GREAT
EDUCATION
DEBATE

Debate Paper Two:

**Improving the quality of teaching and learning
and the leadership of learning**

How do we improve schools?

Every parent wants their child to go to a good school. Politicians and policy makers share a similar ambition to ensure all schools are good schools. The question is how to deliver these aims and expectations. As the paper *Setting the Scene* for our Great Education Debate highlighted, schools in England are improving – but there is still further progress to be made. Research evidence both from England and around the world suggests that there are five key components that will help realise this ambition[1].

The quality of teaching and teachers

Improving the quality of teachers and teaching is generally recognised as being crucial to improving outcomes for students and the performance of an education system. Students who learn with the best teachers can progress up to three times as fast as those placed with low-performing teachers. Improving the quality of teachers and teaching involves:

- attracting the most able graduates into the profession

- operating initial teacher education programmes that balance knowledge about how children develop and learn with classroom experience that equips trainees to diagnose problems swiftly and accurately, use data effectively and apply a rich repertoire of approaches to meet the needs of different students

- creating professional development pathways that encourage teachers to have high expectations of themselves and their students and that view teacher education, induction and ongoing development as an integrated learning continuum

- supporting teachers to be expert 'knowledge workers' constantly striving to improve their classroom practice. Crucially this needs to be done by teachers working together. Institutionalising improved practice (ensuring the consistency and quality of teaching across a school or group of schools) comes from teachers within and across schools planning lessons together, observing each other's practice, reviewing the evidence on effective interventions and trialing and assessing with students the impact of teaching and learning innovations

- identifying leading practitioners and relieving them of some or all of their teaching duties so that they can model practice, provide instruction to their peers and coach other colleagues

- putting in place effective and rigorous teacher performance management.

Questions

- What are the characteristics of an excellent teacher?

- How far should we base a strategy to improve the quality of teaching on standardising good classroom techniques and how far by encouraging and enabling teachers to plan, observe, review and coach each other?

- How should information technology be developed in the classroom and at home to help improve the quality of teaching and learning and provide students with feedback on their work?

- The government argues that School Direct offers a better template for recruiting and training new teachers compared with the traditional university-based training model. What is the best model for teacher training?

- Would the establishment of a Royal College of Teaching help raise the esteem and quality of practice of teachers?

High quality leadership

The quality of leadership in a school is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes. Good leaders achieve this through building a shared vision based on high expectations for all young people. They then develop the strategies, the leadership team, the development programmes and quality assurance systems that will improve the quality and consistency of teaching and learning and student outcomes. The most effective leaders do not necessarily work longer hours than their peers but are more likely to spend their time with people: visiting classrooms, coaching teachers and leaders, talking with students and parents and involving and supporting their leadership team.

Increasingly school leaders have autonomy to lead and run their schools within a framework of accountability[2]. But in the best systems this operates within a culture where school leaders feel responsible for the outcomes and life chances of young people both from their own school and other schools in the local area.

The best schools and school systems also spot and nurture leadership talent and potential, right from the time a teacher joins the profession. They do this through formal development programmes, charting clear leadership progression routes, providing early opportunities to practice leadership skills (both within their home school and other schools) and using experienced school leaders as coaches and mentors.

1. You can find a list of research reports and evidence relating to the five factors discussed on the ASCL Great Education Debate website **www.greateducationdebate.org.uk**

2. The relationship between autonomy and school improvement will, along with the role of market in schooling, be discussed in more detail in the third of the ASCL Great Education Debate subject briefings.

Questions

- What is most important to the success of a school – having an outstanding headteacher or having an outstanding leadership team?

- How long should headteachers be given to turn round a school that is struggling before more drastic intervention action is taken?

- What needs to be done in order to attract, develop, recruit and support the next generation of school leaders, given that it is becoming harder to fill headteacher posts – particularly in primary schools[3] and schools in challenging circumstances?

- How can school leaders use performance management and pay progression for teachers to help improve improving the quality of teaching and learning?

- How can teachers best be motivated to improve and sustain excellent performance?

School-to-school support

School-to-school improvement provides a faster, deeper and more sustainable model for improving the performance of schools than schools acting in isolation. Not all partnership working is effective and nor does it automatically insure against setbacks, but where it is properly structured and led, it proves its worth in terms of increases in relative rates of attainment and the level of Ofsted gradings. Federations, multi-academy trusts and partnerships with executive leadership tend to be more effective than partnerships that rely on traditional leadership structures (ie one headteacher leading each school).

School-to-school work adds value as stronger schools apply their proven systems and leadership expertise to the challenges faced by struggling schools. Crucially, it also provides the basis for developing the capability and capacity of teachers – many of whom thrive on the opportunity to work with and learn from colleagues from outside their own institution.

Nor is partnership a one-way street. There is plenty of evidence that shows how 'stronger' schools in a partnership also gain from the experience. That should not be surprising because the value of school-to-school working is also to be found in deeper and more varied professional development opportunities, broader curriculum offers, accelerated leadership development, improved teaching and learning, stronger governance and more efficient support services.

Questions

- What are the hallmarks of the best joint working between schools?

- As groupings of academy chains, teaching schools and other school partnerships evolve there a risk that some schools will be left behind. How do we avoid ending up with islands of educational excellence surrounded by seas of mediocrity?

- How do we ensure that different chains and networks share the knowledge and ways of working so that their practice does not get locked in 'closed' groupings?

Balanced accountability frameworks

Accountability arrangements can help incentivise educational improvement but need to achieve the right balance between holding schools and school leaders to account and supporting schools to improve. So while the publication of test results can have a positive effect on school and student performance, they can also bring perverse consequences such as teaching to the test, manipulating test scores and making schools with high scores complacent. The higher the stakes attached to test results, the more sophisticated the data needs to be to provide a complete and balanced picture of performance.

No single assessment can meet the information needs of policy makers, teachers and parents. For example, a yearly assessment that reports on the progress of each child may be helpful for parents and useful for holding schools to account, but it will be of limited value to teachers in improving their day-to-day classroom practice.

The best accountability systems also include broader student learning objectives and encourage schools to be aspirational. Crucially, they are also more likely to lead to improvement if they focus attention on information relevant to teaching and learning – and motivating teachers and schools to use that information to compare practice with other schools in order to improve performance. So top-down government performance goals need to be combined with bottom-up capacity building for schools

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3. See **www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6334264**

Questions

- If assessment should focus as much on feedback and helping students and teachers to improve the quality of learning and teaching as on results in end-of-year and key stage tests, how should assessment arrangements be changed to achieve this balance?

- How do we ensure that school and college leaders are incentivised to work with and support other schools when the accountability measures that are reported to the public and parents focus on the levels of attainment in individual schools?

Cohesion and coordination

Initiatives to promote school improvement need to be coherently coordinated and aligned. Policy priorities, strategies, leadership, teacher development, structural reforms, accountability frameworks and resources should work together in a reinforcing way to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The pace of change and the number of reforms being made at any one time need careful consideration, with improvement being something that is done with people in the school system rather than done to them. A number of these points were underlined in a recent report on what has been learned over the last 20 years about making effective, large-scale improvement in the quality of school systems (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hallmarks of an effective system-wide school improvement strategy

An effective, system-wide change strategy requires the following elements:

1. A small number of ambitious yet achievable and well-grounded goals, publicly stated.

2. A positive and motivational approach towards securing teachers' enthusiasm and commitment to improving all schools and success for all students.

3. An emphasis on building the capacity of schools and teachers to improve performance coupled with a focus on results.

4. Engagement with leadership at all levels of the school system to build a 'guiding coalition' for change.

5. Continuous learning through innovation and effective use of research and data.

6. A focus on key goals and strategies while also managing other interests and issues.

7. Effective use of resources based on evidence and informed decisions.

8. A strong implementation effort to support the change process.

Source: Levin, B, 2012, System-wide improvement in education, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning and The International Academy of Education.

The government's policies

The government would argue that it is acting on many of these school improvement principles. It would, for example, point to the action it has taken and is taking to:

- raise the bar for those wishing to enter the teaching profession

- introduce and extend the new School Direct[4] model for training teachers

- work with Ofsted to provide a greater focus on teaching and learning in the inspection framework

- maximise the impact of the best practitioners and leaders though expanding the number of National Leaders and Local Leaders of Education and introducing Specialist Leaders of Education and National Leaders of Governance

- encourage school leaders to be innovative and entrepreneurial through making academy status generally available and accessible

- develop middle and senior leaders, through the programmes facilitated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership

- establish teaching school alliances and grow academy chains, based around the performance of a strong school, to foster school-to-school support and tackle poorly-performing schools

- raise the bar in terms of minimum standards of achievement while reforming the accountability system to provide a fuller range of performance data and introducing more sophisticated benchmarks of relative school performance

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4. School Direct is an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) route that provides the opportunity for schools or partnerships of schools to apply for ITT places working in conjunction with an ITT provider.

Some of the government's critics question whether all the Department for Education's programmes are sufficiently well-grounded in evidence and their implementation thought through. Others are more willing to give them the benefit of the doubt on this score but argue that the government's various strategies fail the fifth school improvement principle: they are not sufficiently integrated and cohesive to constitute a convincing school improvement strategy for all schools in England. They question what will happen if academy chains and teaching schools fail to deliver the added value that is expected of them. They challenge what will happen to all the schools that choose to work on their own or outside of these new groupings and suggest that the demise of an effective school improvement function in many local authorities will result in some schools falling between the gaps in terms of receiving the support they need.

Finally, the sceptics maintain that reform, particularly curriculum reform, is being done to rather than with schools and the teaching profession. The knowledge and expertise of school leaders is often not being sought and even when it is, it is ignored.

Question

- How could the government build greater ownership of an agreed school improvement strategy across England?

JOIN THE GREAT DEBATE.

Here's how you can get involved. Why not:

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Join the discussion and post your views on **www.greateducationdebate.org.uk** where you can also download a resource pack.

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