given the challenge of this ambition a more modest aspiration was to appoint outstanding leaders to head up every school in the borough. Creating favourable conditions designed to enhance the chances of realising such a state of affairs required a particular political and professional approach being adopted by the council. It combined a clear vision based on high aspirations with a painstaking and methodical attention to the detail of school leadership and pedagogy. A crucial aspect of that vision was support for vulnerable children. There was and still is a moral imperative to protect and promote those who need support the most. The council was rightly proud, for example, of its capital investment in special school and resource centre provision and arrangements for securing places for SEN pupils and those excluded or recently arriving in the borough. The education community and council were united in a willingness to be judged by the way the disaffected, awkward and vulnerable were catered for. Mobilising others to support this work, whether they be national government, diocesan authorities or latterly teaching schools and academy chains, was simply another piece of the jigsaw.

The days when Wandsworth led the campaign to abolish the Inner London Education Authority and repatriate education responsibilities to the London boroughs is now a distant memory. It is however a reminder of the passion and determination local politicians exercised in promoting the "place" they serve. The positive impact councillors – both

the executive and ward members had on schooling in Wandsworth should not be underestimated. The proceedings of the council's Education and Standards Committee, a cross party group of councillors that engaged heads and chairmen of governors in robust, professional debate about Ofsted inspections of their schools and of themed reviews, is a testament to the way genuine detailed scrutiny can act as a spur and incentive to raise standards.

The Free Schools and Academies Commission which came later, with a similar profile of councillors but with an independent chair and representation from schools and governing bodies, was equally effective as a quality assurance body. It ensured that there was never any doubt about the council's expectations of potential sponsors and promoters of schools. Originally conceived as a means for providing local influence on and structure for what was now becoming a more fluid and fragmented free market approach to the creation and governance of schools and designed to complement the thorough, yet distant, Whitehall approach to choosing academy sponsors quickly became an indispensable body for vetting, supporting and encouraging new and existing providers.

New Academy chains could potentially add colour, ideas and innovation to what was already a successful, diverse and vibrant school system. The council through the commission was in a position to separate the "wheat from the chaff" – to assess strengths and offer help and advice where it was needed. Wandsworth was not alone in having high calibre elected politicians with a forensic knowledge of their community and local schools who could tread that

delicate line between displaying national party political loyalty and exercising independence of mind based on what the evidence locally demonstrated. However, I sometimes wondered whether national governments truly understood the way the tireless dedication of councillors to the cause of standards in schools contributed to what was over two decades a transformation in pupil achievement in the capital.

While the Wandsworth education story would never be complete without appreciating the political dimension and localism, the platform upon which heads, governors, councillors and council officers relied to push forward school improvement was supplied by data, information and intelligence. It is stating the obvious but data and a confident grasp of how to use it, including a comprehension of what it means by those at every level in the system, including heads, teachers, governors and elected politicians was the engine that drove the steady rise in pupil achievement, not just in Wandsworth but across the capital. Outstanding and good leaders and teachers knew not only what outstanding practice looked like but they also knew in fine detail what the data told them about pupil performance – the progress pupils were making and what they should be achieving.

As the extract at the beginning of this article illustrates, data provided a common language, the evidence that sharpened accountability and the everyday tool for shaping teaching and learning. At the heart of Wandsworth's Education and Children's Services Department sat the Research and Evaluation Unit which gathered and analysed pupil and school

performance data and commissioned research. While the sophisticated way such information could be compiled and interrogated, for example by ethnic groups, with comparisons with other schools, other areas and over time, was a prerequisite for any local authority or school wishing to make advances in pupil achievement, it was not enough.

Even in the 1990s heads and classroom teachers in Wandsworth were growing in confidence in using and internalising this data in their everyday planning and in all their work with pupils. A capacity at the grass roots to assess the success of teaching and learning and to engage in courageous and honest conversations with fellow teachers and heads about what needed to change was an essential aspect of the improvement agenda in the borough.

This was something that Directors of Education in London as a group (and later Director of Children's Services as a group) and the DfE London Challenge Team, including the London schools commissioner, knew only too well. One of the lasting legacies of the joint enterprise between national and local government epitomised by London Challenge was to embed a data rich culture across schools and local authorities in London.

What leaders in London were also quick to appreciate was that this work is never finished. Talented, knowledgeable staff move on and it is a mistake to assume that simply by a form of osmosis, competency in using performance data will transfer to the next generation of heads and teachers. Continual professional development, vigilance within the system – a capacity to spot where support is needed and

generating a culture where it is alright to admit to gaps in knowledge and expertise and to ask for advice especially in building the use of data into classroom practice was a lesson councils and schools in London learnt the hard way.

One of the most misunderstood and misused concepts rolled out to justify education reform is school autonomy and freedom. There was never any doubt in Wandsworth that schools increasingly led by good and outstanding heads with conscientious and committed governing bodies should enjoy the confidence of the council in exercising their leadership. Headship is a responsible role. Leaders who have served their apprenticeship should be trusted to run their school as they see fit – even when things go wrong – which they do from time to time.

Wandsworth's view was simply innovate or plagiarise – what counts is whatever works for children and young people. There are, however, important caveats. First, in an urban area like Wandsworth schools are in a symbiotic relationship with each other – proximity dictates that it be so. The actions of one school can impact on neighbouring ones and on their pupils. The sense of a community of schools where heads, while inevitably focussing on their own institutions, would look outwards and consider the wider system – taking ownership for the outcomes of all children in the area was a feature of the Wandsworth way. This was an ideal difficult to always reflect in practice but one everyone strived to achieve.

Second, schools and leaders experience a cycle of maturity and development. In Wandsworth everyone was aware that new,

less experienced heads may welcome a helping hand from time to time. A strong school with a stable staff might expect to be asked to second a key member of staff to work in a school where turnover was high or where progress was being threatened. Pupils, whatever school they attended, were the ultimate responsibility of all system leaders – all heads. School on school support, usually brokered by the council in one of its key roles, became commonplace.

Third, the unwritten imperative was for the council to know all the schools in its locality well. For maintained schools it was essential but even for academies it seemed an abdication of duty not to understand what was going on even if national government policy appeared to place unnecessary obstacles in your way.

Such intelligence at least gave the council a chance together with the governors and leaders within a school to anticipate difficulties and nip them in the bud before becoming genuine crises which could impact directly on pupils' performance. This capacity for early warning was a cost effective and highly efficient way to support school improvement.

As resources became squeezed the priority inevitably became schools causing concern and requiring improvement or where standards were at risk of drifting. Good and outstanding schools however also had room to improve and the challenge was to support schools including teaching schools develop the capacity to help each other. Creating the capacity to provide effective school on school support is far more challenging than policy makers are prepared to admit and the approach in

Wandsworth was for the council to remain involved without generating dependency.

In Wandsworth, though, the role of the national regulator, Ofsted, was fully supported, elected councillors were clear that because of the time between the cycle of inspections, Ofsted's lack of soft intelligence and its relative remoteness only the council was able to exercise this function effectively. Such local know how and closeness to schools also helps explain Wandsworth's success.

Complementing this knowledge of schools was a commitment to maintaining a multilayered approach to talent spotting, a process for nurturing school leaders and maintaining differentiated support strategies for staff at all levels. The existence of a strong Wandsworth Standing Conference of Headteachers (primary and special) and strong special and secondary heads' forums contributed to the businesslike and outcome-focused meetings with headteachers on a borough and cluster basis. Such an approach was also mirrored in sessions with diocesan authorities and head and teacher unions.

A visit to Tianjin (China) in 2008 with a group of headteachers provided first hand evidence of a system where society's value of education manifested itself not only in parental attitudes but also in the investment of significant sums in professional development and systems for identifying and sharing best teaching and leadership practice at a local level. If endorsement was needed of the priority given by Wandsworth and other London councils to professional development albeit on a fraction of the resource, then this was it.

This third point neatly leads on to another key factor to consider. An understanding of the success of councils like Wandsworth would not be complete without referring to the calibre of the School Improvement and other professional officers. Good people are like gold dust and they made an enormous contribution to the educational success story in the borough. Gradually transforming the learning environment of schools through the investment of capital creatively secured including through an active estate management process and efficient procurement was based on political will, corporate commitment, supportive DfE officials and able education and children's services officers. Winning the trust and confidence of school leaders and governors – especially by those who will be challenged, coached even mentored by such officers was important. Stability in personnel, sufficient to generate mutual respect was rather critical in Wandsworth as was attending to relationships between heads, governors, councillors and council officers. Healthy and vibrant organisations and systems need first class communication, whether conveyed in person, over the phone or in writing (and e-mails need a lot of thought).

Wandsworth Council and the community of schools understood the importance of relationships and communication and how to conduct necessary, frank, yet professional, dialogue. Those who have worked in the borough know that while it is not paternalistic, the council did and does care about the individuals who lead and work in schools. There are, of course, leaders and managers who never succeeded in the borough's schools and left –which was right for them and their schools but the underlying belief was to help and support

people to become the best they could be. This was genuine and it mattered to the school community.

Finally, a short article cannot explore the place of innovation and risk taking in terms of school leadership. Suffice it to say that engendering a culture where colour and creativity were actively encouraged, whether for example through borough-wide choral events, the development of bilingual schools or dual headships, the latter incidentally proving an effective succession planning and preparation tool, or looking at what works elsewhere in this country and abroad, tempered by a down to earth pragmatism, were all part of the Wandsworth mix.

I cannot end without referring to that rather unpredictable companion – luck. Appointing an outstanding head when there are only three candidates, persuading a governing body to agree to seconding their head when the omens were not originally favourable, experiencing an increasing proportion of applications to Wandsworth schools from highly motivated middle class families as results and Ofsted inspection judgements improved, or the arrival of London Challenge just at the moment when the conditions were right for London councils to take full advantage of what the initiative had to offer, all relied as much on good fortune as planning and skill.

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Paul is currently Chairman of the London Grid for Learning Trust Company, a regional broadband consortium for providing ICT services to education. He is a past Chairman of the Association of London Chief Education Officers (including prior and during the time of London Challenge), a position from which he helped to establish both the Association of London Directors of Children's Services and its national counterpart the Association of Directors of Children's Services. He has been a member, amongst other things, of the London Safeguarding Children's Board, London SEN and Children in Care Commissioning Board, Health Education South London and an advisor to the London Councils. He is Governor of South Thames FE College.

During his career he has joined Ministerial Advisory Committees, contributed to major reviews and research projects and been a member of numerous national working groups.

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Re-imagining the role of councils in supporting London's schools

by Barry Quirk

The needs of London's children in the 21st century

A 10 year-old at school in Balham or Barking today will be starting their new secondary school this September. They will most probably enter the world of work in the early 2020s; and they will most likely be starting their own family sometime in the early 2030s. The success they will achieve at their new secondary school will be a vital part of this critically important phase of their life. It is the beginning of their transition into adulthood; it is when they start to discover their wider potential in life. And it will be so much more difficult for them to craft their own path if their schooling fails them. In this way, all of London's schools offer positive paths for life; they are not simply places to learn how to pass exams.

Children start at school full of wonder and curiosity about the world. They approach every issue with a "why?" The purpose of schooling is to fuel this drive for learning through the disciplined pursuit of knowledge and the imaginative desire for creative self expression. The ability continually to discover new truths and creatively express one's views are the core purposes of a rounded education.

And this ability is strengthened by the transformative character of 21st century education.

Education is important substantively in its own right; and it is important in the instrumental power it gives young people to realise their full potential in the world of work but also in their own personal growth and development. These substantive and instrumental roles of education leads to many arguments amongst people who are passionate about the sector. Some worry about the growing "vocationalism" in education and feel that young people are schooled too early into the world of work. They need to worry less. Education has always fulfilled both roles. A good education serves to open minds and not to close them. It supports an independence of perspective and hence encourages the development not only of valuable work but also of critical debate and of the engaged and critical citizenry that London needs.

What's more the character of learning is changing. Open sourced learning and peer networks of learning support are not restricted to the university sector. Schools in London are at the forefront of innovation in teaching and learning. Some of the leading edge pedagogic practice in the

world can be found in London's schools - with tens of thousands of highly engaged classroom teachers motivated and inspired by thousands of excellent headteachers. But the world of learning is changing fast.

This was brought home to me recently at a discussion in Catford with 40 or so pupils representing the various schools councils in Lewisham. They were discussing with me the age when young people should have the right to vote. One young 14 year-old boy said to me, "Sir, because of the Internet we have more knowledge at our finger tips than you ever did at our age, so our chances of discovering the truth of things or of being successful must be greater than yours was at our age". This was a healthy (if sobering) reminder of the changes sweeping through the character of education and learning. My response to the young boy was to say that his task was substantially harder than mine was at his age. For his problem was that he had so much information he could call upon, that he needed to develop high order skills so as to filter out the truths from the untruths. He said that it was right that a lot of what passed for knowledge on the Internet didn't merit knowing but that the tools at his disposal were incredible compared to previous generations.

London's schools do well, they need to do much better

In the 21st century young people can increasingly pursue their own line of enquiry through self directed learning. But they also need the discipline of learning at school. Obviously we want to witness the individual and personalised flourishing of each and every pupil in all of London's schools. The ideal for each pupil is that their school experience will add to their

personal growth and creative potential. Our means of appraising pupils' experience of school often gets trapped in simple statistical tables of aggregate school performance. These tables (that aggregate pupil level performance at school level) are useful in showing an overall direction of collective success. And what they show, over the recent past, is that pupils in London's schools are performing better than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. Many have claimed part of the credit for this comparative success. In truth a mix of complementary factors is likely to be behind the facts.

London is the most socially diverse and highly populated place in the UK. London is also a destination for ambitious parents, teachers and headteachers. London has the most successful economy in the UK and it therefore attracts talent and investment more generally. London is a crucible of innovative practice in teaching and learning - encouraged by the university sector and by schools themselves. London has some of the country's most accomplished headteachers, who bring the vocation of educational leadership to impact upon the wider school communities. And finally, London's councils have a highly progressive approach to supporting their schools improve their performance.

The combined effect of these (and other) factors is that London's schools do comparatively well. London's primary schools are doing exceptionally well in equipping young pupils with a baseline of education and skills. And London's secondary schools are doing comparatively well. That is a substantial achievement. Those who have played a part in this success should be proud - but not for long,

perhaps for about fifteen minutes. That's because this achievement is in truth not anywhere near good enough. They need to redouble their efforts and try to achieve substantially more.

When I was a teenager in the 1960s at school in Stepney, in East London, my headteacher addressed us in one of our school assemblies in the following way. "Look to the boy or the girl on your left. Now look to the girl or boy on your right. Only one of the three of you will succeed. So work as hard as you can at school to make sure that you are the one that succeeds!" That's what passed for scholarly inspiration in my school in the 1960s. The fact is, he was wrong. London's population declined over the next 20 years. People moved out of London; including many of my fellow pupils. This meant that the majority of us who remained in London did fairly well in London's labour market. To put it at its simplest, it could be said that those who were successful over this period achieved that success against a background of comparatively weak competition. Not so now. The equivalent teenagers sitting in assemblies in Stepney today are going to live through a period of rising population. People are moving into London. London is a global mega-city that will shortly be home to over 10 million people. This means that these pupils are not competing with the girls or boys in their class but girls or boys from across the UK or more widely from across the world.

And this is why London's schools need to redouble their efforts so that their pupils continue to do substantially better over the coming ten years. Just look at the Central and Inner London labour market. This is where the majority of Londoners work. Not

all of course, but most. Over two-thirds of the jobs on offer in the Central and Inner London labour market are graduate level jobs. Well, how many of the 10 year-old pupils attending the schools in these central and inner London boroughs will, on present trends, go on to get degrees? Not two-thirds, that's for sure. And that's London's problem - the aggregated pupil achievement at secondary school is falling short of the requirement of the sorts of jobs on offer for those pupils. That's not to say that all jobs are graduate level jobs. Many hundreds of thousands of workers across London perform fulfilling and valuable roles in the transport, logistics, service and retail sectors. After all, London's bus drivers need a solid basis of education and arguably the role they perform across the capital is more crucial (or at least just as crucial) than the daily role performed by equity analysts in the financial services sector.

Of course the ratio of graduate level jobs in London just tell some of the story (albeit two-thirds). There are very many job roles for non-graduates. However, the other one-third of the jobs available are subject to intense competition from that proportion of the resident workforce who do not have a graduate level education. Many of these roles provide good quality training and development - and opportunities exist. But even here there is tough competition for these roles. For example, how many of London's restaurants are fully staffed by under-employed young graduates, from around the globe, who crowd out others from this particular sector?

These factors are behind the attempts of many councils to build easier paths for young people into work - particularly those who for whatever reason are excluded

from the conventional routes into valuable employment markets. It is one of the reasons why the South London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham are working on a “shared solutions” model of getting young people on the margins of the labour market into semi-skilled work.

To build easier pathways into work demands excellent connections between schools and wider society, and there are many excellent examples across London of schools connecting with wider society in ways that help their pupils succeed. Schools have links with local business, with local civil society, with the higher education sector more generally. But these links are tend to be developed ad hoc and in isolation. Each and every London secondary school needs to have strong roots in its locality. But they also need to devise effective routes for its pupils into the wider world of London’s work, culture and economy. There are several schemes for achieving this but they point to the future role of local authorities.

So what can councils do differently?

What precisely can London’s councils do to support and challenge schools? There are three main ways they can assist. First, they can support them to be independent and autonomous. Second, they can help them strengthen their roots into their immediate locality. Third, through critical challenge they can help them thrive in the growing global mega-city that is London - with its acknowledged global excellence in business, sport, culture, public services and higher education.

The starting point for councils is the recognition of the significant and rising autonomy of the secondary school sector.

In addition to the growth of Academies, all secondary schools rightly operate under conditions of very high autonomy. And it is also recognised that they are doing well because they operate free from arbitrary constraint and because they have control over their own resources - with the commensurate freedom to innovate so as to improve the teaching in their schools. This high level of autonomy is a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future. There is no going back.

What’s more the ring fencing of school budgets during the first phase of public austerity in the UK (2010 - 2015) has meant that schools have been shielded from the worst affects of the fiscal consolidation. Indeed, in very many London boroughs the amount of public resource that is devoted to schools (in the dedicated schools budget) is now greater than is spent on mainstream council services in aggregate. Nonetheless, local councils have an important role to play in supporting local schools for a to arrive at sensible solutions to collective funding problems. For while it is right that headteachers locally (and their governing bodies) decide upon these matters; they require the support of finance and audit professionals to help them strike the right balance in the revenue and capital funding decisions they have to make. Additionally, schools may, over the coming period, increasingly require more formalised “fee for service” deals with councils for the provision of professional support service functions.

But while schools start from a position of relative autonomy, they are not completely autonomous. No public institution, no public service, is completely autonomous and free to act wholly as it sees fit. In the glare of the modern world every agency

is called to give a public account of their actions to someone: a regulator, a funder, the media, Parliament or the public at large. Institutions learn this when blunders occur or when they or their employees make errors of judgment or conduct. It is why they are called to give an account in the court of public opinion, to some regulator or to another level of public governance. The move over the past decade for many of London's schools to become academies may alter the constitutionality of this accountability but it does not alter the need for academies to give an account of their actions to some public fora. This points to the prospect for councils' oversight and scrutiny committees to have a role in the local education sector commensurate with the role they perform in respect of the local health sector.

For each secondary school to be successful it needs to have effective roots in the locality where it is based. In London this is slightly more difficult than is the case elsewhere in the UK. That is because many pupils attend schools other than the one that is closest to their home. This is a function of London's high population density and its excellent public transport network. The parents of the average 10 year-old in London can realistically consider up to 10 or so schools within reasonable travel distance for a teenager. And so pupils at any one secondary school will have attended dozens of different primary schools and may themselves live in several different boroughs. Together these factors mean that the community roots in London are seldom drawn as parochially as they are elsewhere. Of course this varies across the capital with schools on the fringe of London tending to serve larger geographical areas, albeit with pupils derived from fewer primary schools.

Councils have an important role in cementing local links for schools. And not in terms of connections to local councils themselves but in terms of establishing effective links with local civil society, local businesses as well as the local sporting and cultural sectors. It may not be the "local business" that can make the most fruitful connection but the local business woman or man who may run a large business elsewhere in London but who may happen to live locally or have some strong local connection. Every locality has its "alumni" in the same way as every university searches for its successful graduates. Local ambassadors with links to local schools can be matched by activist local councils who are keen to add social and community capital to their schools.

Over the short term, London's councils need to have a close regard to their current responsibilities insofar as these impact upon schools. These include school places planning, special education, various support functions to schools, and a range of key children's social care functions including safeguarding and child protection. Increasingly, these functions are being conducted across borough boundaries as the fiscal pressures on councils bear down upon their abilities to maintain these functional responsibilities on their own. As a result of these "top-down" budgetary pressures it is likely that, over the next five years, new styles of "combined authority" approaches (such as "joint committees" and more integrated approaches) for schooling and learning across three or four London boroughs are likely to come to the fore.

These responses are only in part driven by the changing legal responsibilities councils have for educating their children, which

are developing in a more ad hoc way than ever before. In 1870 the “School Board for London” was set up under the Public Elementary Education Act. According to the archives of the City of London, the School Board, “had great difficulty in carrying out its responsibilities in building sufficient schools to accommodate all London children of the elementary school class and persuading parents to send their children to school. It devoted great attention to school architecture and curriculum, and, once the problems of the early years had been overcome, to developing higher grade elementary education for older children and to assisting underfed and badly clothed children.” After just 30 years, following disputes about the Board’s revenue raising powers, the Education (London) Act of 1903 abolished the School Board for London and transferred its responsibilities to the London County Council (LCC) in 1904. For the next 60 years, the LCC was the principal local authority for London in respect of a range of functions, including education.

Some 60 years later the Herbert Commission’s report (published in 1960) recommended the establishment of the Greater London Council. This commission advocated a London-wide division of educational powers between the GLC and the London boroughs. The GLC would be responsible for strategic control of schools, and the boroughs for routine management. However, this part of the report was rejected by the government of the day. Instead the London Government Act of 1963 created the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) so as to inherit the educational responsibilities of the LCC within Inner London. It also gave Outer London boroughs responsibilities for educational functions. One generation

later the ILEA itself was abolished and the responsibilities for education across London is as we see it today - with each London borough responsible for a range of education and (what has become known as) children’s services functions.

So, structural change in borough councils’ responsibilities for education has historically occurred through legislative change after considered reports by strategic London-wide commissions. At present, changes across this sector are occurring in ad hoc, tactical and emergent ways. Some strategic approaches have been adopted - such as secondary school admissions; now implemented London-wide each year. Other innovative approaches to collaborative working on school support services are currently being devised by leading councillors across London and by the Directors of Children’s Services and the professional networks of those staff working on school effectiveness.

Councils need to continue to support and critically challenge all their local schools to continue to improve the educational (and other) outcomes for their pupils. For while schools (and the teachers in them) are characterised as acting in loco parentis; London’s councils act as stewards for the wider community. To do so councils need to adopt a whole system and long term perspective. Just as parents have ambitions for their children, so councils have ambitions for their communities. And just as schools nurture the capabilities and confidence of their pupils, so councils must foster opportunities for people and enterprises locally.

Councils need to ensure that schools are alert to wider changes and alive to wider

opportunities. And London is replete with both. Three generations ago lessons learned and skills acquired lasted most people, for most of their working life. Lessons learned and skills acquired 10 years ago are already fading in their utility. And with the accelerating pace of change in the economy and society in London it is likely that some of the lessons learnt and skills being acquired now may not see the end of 2015.

In the context of the globally competitive world in which London's economy operates; and in the context of the competition for talent that London draws upon; London's schools need to ensure that all their pupils tightly grasp the mystery of life long learning. For over their long working lives (and in all likelihood they will most probably work longer than previous generations) this will surely prove more useful to them than the short term mastery of any specific skills.

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