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# LEA involvement in school networks

*“ Networks offer the possibility of new patterns of leadership - more lateral and more distributed - they offer new possibilities for LEAs and schools to engage in co-leadership. ”*

Michael Fullan

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the authors for their time, patience and commitment to this publication.

We would also like to thank Tom Bentley, Jo Bester, Karen Carter, Kerryanne Delbridge, Mark Hadfield, Valerie Hannon, Julia Huber, David Jackson, Duncan O'Leary, Hannah Lownsbrough, Jan McKenley, Denis Mongon, Steve Munby, Gene Payne and Ronnie Woods.

Finally, thank you to the members of NCSL's LEArning Forum and LEArning Project, whose work has informed our thinking.

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Bill Rogers, Networked Learning Group, Editors**

# LEA involvement in school networks

**Networking and collaboration** between schools is key to raising standards of student achievement, and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have an important role to play in enabling this to happen. The government's *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2004)* clearly states that:

***“...supporting effective learning networks of primary schools will be the single most important way in which we can build the capacity of primary schools to continue to develop and improve, and in particular to offer better teaching and learning and a wider range of opportunities to pupils and to their communities... We intend this to be the foundation for a far wider range of networking activities in future.”***

Many teachers, headteachers and LEA staff would no doubt agree with this sentiment. The *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* also commits to foundation partnerships for secondary schools and in *A New Specialist System: transforming secondary education (DfES, 2003)*, the government sets out a commitment to collaboration and networking for specialist secondary schools:

***“Benefits to individual schools are important. But there are much greater system-wide benefits to be had where specialist schools work in partnership with one another, colleges, special schools, pupil referral units, primary schools, middle schools and the independent sector.”***

For the last two years NCSL has been supporting and researching networking and collaboration within networked learning communities (NLCs). These networks of schools are learning networks designed to promote networked learning – interdependent working and professional learning through which pupils, teachers and other adults from different schools learn with, from and on behalf of one another.

The potential of networks to improve outcomes for a range of different organisations, particularly in terms of promoting innovation and change, has been reported widely in research literature. Networked learning communities are learning how and why school networks can make a difference to student achievement, professional learning, school leadership and overall school performance.

We are also learning that LEAs have important roles to play in supporting school networks. In this short paper we outline why LEA involvement in school networks is important, what roles LEAs can play in school networks and where LEAs can add the greatest value. In the think piece that follows, you will find some exemplification of these issues. □

## Why should LEAs be involved in school networks?

**Practitioners and policy-makers** in England are united by the twin challenges of raising overall standards of student achievement and reducing inequalities in student outcomes. Their challenge is to make the political rhetoric of 'high excellence and high equity' a reality.

### In recent years, the national school reform agenda has been characterised by the:

- implementation of uniform national strategies to improve the quality of teaching
- application of external accountabilities including national inspection and target setting
- national collection of school performance data
- devolution of more funding direct to schools

The impact of this overall approach is marked. It has resulted in improvements in student attainment with the result that England is now one of the top-performing education systems according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development<sup>1</sup> (OECD). However, evidence suggests that improvements in performance have reached a plateau and despite achieving high standards overall, our system produces some of the most inequitable outcomes among the OECD countries.

It appears that this approach has been effective in levering-up attainment levels in the short term. It has not, however, proved to be a capacity-building model. In other words, it has not provided the basis for building the collective capacity of schools and the individuals within them to provide a longer-term, sustainable strategy for improvement.

The combination of greater self-management at school level and greater levels of prescription at national level, has greatly affected the role and capacity of LEAs as a significant element in the education system. As the evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies conclude:

**“Continuing improvement will require not only greater individual capacity in headteachers and teachers, but also greater organisational capacity in schools and LEAs. In the long run, we believe that the commitment to collective capacity building is the most promising direction for addressing the challenges of the future.”**

Earl et al, 2003

The system needs to encourage greater collective capacity building within and between schools. What is clear is that top down, hierarchical models of control are, it seems, unlikely to work well in the medium to long term. The next wave of school reform needs to create greater local capacity to foster what David Hargreaves calls 'disciplined innovation' within schools, and spread those innovations laterally between different schools.

This form of innovation is disciplined both in creating the spaces for processes and practice, whilst at the same time maintaining a focus on outcomes. It converges on good things and builds commitment to a culture of collaboration, rather than one of splendid isolation. LEAs are well placed to be strategic partners in the facilitation of this collective capacity-building locally and regionally because of their legitimacy, permanence and local knowledge.

### This local approach to collective capacity building is driven by a recognition that:

- barriers to effective learning relationships are usually institutional rather than personal
- lateral networks offer more effective learning relationships than vertical hierarchies
- effective learning relationships between schools could help reduce the gap in performance between high-performing and low-performing schools
- effective learning relationships between schools are based on trust between individuals that takes time to create and is maintained by sustaining activities over time
- in order to fulfil the aims of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003a) services must be organised around the needs of children and families rather than the needs of institutions – this will require professionals to work more effectively across organisational boundaries

There have been many attempts to promote local collective capacity building in recent years. Successive policy strands focusing upon the most challenging and the most successful schools have promoted school networking and collaboration – through Education Action Zones (EAZs), Excellence in Cities (EIC), Beacon schools and Specialists schools. Most have demonstrated that schools can benefit from working in partnership with one another and with other service providers (Ofsted, 2002).

More recently, collaborative imperatives within the Leadership Incentive Grant, Leading Edge Partnership Programme, Networked Learning Communities, 14–19 Pathfinders and the *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003b) statement, that every primary school should have the opportunity to be a member of a learning network, have further extended this commitment, resulting in the Primary Strategy Learning Networks.

For this approach to be successful, however, greater attention needs to be paid to the creation of effective local learning relationships between schools. Our experience of NLCs has shown that schools benefit from being supported by a local partner who can perform a range of brokerage roles.

### Brokerage roles are best performed by a partner organisation that:

- is committed to the purpose of the network
- can provide or broker appropriate resources to the network
- is connected to other potential partners
- has high levels of local knowledge, intelligence and influence

In most but not all cases, we have found that the LEA has performed the role of local broker. This partly explains why there is a high concentration of NLCs in LEAs that have a well-developed capacity to support networks of schools and why many effective NLCs have benefited from prior history and experience of networking and collaboration.

We have noted, over the last two years, an increased enthusiasm and interest among LEAs to encourage all of their schools to join learning networks. There have also been developments which have prompted LEAs to restructure their Inspection and Advisory Services in order to better perform these brokerage functions, and to reconfigure their provision to align it to work with networks of schools. This approach to restructuring and re-culturing the relationship between schools and LEAs poses fundamental questions about the role of LEAs. □

<sup>1</sup> The OECD groups 30 member countries sharing a commitment to democratic government and the market economy.

## What roles should LEAs play?

**The role of LEAs** is evolving. While many of their core statutory duties remain, at the time of writing, changes are under discussion in relation to the government's proposed *New Relationship with Schools (DfES and Ofsted, 2004)* and in relation to the creation of new local Children's Services. We argue here that LEAs have three main roles:

- 1 LEAs retain a strategic overview of education provision within a particular locality and related functions, which range from access and inclusion to school buildings and school places. In this context, LEAs perform vital equity functions to support individual learners to access their entitlement to an education.
- 2 LEAs support and intervene in schools at times of difficulty eg school improvement teams frequently play a central role in sustaining schools going through serious weaknesses or special measures proceedings.
- 3 There is an emerging role for LEAs to play in relation to building collective capacity through networking and collaboration between schools themselves and between the school service and other Local Authority services. In this regard, the role of the LEA is to act as a facilitator of networks of schools, as well as brokering partnerships between education and health, police and social services amongst others, to enable a multi-agency approach to service delivery (*Hopkins & Jackson, 2002; DfEE, 2000*).

In short, LEAs are being asked to develop capacity in four, quite different, dimensions:

### Dimensions of LEA involvement in developing capacity

- 1 Provide strategic leadership and functional support to local education provision.
- 2 Hold schools to account and intervene where necessary.
- 3 Broker multi-agency partnerships.
- 4 Provide facilitation and brokerage to school networks.

It is plain to see that these different roles demand different ways of working. Some require responsive 'followership', others require leadership. At times the leadership might need to be strategic, directive or centralised, at others it will need to be facilitative and distributed. In this way, the current LEAs and the future Children's Services need to be highly adaptive organisations – learning how to evolve and change as their role and purpose changes, and learning this in tandem with the changing relationships between schools.

Developing this adaptive capacity internally, within the LEA, will require sensitive internal brokerage and facilitation. In other words, it will require the kind of capacity internally that is also needed externally to support and develop networks of schools. Put another way, Local Authorities will need to develop more and stronger internal networks around their core purposes.

In the next section, we outline the nature of these brokerage and facilitation roles and explore some of the activities that they entail. □

## How might LEAs support school networks?

**LEAs perform many roles** and functions in relation to schools. However, we have identified five distinct brokerage roles through which LEAs appear to be able to add greatest value to networks of schools.

We have characterised these five roles as 'brokerage' in order to distinguish these functions from traditional LEA roles and ways of working. Brokerage describes the act of arranging or negotiating relationships and partnerships. A broker is an intermediary or matchmaker engaged in the 'acquisition of obligations' from different parties in a purposeful relationship.

### Brokerage roles for LEAs

- 1 **Brokering network membership.**
- 2 **Brokering network relationships.**
- 3 **Brokering partnerships beyond the network.**
- 4 **Brokering the network's access to resources.**
- 5 **Brokering knowledge-exchange within and beyond networks.**

LEAs are better placed than most other local organisations to perform these brokerage roles because their responsibility for ensuring that all children have access to a high-quality education gives them legitimacy, their permanence gives them long-term continuity and their local knowledge gives them authority.

However, in practice some LEAs have limited or only indirect influence over school networks. There are also some examples of these brokerage roles being played by diocesan boards, EIC partnerships, EAZs, the Specialist Schools Trust, subject associations and university departments.

**What is clear from the work of NLCs, though, is that the move to a more collaborative and network-based system offers a real opportunity for LEAs to co-design with school leaders a transformation of the local landscape.**

This involves looking with fresh eyes at the way that schools work with one another, the way that the LEA works with networks, and the way that local authority services, including education, collaborate to meet children's needs. □

## Brokerage roles for LEAs

### 1 *Brokering network membership*

**Learning networks** potentially could widen rather than close the performance gap between schools if some schools were excluded from participating. To avoid this, LEAs sometimes work to influence the membership of networks to ensure that all schools can participate in learning networks of some kind. Often LEAs encourage existing networks to invite new schools to join. Equally, LEAs often have to actively encourage some isolated or reluctant schools to join and participate in existing school networks, particularly where a headteacher is disinclined, where there is a past history of fierce competition, or where the school faces particular challenges.

One of the learning points from the NLC programme is that membership of school networks has to make sense in terms of local social and educational contexts. When LEAs support the establishment of new networks of schools, membership is frequently designed to ensure that all schools are included in some way and that there is appropriate diversity of school types within networks.

LEAs are better placed than most organisations to influence the membership of school networks because they have responsibility for ensuring all children have access to a high-quality education. However, in practice some LEAs have limited influence over the membership of many school networks. Others may seek not to influence membership at all except where a particular configuration or involvement might act as a brake on school improvement for a particularly vulnerable school, or may not make sense in terms of local geography.

International research findings and the work of the NLC programme make it clear that establishing effective learning relationships between schools requires voluntary participation and membership. Networks require discretionary effort. Schools have to want to work with one another because they believe that they can do a better job for children and teachers together than they can alone. For this reason, LEAs should only ever influence or encourage membership of networks, they should not and probably cannot, direct schools into effective and sustained learning relationships. Instead, voluntarism can be fostered actively and sensitively – obligations can be brokered.

Our work has shown us that the most effective LEAs in this regard have used many of the following activities to broker membership of networks in the early stages.

#### The activities of brokering network membership

- Raise awareness, disseminate information and promote networking opportunities to all schools.
- Generate enthusiasm by promoting the ideas and potential of school networks.
- Build a sense of community, shared responsibility and shared moral purpose by articulating a vision or compelling idea for equity and excellence through collaborative working between schools.
- Challenge leaders of school networks about the membership of their network: Is the size of the network fit for purpose? Is the mix of school contexts and capabilities appropriately diverse? Does the network serve the needs of all children within a recognisable community or area? Why are some schools members while others are not?
- Hold the strategic overview – show how membership of school networks can complement wider LEA intervention strategies, the priorities in the Education Development Plan and other Local Authority plans.

### 2 *Brokering network relationships*

LEAs should know more than any other organisation about the development needs of schools in a locality. They are also uniquely placed to know which other schools could help to meet those needs, or which schools have shared learning priorities.

Some LEAs have become skilled at identifying teachers in different schools who are able to learn effectively from one another, inviting them to learn together, establishing network structures where they can learn from one another and facilitate and challenge their learning by introducing external expertise and knowledge. Similarly, some LEAs facilitate learning sets for groups of headteachers and other school leaders.

The evidence from the NLC programme shows that LEAs have used many of the following activities to broker relationships within a network.

#### The activities of brokering relationships within networks

- Support school and network collaborative self-review processes that enable schools to identify an aspect of pedagogy, an area of the curriculum and a group of children on whom they are going to focus their collective development work.
- Help the network to design and plan professional development programmes that will address the focus they have identified and create coherence with other national and local professional development priorities.
- Assist the network to action plan and to design collaborative work programmes. These are likely to be around their network focus and to relate to the network's shared purposes.
- Facilitate relationships between school leaders in order to build trust, develop commitment and articulate shared values. This might also involve brokering and enabling the nomination of appropriate network leaders.
- Develop a cadre of network facilitators and professional leaders by training advanced skills teachers, consultant leaders, LEA inspectors and advisers in network facilitation skills.

### 3 *Brokering partnerships beyond the network*

There is clearly huge potential advantage to be gained from schools learning from one another. However, there is also a danger that networks can end up recycling their own existing knowledge. In other words, if they do not build on external expertise and knowledge, they put boundaries around their learning.

There is a significant role, therefore, for an external broker to help schools access external knowledge and expertise located in universities, colleges or other public services. LEAs might view their role in this respect as networking the networks – brokering partnerships that encourage communication and a flow of information between different sectors, both locally and nationally. LEAs that work effectively with networks broker partnerships between schools and other public agencies such as social services, police, primary care services, universities and colleges.

School networks have much to learn from other sectors in relation to meeting the needs of children and their families and developing more powerful classroom pedagogy. There is learning for school networks, too, from the experiences of other sectors in leading networks, structuring networks and facilitating staff professional development to support this work.

#### The activities of brokering partnerships beyond the network

- Support schools to form links with the local university by negotiating routes to accredited teacher professional development work, support for teacher enquiry, or purchasing external consultancy support.
- Assist networks to establish Initial Teacher Training partnerships linked to training schools or local universities.
- Help for school networks to utilise other nationally available professional development opportunities such as NCSL's Leading from the Middle, Collaborative Leadership Learning and Building Capacity programmes.
- Enabling networks of schools to access adult and youth services, health care services, educational welfare support or police liaison links as a network. In some cases this has meant LEAs enabling school networks to design new joint partnership arrangements for previously centrally delivered services.



## Brokerage roles for LEAs

### 4 Brokering the network's access to resources

When formed, school networks generate a new organisational identity that has collective resource needs. Often, though, it is difficult for a network to be a fund-holder, or to employ network leaders. LEAs have a role in helping the network to navigate these challenges.

The LEA can also help in brokering resources for the work of school networks by identifying and attracting new funding streams (eg regeneration funding or lottery funding) and by supporting networks to develop bids for funding. Other activity related to the brokering of resources includes identifying support for networks as a priority within their Education Development Plan and through the consequent deployment of LEA personnel and time to broker, facilitate and otherwise support network development.

#### Examples of the ways in which LEAs have supported networks in brokering access to resources

- Providing external facilitation or consultancy through LEA personnel during the planning phase.
- Offering to be the fund-holder or notional contract holder for networks.
- Allocating Standards Fund or core school improvement, inclusion and Special Educational Needs funding to the network to allow collaborative decision-making to take place in partnership between the network and the LEA.

### 5 Brokering knowledge-exchange within and beyond networks

#### Three core functions that transform ways of working

- 1 Expand access to knowledge and ideas.
- 2 Encourage disciplined enquiry, which generates good ideas and exposes bad ideas.
- 3 Expand the sense of identity for the use of knowledge towards the common purpose.

Many LEAs have worked in a partner role with NLCs to assist in the brokerage of these knowledge-related functions. They have done this by making visible the range of expertise within the network, supporting cross-school enquiry partnerships and encouraging the exchange of practice, expertise and personnel.

Beyond this, though, a networked system affords the opportunity for network-to-network learning. The LEA is ideally placed for this strategic knowledge-management function – to ensure that interesting practice and innovation is made visible and transferable from one network group to another.

In addition, some LEAs have formed networks themselves with other LEAs. In so doing, they are modelling collaborative practice and widening the field of knowledge and enquiry from which they and their networks of schools can draw. □

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