

## Are SIPs partners?

**Do School Improvement Partners (SIPs) provide a 'priceless' service that can give heads 'new impetus and direction' or are they 'ineffective, time consuming and expensive'?**

Both sides of the argument were aired in a recent talk2learn debate on experiences with SIPs, chaired by Adrian Percival, National Director School Improvement. And while a handful were disappointed with their experiences thus far, most contributors were overwhelmingly in favour of SIPs.

Jo Williams, a headteacher of a primary school in Lancashire and SIP herself, said she appreciated the "external eyes analysing the school's data with a fresh approach... *it helps me think along different avenues*".

Jenny Tosh, a secondary and special school SIP in Enfield, said her local authority had established clear lines of responsibility for overseeing the work of SIPs.

"We have been careful to involve our SIPs (whether they are heads, consultants or LA officers) through CPD in the developing role and we have kept lines of communication open so that we can address any confusion if and when it occurs."

Ian Hart, headteacher of a primary school in Nottinghamshire, described how his SIP meeting had a positive effect on his school... and himself.

He said that the constant bombardment from a number of difficulties facing his school had taken its toll on him and led him to seriously question his own performance. *"My SIP, who is a serving headteacher, gave me new impetus and direction. This has been priceless to me."*

On the critical side, one contributor said his school's SIP had little relevance as the objectives of the programme were met through different avenues.

"I see the SIP process as pretty ineffective, time-consuming and expensive, another layer of review which lacks the rigour and impact of the other processes."

Rod Woodhouse, a primary headteacher in Hertfordshire, said he



was concerned about the role the SIP played in his performance management

"The worry has to be that SIPs will seek to promote local authority agendas into PM discussions and target setting."

In a rebuttal of the criticisms, Adrian Percival said that evaluation of the SIP programme showed most headteachers were pleased with the results. Where quality of SIPs was an issue or where heads felt that LAs had simply re-branded their Link Advisors as SIPs, he urged contributors to raise the problem with their LAs or with the regional SIP coordinator.

He added that very few heads or governors he spoke to felt that the previous external adviser system on performance management was better.

"In fact, this aspect of the SIP role comes back time and time again to my team and other independent evaluators as the big win of the process being much more time-efficient, streamlined, relevant and sharply focused than the predecessor system."

Finally, another school leader suggested one possible – and potentially revolutionary – consequence of the SIP programme as it evolves:

"I feel that in the future – *if SIPs are effectively deployed, then the Ofsted inspection might become irrelevant for most schools*. The SIP's annual report is based upon considerable more interactions with the school than Ofsted's reports. There's a controversial thought – no Ofsted!"

**If you are not yet a member of talk2learn and would like to join, more information is available at [www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities)**