Estyn

School-to-school support and collaboration

June 2015

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⅄ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
⅄ primary schools
⅄ secondary schools
⅄ special schools
⅄ pupil referral units
⅄ independent schools
⅄ further education
⅄ independent specialist colleges
⅄ adult community learning
⅄ local authority education services for children and young people
⅄ teacher education
⅄ and training
⅄ Welsh for adults
⅄ work-based learning
⅄ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

⅄ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others
⅄ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

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Introduction

This report is published in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2014-2015.

The report gives examples of school-to-school support, including informal self-generated or brokered arrangements, collaborations and federations. For each example, there is a case study that illustrates current practice. The report considers what works, how and why it works, and the support mechanisms that sustain it. It also discusses the impact, success factors and obstacles facing these school-to-school initiatives.

The report is based on visits to nine providers to discuss their school-to-school work. It also based on an analysis of responses to a survey questionnaire from 22 secondary schools. The sample of schools selected to take part in the survey questionnaire represents a broadly representative sample of the secondary schools in Wales. Additional evidence was drawn from an evaluation of inspection outcomes since 2010 (see evidence base page 25 for further details).

This is the first of two reports on school-to-school work. The second report will summarise and synthesise the findings from this report, the evaluation of the first year of the Schools Challenge Cymru initiative, and the evaluation of the Lead and Emerging Practitioners project by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

The report is intended for the Welsh Government, senior leaders in schools, the local authorities and regional consortia.

Background

The report is set in the wider context of Welsh Government education policies which encourage school-to-school working, including the National Model for Regional working and Qualified for Life.

- The **National Model for Regional Working** was launched by the Welsh Government in February 2014. In guidance, the Welsh Government set out an expectation that all schools will follow an annual cycle of school improvement planning. It also put in place a national system of categorisation for schools. Central to its plans is that regional consortia should challenge and broker support appropriate to the needs of a school. The guidance states that:

    Schools that have the capacity to do so should be encouraged and empowered to lead their own improvement and deploy their own resources accordingly. For those schools that are at risk of causing concern or who cause concern, it would be the role of the consortia to help match and broker the support needed to the support available, (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.3).

- **Qualified for Life –** an education plan for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales published by the Welsh Government in October 2014. The plan includes the strategic objective that leaders of education at every level work together in a self-improving system, providing mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools. The plan includes two commitments about school-to-school working (to ensure that the principle of school-to-school support underpins Welsh Government and consortia approaches to school improvement and to work with the National Leadership Development Board and consortia to encourage school-to-school working), (Welsh Government, 2014c).

There are various forms of informal and formal arrangements for school-to-school working available in Wales:

- Informal school-to-school working – including self-generated and brokered arrangements
- Formal collaboration (under the Collaboration of Maintained Schools Wales 2010) where school governing bodies can form joint committees to deliver their functions
- Federation of schools, where between two and six schools federate under a single governing body to drive school improvement. Since 2010, regulations have allowed school governing bodies to choose to federate. In May 2014, The Federation of Maintained Schools (Wales) Regulations enabled local authorities to federate schools[1]

There are several initiatives or projects in Wales that have been designed to encourage school-to-school support and collaboration. These include:

- The **Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools** project, which was launched by the Welsh Government in November 2013. The project matches a strongly performing primary or secondary school (the Lead Practitioner School) with a weaker performing school that has already started its improvement journey (the Emerging Practitioner School). The intention is that developing and sharing best practice and information will be of benefit to both the lead and emerging school.

- **Schools Challenge Cymru,** which was announced by the Welsh Government in February 2014, is a package of support intended to improve the performance of 40 secondary schools that are both in challenging circumstances and challenged in terms of delivery'. These schools, identified as underperforming as measured by banding and a range of deprivation related factors, receive a package of support that is individually tailored to meet the school's needs and circumstances, (Welsh Government, 2014a).

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[1] The regulations allow for many different types of federation. These include clusters of primary schools; cross phase schools – secondary and primary or infant and junior; under performing schools and stronger schools; groups of small and/or rural schools; Welsh-medium and English-medium schools; and schools in different local authority areas.

Families of schools also help schools to work collaboratively. Families were created in 2010 by grouping schools according to whether the language used in the school is mainly English or Welsh, the size of the school (for primary school families) and their score on an 'index of challenge'[2]. The families were revised in 2013. Schools are expected to set ambitious targets for school improvement based on their performance against that of other members of the school family and other similar schools. There is an expectation that family members seek advice and share good practice from other family members.

This report does not consider the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools project or the Schools Challenge Cymru initiative, as these are being evaluated by other means, but looks at the other types of school-to-school support and collaboration. The findings of the mid-point evaluation of the Lead and Emerging Practitioners by NFER (2014) identified success factors and obstacles similar to the findings described in this report.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report

In January 2014, a report by the OECD, commissioned by the Welsh Government, evaluated aspects of the Welsh education system and made a number of recommendations. Among these was a recommendation to:

> develop and implement a Welsh strategy for school-to-school collaboration, creating an architecture which encourages schools to select appropriate partners, in an atmosphere of transparency, awareness and support. (OECD, 2014, p.8.)

In the report, OECD said that school-to-school collaboration is 'one of the most effective options for developing professional capital and especially social capital among teachers and leaders'. (p.77.) It also said:

> School-to-school collaboration provides the means of circulating knowledge and strategies around the system; it provides an alternative way of supporting struggling schools to that of exercising top-down intervention; and it develops collective responsibility among all schools for all students' success. (p.77.)

The report noted two sets of challenges for the Welsh Government in developing more effective school-to-school collaboration; it describes these as 'challenges of implementation and of design' (p.77). OECD warns that much existing school-to-school collaboration has been as a result of crisis, to avoid closure or when a school has a poor inspection outcome. The collaboration has not come about to meet the needs of learners and provide improvements that apply to and benefit many. OECD says that this is 'important because not all the students who encounter disadvantage or underperform are in schools where the majority of their peers are

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[2] This index is derived using the following contextual factors: the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals; the percentage of pupils living in areas classed in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales; the percentage of pupils with school action plus support or special educational needs statements; and the proportion of pupils of statutory school age who are either new to the English language or Welsh where relevant, at an early acquisition stage or developing competence.

performing poorly' (p.77). Research on successful models in other parts of the world suggests that:

> most schools can give or would benefit from assistance for some students in some areas, but a model that concentrates on overall levels of poor performance cannot support these wider groups of schools (p.77).

In addition, it concludes that current approaches to support school-to-school working[3] are in the early stages of development, under resourced, largely top-down and lacking in focus. OECD argues that research shows that these are not the ideal conditions for establishing thriving school-to-school collaboration.

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[3] Lead and Emerging Practitioners and local 'Challenge' style projects based on London and Manchester Challenge

Main findings

1   Nearly all[4] schools are involved in some form of partnership working with other schools. In most schools in Wales there is collaborative work with other schools within a primary/secondary cluster. In a minority of schools, all additional school-to-school work is the result of brokering (by the local authority, consortia, or the Welsh Government). Around half of schools have other school-to-school working arrangements that are self-generated.

2   Successful school-to-school working arrangements require the genuine commitment of school leaders and attitudes of openness, trust and transparency. It is also essential that those working together have clearly identified strategic objectives and precise success criteria for such collaboration. Most crucially the focus must be on the impact for pupils.

3   Only a minority of schools with self-generated school-to-school support are able to identify its impact on standards. This is generally because they do not set clear success criteria or evaluate the impact of the work.

4   For school-to-school support to be successful, school leaders must commit a significant investment of staff time for research, development and collaboration.

5   School-to-school support works best when:

- it arises from a clear identification of need, has a clear rationale and is based on a strategic objective
- the focus is on improving outcomes for pupils
- the participants experience it as mutually beneficial
- the schools are at similar stages of their journey of improvement because, if one is good or very good and the other is weak, it is less likely that the support is effective as the distance between the schools involved is too great
- the relationships between schools are equal, trusting, open and transparent

6   The barriers identified to effective school-to-school working include:

- lack of commitment by the school leadership
- lack of shared interests
- lack of trust and openness
- a belief that others have nothing useful to offer

7   In around half of schools visited the brokered school-to-school activity (apart from 14-19 collaboration) is recent and it is too early to see its impact on standards.

8   In practice, nearly all existing federation arrangements originated from a need to save money or save schools from closure.

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[4] The quantities used in this report are those used by Estyn in all its reports. Detail is in the Glossary.

9   Most federation arrangements are relatively new. There is evidence that outcomes for pupils in relation to wellbeing, such as attendance and behaviour, improve as a result of federation. It is too early to evaluate fully their impact on standards.

10   Federated schools seek to improve the learning experiences of pupils by planning schemes of work jointly in regular meetings of the staff from the federated schools. Joint extra-curricular activities contribute well to pupils' wellbeing. Teachers develop a greater range of teaching skills as a result of working together and sharing professional development activities.

11   In nearly all federations there have been financial benefits. These derive from:

- sharing and pooling staff and expertise
- achieving consistency of approach, for example to assessment practice, developing skills and managing behaviour
- being able to negotiate better deals for services and resources
- rationalising the staffing structure (for example having one head of department rather than two)

12   Federated schools are registered as separate schools, which means that for audit and inspection purposes they are treated separately. This duplication of effort wastes time and resources.

Recommendations

School leaders should:

R1 be very clear about what they want to achieve from taking part in school-to-school support activity

R2 identify specific success criteria for the activity

R3 make sure that the focus is on raising standards and improving outcomes

R4 evaluate the impact, costs and benefits

Local authorities and consortia should:

R5 have a clear strategy for matching schools to work together

R6 set expectations about how groupings will operate

R7 make sure that resources are available to support school-to-school work

R8 identify and disseminate information about practice worthy of emulation

The Welsh Government should:

R9 consider ways of allowing federations to register as a single school

R10 co-ordinate a national database of practice worthy of emulation that brings together Estyn best-practice case studies and those identified by consortia and local authorities

Types of school-to-school support and collaboration

13 Nearly all schools are involved in some form of partnership working with other schools (in cluster collaboration or in 14-19 networks). Around half of schools have other school-to-school working that is self-generated. In a minority of schools, all additional school-to-school working is as the result of brokered activity (by the local authority, consortia, or the Welsh Government). A very few schools do not work with schools other than their partner primary schools and this work is mostly about pastoral transition.

14 For the purpose of this report, school-to-school support is defined as when two or more schools work together based on a clear identification of need, a clear rationale and the strategic objective to improve outcomes for pupils. It is useful to classify the different types of collaboration that meet this definition as follows:

1 Informal school-to-school working, including:
1.1 Self-generated collaboration, where schools choose for themselves to work together
1.2 Brokered support, where an external body, for example the local authority or consortium, arranges for schools to work together
2 Formal collaborations – often called 'soft' federations, where schools share staff (including a headteacher), resources and expertise, but have separate governing bodies and establish a joint committee to discharge some of their functions
3 Federations ('hard' or formal federations), where schools have a single governing body

1.1 Self-generated collaboration

15 The focus of self-generated school-to-school support activities varies. The types of activities generally result from the school's own self-evaluation and its priorities for improvement or are linked to the recommendations from inspection. In practice, the most common foci are:

- the use of data, tracking and monitoring
- skills development, in particular the development of numeracy provision
- subject specific support
- improving self-evaluation and quality assurance
- improving teaching and assessment

16 Other aspects include:

- curriculum development
- middle leadership skills
- pupil wellbeing
- support for pupils with English as an additional language

17 Inspectors visited two examples of self-generated school-to-school working. One is a

group of special schools who collaborated to address a specific shared need. The other is based around a secondary school that has a long tradition of collaborative working with other schools. Both examples have developed over a period of at least five years. In both, the desire and commitment of the leaders to work with other schools have been a crucial driving factor. In both, the primary aim has been to improve outcomes for pupils.

18 Special schools in Wales have a long tradition of collaborative working. Given their wide geographic spread, their specialist nature and the fact that they are small in number, they have felt a greater need to support each other. Much of the resource, advice and guidance that are generally available to mainstream schools on teaching, curriculum and assessment issues are not always easily applicable to their special circumstances. Much of the expertise to do with practice in the sector lies within the schools themselves. As a result, the leadership and staff of the schools are very open to collaborative working. Below is an example of collaborative working between special schools in South Wales.

Case study: Crownbridge Special Day School and its partners Portfield Special School, Green Fields Special School, Heronsbridge Special School, Henfelin Special School and Ty Gwyn Special School

Context

Crownbridge School provides for 95 pupils aged between three and 19 years of age in Croesyceiliog. Just over two-thirds of pupils are of statutory school age. The school's catchment area comprises Torfaen, Newport and Monmouthshire. All pupils have statements of special educational needs for a range of significant, complex and multiple needs, or are undergoing statutory assessment.

All pupils are from predominantly English-speaking backgrounds. Three pupils are 'looked after' by the local authority, with a further nine pupils receiving occasional respite provision. Thirty-nine point seven per cent (39.7%) of pupils are eligible for free school meals. This is lower than the all-Wales average of 45.3% for special schools.

There are the equivalent of 12.8 full-time teachers and 58 support staff. The headteacher and deputy headteacher do not have a teaching commitment. There are 10 classes at the school, two of which are on the site of a local primary school. There have been significant staff changes during the last two years, with seven new teachers joining the school.

Identifying issues

The headteacher was increasingly aware that special schools in Wales did not have the tools to assess, track and monitor pupils effectively. At end of Foundation Phase and key stage national data collection, special schools are required to report using D (disapplied), W (working towards) or Foundation Phase outcomes / national curriculum levels. There was a need to recognise attainment below an outcome 1 and level 1 so that small steps of progress could be measured. Special schools also do not have access to the same range of information and comparative data that

mainstream schools have. As a result, it is difficult to compare them and their pupils with similar schools or children in other special schools even when they have similar additional needs.

Action

In 2008-2009, the headteacher, with other headteacher and deputy headteacher colleagues, established an informal group of five special schools across South Wales. The headteachers were aware that special schools did not have the same support for setting targets, assessment, moderation and tracking as their mainstream colleagues. The group had a shared need to develop a common assessment framework in special school settings; and to raise standards in pupil progress through setting up and maintaining a special school moderation of teacher assessment network. A sixth school joined soon after.

All six special schools were tackling a similar difficulty: how to standardise teacher judgements in Wales below Foundation Phase outcome 1 and level 1 national curriculum level; and, as of 2013, reception Literacy and Numeracy Framework levels. The group looked at how to secure rigorous judgements, to benchmark pupil attainment with similar pupils and to measure progress. There needed to be a shift from the collection of data to the analysis of data.

The six schools were originally using a mixture of tools to assist teacher assessment below outcome and level 1. An agreed common language and understanding were crucial. The group constructed a data conversion chart that enabled them to moderate learning across their schools whether they were using pre-national curriculum levels from England – 'P' levels, Foundation Phase outcomes, National Curriculum levels or routes for learning. The group became a moderation group. Regular meetings took place with a specific focus for each meeting.

As the Literacy and Numeracy Framework was developing, the group focused on the assessment of literacy and numeracy. Special schools were not allocated National Support Programme (NSP) partners and so they bid for Literacy and Numeracy Framework partnership funding from the CfBT Educational Trust[5]. Their aim was to build capacity to develop a moderation network for literacy and numeracy across special school settings. This was successful and has led to 30 schools being involved in a moderation network as well as in bespoke training events through NSP partnerships during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

Outcomes

The impact of partnership work is monitored and evaluated through the National Support Programme monthly milestones and event evaluations. The NSP rates progress using 'RAG rating' on a scale from red (meaning most in need of development and support) to green (meaning progress is good). The ratings for Crownbridge moved from red to green over two years. Evaluation also found high levels of confidence among staff in their assessment of pupils' skills.

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[5] Originally known as the Centre for British Teachers established in 1968

Crownbridge Special Day School's inspection report published in 2014 noted that 'information about pupils' literacy and numeracy skills is used highly effectively to plan and monitor specific interventions for all pupils' (Estyn, 2014, p.2).

Estyn (2014) judged that:

> the school works very well with other special schools. For example, it has developed an innovative joint moderation process for judging the accuracy of teacher assessment for all pupils in relation to the literacy and numeracy framework. This work is developing into a unique system of national moderation for literacy and numeracy, and subsequent bench marking in special schools. This approach, shared with partner schools, is sector-leading (p.11).

Other benefits identified by the group:

- Networking of other staff groups, for example teaching assistants from different schools working together to create sensory boxes
- Leadership development opportunities
- The ability to set targets and track effectively, which has supported Performance Management within the schools
- Extensive shared professional development, as staff visit other schools to share good and excellent practice – often highly specialised because of the nature of the pupils
- Effective cross-consortia work, which is still evolving, due to the high levels of commitment and the funding that has enabled much more work to be done

19 The second example exemplifies a key message from Estyn's (2013a) thematic report on 'Twelve Secondary School Improvement Journeys'. A key feature of schools that are good or excellent is that many staff are engaged in enquiry and reflection focused on collaborative activities to improve teaching and learning. All staff have the opportunity to take part and outcomes are disseminated widely within the school communities and through networking with teachers in other schools.

Case study: Cwmtawe Community School providing support to others

Context

Cwmtawe Community School is an 11-16 comprehensive school in Neath Port Talbot. Sixteen point six per cent (16.6%) of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is slightly lower than the national average of 17.5% Most pupils come from Pontardawe and the surrounding area, with about 30% opting to attend the school from outside the normal catchment area. The school has two types of specialist teaching provision on site, one for dyslexic learners and the other specialising in autistic spectrum disorder. It has a long tradition of school-to-school support working.

Strategy

Continuing an approach established by a previous headteacher, the leadership team

believe that the key to school improvement is the development of leadership skills amongst all staff and to seek out good practice. In seeking support and in sharing support they insist that the rationale should have three underpinning principles:

- a clear focus on raising standards and school improvement
- the desire and determination to make things happen
- a commitment to learn

Action

Cwmtawe has worked with a number of schools on a wide range of issues. These include: work with local primary schools to develop shared approaches to the development of literacy and numeracy; work with a secondary school aimed at improving Welsh language development at Cwmtawe; supporting schools seeking to improve tracking and target setting for pupils; sharing their approach to peer mentoring; and how they coach and support pupils with additional learning needs.

Outcomes

Performance at the school is consistently high. Set against most indicators at key stage 4, the school is performance places it in the top quarter of similar schools based on eligibility for free school meals for the past three years.

At its last inspection in 2012, it was praised for the well-established professional development culture within the school that enables staff to develop their expertise and share effective practice both within the school and further afield. This has a strong impact on building the school's capacity for continuous improvement.

The school was invited to present a case study on its assessment strategies and especially its data and tracking systems and practice (Estyn, 2013b). The school has had visits from a number of schools interested to find out more. As a result, a few very beneficial partnerships have developed. The factors that have enabled these successful links are support and commitment by leaders in these schools and a clear understanding of what needs to improve. Schools that have worked with Cwmtawe include Pencoed Comprehensive School and Bryntirion Comprehensive School in Bridgend. Both schools saw an improvement in key stage 4 outcomes once they had introduced similar systems.

The leaders at Cwmtawe say that the essential factors that have allowed them to provide useful help to others include commitment by the leadership of the school seeking support and knowledge of what they want to learn from Cwmtawe and why. This allows them to identify the most appropriate staff to send on visits and allows them to prepare to invest sufficient time to benefit from support. The leaders at Cwmtawe are firmly committed to working with others because they see this as important for professional development and essential for school improvement. However, they are concerned at the pressure this places on their time and resources.

20   Both the above examples highlight the importance of leaders' commitment, openness, trust and a relentless focus on improving outcomes for pupils. Both also emphasise the need for funding that allows schools to commit sufficient time and to deploy staff appropriately to develop practice.

1.2 Brokered support

21 Brokered support activities tend to focus more specifically on national priorities. These include:

- widening choice for pupils in key stage 4 and post 16
- closing the gap resulting from disadvantage
- improving literacy and numeracy

22 However, they also have other foci that generally arise from shortcomings identified by local authority or consortium activity and by inspection. These foci tend to be expressed more vaguely and include:

- improving key stage 4 outcomes
- sharing 'good' practice

23 The regional consortia are establishing arrangements for this type of school-to-school support. It is too early to assess the impact of such arrangements. However, inspectors visited a group of primary schools in Anglesey that was established by the GwE regional consortium in April 2013 and began work in September 2013. The main benefits that inspectors identified arise from the sharing and pooling of expertise. This is considered a strength of any collaborative school-to-school support.

24 The main barrier identified was an initial reluctance to invest staff time in collaborative work. School leaders need to be committed to support school-to-school support and to deal with concerns about pressure on staff time, particularly if staff need to be released from teaching commitments.

Case study: Anglesey 'primary' families

Context

Following the inspection of Anglesey's education services in 2012, the Recovery Board challenged headteachers to take responsibility for what is happening within other schools in the authority in addition to their own schools. A further impetus was the ending of the existing support provided by Cynnal and its replacement by the regional consortium GwE.

Strategy

In preparation for implementing the strategy, school improvement staff visited Manchester to look at the impact of the 'Manchester Challenge' and some of the principles are based on that work.

A system was established to enable co-operation and includes various projects are supported within this system. It is a system of 'families' including every primary school in the local authority and there are seven families in all, varying in size from six to eight schools in a family. There is no lead school within a family but they act on the principle that all schools have strengths and can lead on an area that is

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beneficial to another school or schools. It is emphasised that all members of the family are equal and that the system allows flexibility. A few schools have felt that they did not have a contribution to make but are now beginning to contribute and understand the principle of collaboration.

Families identify areas in which to collaborate through their school improvement plans.

Action

- At headteacher level, the work at first focused on managerial issues such as using and interpreting data, using Fischer Family Trust data[6] effectively, comparing improvement plans and self-evaluation reports and mentoring new headteachers.
- Meetings are held monthly between headteachers within each family. All headteachers have visited all other schools in the family.
- At teacher level, professional development days have included opportunities for sharing good practice, scrutinising books jointly, preparing for the Foundation Phase, collecting and recording evidence, mapping and responding to the Literacy and Numeracy Framework and developing homework.
- At assistant teacher level, sessions have been held to promote literacy and numeracy.
- Co-operation continues beyond formal professional development days and staff are released to collaborate with schools in the family to develop these projects further. This has extended across other families, there is no limit, and it has led to an ethos of collaboration.
- The collaboration is totally dependent on the school's needs – the schools agree on the direction.
- One family's activity is open to the remainder of families in the authority and there are examples of collaboration between families and on an inter-county basis.
- There has been an early emphasis on managerial aspects but now a focus on aspects of teaching and learning is beginning to influence pupils' standards.

Outcomes

Every school agrees that the system is continuing to develop and so far the main improvements are evident in provision. However, there are definite examples of better direct outcomes for pupils.

The following details some activities and their outcomes:

- A consistent approach was agreed by the schools on the format of annual reports to parents and school handbooks.
- Collaboration on self-evaluation reports, improvement plans and data interpretation has led to measurable improvements. There is consistency in the

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[6] Fischer Family Trust is a non-profit organisation that provides data and analyses to all schools and LAs in England and Wales.

> self-evaluation processes and in the ability of schools to identify their strengths and weaknesses.
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> - The quality of homework at one school (Kingsland) improved as a result of a 'sharing day' activity among families. At least one other school in the family has also adopted the method.
> - There are various methods of recording activities in the learning areas of the Foundation Phase. A number of schools showed the different ways they had of recording – following this, one school (Esceifiog) developed an idea and progressed it further to map the Literacy and Numeracy Framework and the Skills Framework. This has been shared with schools within the family.
> - It is too early to measure the full effect but the examples above, along with early findings about progress in literacy and numeracy, are encouraging.

2 Formal collaboration or 'soft' federation

25 Three examples of formal collaboration or 'soft' federation schools were visited. They share a number of common features. Each was established as a pragmatic response by the governors or the local authority, either because the headteacher left or there were concerns about falling numbers or possible closure. The desire to improve outcomes for pupils was not identified as the main factor. Soft federation schools have separate governing bodies and delegated budgets. There is a single headteacher appointed jointly by the governing bodies.

26 Overall outcomes for pupils have improved in each example. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the federation arrangements on end of Foundation Phase and key stage 2 outcomes because of the nature of the cohorts, which often have very small numbers of pupils. However, scrutiny of pupils' work shows that most make at least good progress, particularly in the development of literacy and numeracy.

27 In every example there have been significant benefits for provision. By working together the schools have improved the learning experiences available to pupils. Schemes of work are jointly planned effectively based on regular meetings of the staff of the federated schools. Joint extra-curricular activities contribute well to pupils' wellbeing. Teachers have developed a greater range of teaching skills as a result of working together and sharing professional development activities. Teachers meet, plan together and share resources.

> **Case study**: **Professional development of staff at Ysgol Tregarth and Ysgol Bodfeurig in Gwynedd**
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> **Context**
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> Following the retirement of the former headteacher, the current headteacher was appointed by both governing bodies as the headteacher of Ysgol Tregarth and Ysgol Bodfeurig. Since September 2013, she has set a robust strategic direction for both schools.
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> **Strategy**
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> The headteacher's vision was to bring two schools and a community together,

ensuring that both schools retain their identity and are considered as important as each other. Pupil standards and the success of both schools were paramount. At the same time, there was a desire to respect and protect the differences and unique characters of each school.

The headteacher established staff pairings and teams to work together on priority areas for improvement and in order to support both schools' individual and departmental professional needs.

Actions included:

- joint planning
- sharing good practice
- analysing data, scrutinising books, robust monitoring processes in place, and acting on findings and developing teachers' roles at the same time

Outcomes

Staff training and development in literacy and numeracy have improved provision and standards at both schools. Working together has led to improved standards in writing. Scrutiny of pupil's books show progress in the standard of pupils' work in the outcomes at both key stages in both schools. Results and performance in the national tests are very encouraging and place both schools' performance in the upper quartiles.

Parents' feedback is very encouraging about the changes that have occurred in both schools since co-operation was tightened and parents' comments at open evenings and in discussions about standards are very positive.

A particular focus on assessment for learning (AfL) is having an impact on standards – AfL strategies are firmly embedded throughout both schools and very robust evidence of its effect can be seen in pupils' work. Working together to evaluate AfL in practice in their peers' book and to share ideas and good practice has provided effective professional development for teachers at both schools. Teachers are now more accountable for standards and pupils' books are very sound evidence of the effect of AfL. Members of the leadership teams at both schools are given regular opportunities to scrutinise books and to lead on this. This gives a clear overview of the standards at both schools, and identifies areas for development. An ethos of effective teamwork exists between teachers at both schools as they share resources, plan jointly and support each other.

Key to the success of this 'soft' federation has been the attitude and commitment of staff at both schools. They value the opportunities to work together and support each other and the headteacher for the benefit of the wellbeing of children at both schools and to raise standards. Tregarth was inspected in November 2013 and inspectors reported that teachers lead and co-operate closely with local primary schools (which includes Bodfeurig) to share experiences in terms of developing staff and assistants. A variety of ideas and delivery methods are shared in subjects such as numeracy and literacy and this has had a strong effect on raising pupils' standards.

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3 Formal or 'hard' federation
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28 Two examples were visited. One is a federation of two secondary schools and the other is a federation of a cluster of primary schools and the secondary school linked to the cluster. Both developed as a result of a need to rationalise provision and ensure sustainability. In both instances the local authority played a significant role. The drive to achieve school reorganisation and reduce surplus places has resulted in proposals to close and merge schools. In these examples, federation was proposed by the local authorities as an alternative to closure.

29 Both examples identify benefits similar to those of formal collaboration/'soft' federation. These include:

   - sharing and pooling of staff and expertise
   - achieving consistency of approach, for example, to assessment practice and the development of skills and behaviour management
   - savings resulting from being able to negotiate better deals for services and resources because the orders are larger (for example contracts for information communication technology hardware)

30 In both examples attendance has improved since federation. This is as a result of the pooling of resources and expertise and a tightening up of policy and practice. The primary secondary federation has also seen improvements in performance at the end of key stage 2 as a result of establishing a consistent approach to skills development. It is too early to assess the impact on standards by the end of key stage 4 in either example.

31 In examples both the issue of budgets and grants was identified as a barrier. The schools are federated but still have individual school numbers and, for funding purposes and grant allocation they are treated as separate providers. Both federations take a strategic approach and pool their resources in order to achieve their priorities but for audit and accountability purposes they have to report separately. This is wasteful of time and creates bureaucratic burdens.

32 Both also identified the issue of inspection as a concern. Each school within a federation still has an individual number and Estyn has a legal obligation to inspect all maintained schools. The primary/secondary federation comprises five schools. Therefore, legally Estyn will carry out five separate inspections of what is in effect the same provision under the same leadership. The requirement to inspect each creates a burden for senior leaders in particular and comprises a waste of public money

33 Both examples considered the benefits of federation for pupils outweighed the shortcomings presented by the bureaucracy created by separate budgets and the prospect of multiple inspections. The heads spoke of their pride in retaining the character of the federation's separate parts. However, both argued that to be considered a single provider for accountability purposes would be very helpful.

Case study: **The Federation of Schools in the Upper Afan Valley**

Context

Federation was originally discussed in 2010. The motive was primarily economic: the local authority needed to secure the sustainability of schools in this relatively remote area. The formerly separate schools were operating at less than 50% capacity and were having to manage reducing budgets. There were also concerns about standards in the schools, with significant variance in outcomes. Federation was proposed by the local authority as a way of dealing with some of these issues. The federation has grown organically since as headteachers retired or moved to new schools. The federation began in September 2010 with the federation of the secondary school and one primary under a single headteacher. Another primary followed in September 2012, a third in January 2013 and the last in September 2013. A temporary joint steering committee was set up in September 2012 to lead the consultation process of federating formally all five schools under one headteacher and governing body. In September 2013, all five schools formally federated.

Strategy

The five schools share a leadership team with federated responsibilities. This ensures more consistent approaches. There are shared policies across the schools and a consistent curriculum across the primary phase. This has positive implications for standardisation and moderation. There is also a single monitoring policy with a single Federation Improvement Plan based on a primary self- evaluation report and a secondary self-evaluation report. Although each school receives a single budget there is a strategic approach to how it is spent across all schools. This approach is also taken with the pupil deprivation and school effectiveness grants as well as other grant funding streams. There is one business manager and shared administration and backroom functions. Pupil support and inclusion approaches are also shared across all phases.

Actions

These include:

- creation of a single leadership structure
- adoption of consistent federated policies
- creation of a single monitoring calendar and practice including tracking
- adoption of consistent assessment practices
- consistent approach to inclusion across schools
- establishment of a single curriculum for the primary schools
- development of a key stage 3 curriculum for the secondary phase that builds on that of the primary schools and is aligned to the literacy and numeracy framework
- cross-phase working group focused on numeracy
- nurture programmes across the key stages
- shared sports academies, cluster carol services, trips and engagement activities, and focus days
- sharing of best practice across schools – planning, marking, the use of

> information communication technology, moderation, charity events, single sports day, federated teams
> * shared educational welfare officer, additional learning needs co-ordinator, counsellor, and IT support technicians
>
> **Outcomes**
>
> * Attendance rates in primary phase have risen by two percentage points to 94.6% since formal federation – each school is achieving their best ever attendance.
> * The secondary school has improved attendance from 88.6% in 2011 to 91.0% in 2014. The percentage of persistent absence has fallen from 36.5% in 2011 to 27.8% in 2014.
> * Exclusions have reduced from 303 days lost per year prior to federation (2010) to 28 days lost in 2014. This is a significant improvement.
> * Most key performance indicators at key stage 3 and many in key stage 4 are higher overall since before federation. The outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals, boys and girls are above the average for these groups of pupils in its family of similar schools.
> * At key stage 3 the core subject indicator has improved by 24 percentage points since 2010, English by 21 percentage points, mathematics by 13 percentage points and science by 34 percentage points.
> * At key stage 2 the core subject indicator has improved by 11 percentage points.
> * Restructuring has enabled greater staff development and leadership opportunities. Two out of four primary lead learners are internal appointments.
> * Since March 2014 the federation has provided support to other schools in areas such as pupil tracking, Foundation Phase and the use of an electronic assessment, recording and reporting tool.
> * The Upper Afan Valley model of federation has been shared with other authorities, for example Gwynedd.

Impact

34 The majority of schools are too often unable to identify whether or how most types of school-to-school activities have had an impact on standards. The exceptions are when they can provide evidence of the impact of collaborative arrangements to widen choice or can identify an improvement in skills resulting from primary-secondary school partnership work. In nearly all cases, schools are hesitant to identify impact on standards. This is partly because of a belief that they cannot show a direct link between cause and effect and also because an improvement in standards is usually as a result of a combination of factors.

35 However, some positive impacts can be identified by most schools that provide and seek support. These are mostly to do with curriculum enrichment, improvements in provision and staff development. The development of leadership skills is also identified as a positive impact by schools that are regularly approached to provide support. In successful schools, leaders create a collaborative ethos where there is a

willingness to learn from others and share both internally and with other schools. This has been an important strategy in the drive to maintain or improve standards[7].

36 In around half of schools the brokered school-to-school activity (apart from 14-19 collaboration) is recent and it is too early to see the impact on standards. However, the schools taking part in the Lead and Emerging Practitioners project did report that there is early evidence of pupils making more progress in lessons as a result of changes in classroom practice.

37 Only a few schools have identified very clear and precise targets and objectives for their school-to-school working. Only a very few carry out careful evaluation of the impact of their school-to-school support activity. This is confirmed by inspection findings. Last year we found that a majority of schools have good links with other schools and organisations that enhance pupils' experiences and outcomes. However, we also found that in around half of schools self-evaluation is only adequate. The most common significant shortcoming is that, when evaluating their work, schools do not have sufficient focus or clear success criteria relating to impact on standards or wellbeing.

38 An interesting and effective approach in a very few schools is to require their own staff, and that of other schools seeking support, to submit a detailed bid. These make very clear why support is sought, what outcomes are intended and what support is required. This is followed up by a requirement to review impact.

Case study: **Improving the planning, assessing and reflecting on the impact of school-to-school working at Elfed High School, Flintshire**

Context

Elfed High School is an English-medium 11 to 18 mixed comprehensive school serving the town of Buckley. Around 16% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. A total of 24.4% of pupils are on the school's special educational needs register, which is slightly higher than the Wales average of 22.6%. Two point five per cent (2.5%) of pupils have a statement of special educational needs. This figure is roughly in line with the national average of 2.7%. The school has a well-established tradition of seeking and providing support.

Strategy

The headteacher was and remains committed to making sure that school-to-school activities have an impact on professional practice and pupil outcomes. Initially she wanted to improve the planning of her own staff if they were looking for practice worthy of emulation. She also wanted to make sure that when her school was approached by others that their needs were clear in order that Elfed could provide them with appropriate support. The intention was also to make best use of time and resources by deciding at the planning stage exactly how much time would be needed in order to minimise any potential disruption to lessons or the day-to-day work of the school.

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[7] See the Estyn(2013a) thematic report 'Twelve Secondary School Improvement Journeys' for further detail and case studies.

Actions

Over the last two years the school has worked collaboratively with or provided support for a number of schools. A particular focus has been on sharing practice in the development of literacy and numeracy. It has also provided support on developing leadership skills and motivating pupils. This is carefully recorded. In order to evaluate impact more carefully in September 2014, the school introduced a planning document. This required that before any visit there should be:

- identification of the focus for the support
- description of the need or issue
- the strategic objective for the work

Following the work a description of the support provided is added and subsequently an evaluation of impact is carried out.

Outcomes

The inspection team who visited Elfed in March 2015 noted that there is a strong culture of reflection and collaboration in sharing best practice in teaching, assessment and skills as a result of the professional development opportunities offered. In the past two years there has been consistently very high performance particularly against those indicators that include English and mathematics. Also, boys and girls including pupils eligible for free school meals do better than these groups of pupils in the family and Wales. Pupils with additional learning needs achieve above expectations.

The inspection also noted that:

- Skilful leadership at all levels has resulted in exceptional performance in key stage 4 for qualifications that include English and mathematics
- Leaders plan very successfully to meet national priorities
- There is a very strong culture of accountability at all levels
- The school's robust self-evaluation and improvement planning procedures are integrated effectively into all aspects of school life

A common barrier to effective school-to-school work identified by many schools regularly approached to share their practice is a poor understanding by those who visit of what needs to improve. This means schools seeking support do not consistently benefit from the support provided by others. The introduction of the formalised planning of school-to-school work at Elfed High School has encouraged schools to consider very carefully what they want from the support and as a result activities have been better focused. By requiring a school approaching them for support to be clear about their needs, Elfed High School is helping colleagues to develop clear focus and structure in their professional learning opportunities.

Success factors

39   Nearly all schools consider that openness, honesty and commitment by leaders and teachers are the most important factors need for successful school-to-school support. A few schools also identified the needed to share common goals, a can-do attitude and a relentless focus on improving standards.

40   Most schools have strengths and practice that is worth sharing. Many schools struggle to identify where there is practice that can help them to address specific shortcomings. Many are confident that the local authority is able to sign post point appropriate support within the local area but the majority have concerns that this may not be the most useful support. A minority have made links within their family of similar schools but very few have made consistent and sustained use of this source of possible support. Many do look at the Estyn best practice area on our website but are not always able to benefit from these. There are several possible reasons for this:

- The case study school may be too far away
- There is insufficient detail in the case study
- The case studies available do not describe practice in the areas of interest

41   The majority of self-generated school-to-school support is initiated as a result of informal networking. Headteachers ask other headteachers. Subject leaders meet others on training courses. In many ways this is effective because if openness and honesty are important success factors then working with people you trust is essential. However, this ad hoc approach does not ensure that schools are able to identify those who are most likely to provide appropriate support .

Obstacles and barriers

42   Successful schools struggle to meet the demands made of them in terms of time. While these schools have a strong commitment to shared purposes and see it as their duty to support others, the pressure on their staff and concerns about time spent away from the classroom can be barriers. Schools that are regularly approached to share their practice and expertise want to be supportive but can be frustrated by barriers that schools that are seeking support themselves put up. These include:

- insufficient understanding of what needs to be improved and why
- inability to ask the right questions
- lack of senior leadership commitment to support the development work needed to bring about sustained improvement
- unrealistic expectations, believing that simply importing a practice, without careful preparation and sufficient staff training, will bring improvement

43   Schools looking for support also struggle to find the time and resources to invest in this type of activity. A minority of the schools that are in need of improvement are reluctant to release staff because of concerns about the impact on pupils' learning.

44   Nearly all schools identify concerns about cost as a significant barrier. Effective school-to-school working requires significant investment of staff time for research and development. This time has to come mostly from within the school day. The costs of supply, workload concerns and the concerns of a possible negative impact on pupils deter around half of schools from school-to-school working even when funding is available.

Annex: An aide memoire to support the planning and evaluation of school-to-school collaboration

This is based on the Elfed High School planning and evaluation document and the survey used for this thematic report.

Name of school	Contact person
	Role

Focus: *What is the focus of the school-to-school support? This should be as detailed as possible.*

Example

Key stage 4 (GCSE) mathematics, particularly D to C grades, but also progression through to the higher grades. I would like to find out what has contributed to the school's consistent and sustained high GCSE performance. In particular, I would like to know more about:

- Key stage 3 curriculum and how it prepares pupils for effective progression to KS4
- How you set targets (at key stage 4) and track pupils' progress against their targets
- How early do you start the GCSE course?
- What specification / assessment regime do you follow? Early entries?
- The impact of whole school / departmental policies and procedures, such as lesson observation / work scrutiny / marking and feedback policy, etc

Need: *This should outline the reasons why support is sought.*

Example

Performance in mathematics has been consistently below the average for our family of similar schools. It has been in the lower half of similar schools based on eligibility for free school meals for the last three years. As a result performance in the level 2 including English (or Welsh) and mathematics and in the core subject indicator is consistently below the average for the family of similar schools despite strong performance in English and other subjects. A particular concern is the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals. This is not improving and these pupils consistently achieve less well than FSM pupils in the family.

Strategic objectives: *Link these to school, local or national priorities.*

Example

To raise attainment at key stage 4 and particularly for FSM pupils. This is in line with the school improvement plan and national priorities.

Provision: *(To be completed after the support work) Outline here what activities took place and how support was provided*

Initial evaluation
Effectiveness: *How effective was the school-to-school Support? Include here an evaluation of the support work.* *Example* A clear, coherent and strategic approach to ensuring pupil outcomes was imparted during the visit. The combined cumulative effect of simple but effective practice was particularly striking. These included: • skills development in key stage 3, supported by diagnostic testing and targeted provision • planning the optimum conditions for success in the core subjects (curricular design / contact time / course structure / early entry policy) • effective teamwork of learning directors (maths and Y11 progress) in establishing a co-ordinated approach to target-setting, tracking and provision
Action plan – *a brief summary of what you intend to do the detail would be in the school or departmental development plan*
Impact assessment: *This would need to be added at a later date once any changes made had been implemented and there was data to support the evaluation.*

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on visits to 9 providers. These were selected because they are engaged in the particular types of school-to-school support considered in this survey. In these visits, activities included

- discussions with senior leaders
- discussions with class teachers
- meetings with local authority staff
- discussions with governors
- meetings with partners involved in the school-to-school work

List of providers visited

- A family of four primary schools on Anglesey
- Primary federation Ysgol Ieuan Gwynedd and Ysgol Gynradd Brithdir in Gwynedd
- Primary federation Ysgol Tregarth and Ysgol Bodfeurig in Gwynedd
- Crownbridge Special School in Torfaen
- The Upper Afan Valley Federation of schools in Neath Port Talbot
- Ysgol Dyffryn Conwy in Conwy
- Cwmtawe Community School in Neath Port Talbot
- Michaelston and Glyn Derw Federation in Cardiff
- A primary federation in Ceredigion

Additional evidence was drawn from:

- inspection outcomes
- responses to questionnaires sent to a sample of schools in each secondary Family of schools

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Glossary/references

Quantities and proportions

nearly all = with very few exceptions
most = 90% or more
many = 70% or more
a majority = over 60%
half = 50%
around half = close to 50%
a minority = below 40%
few = below 20%
very few = less than 10%

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