

Collaborative overreach: why collaboration probably isn't key to the next phase of school reform

Executive summary

- Collaboration between schools has come to be regarded as an important way in which they may find the means to improve their educational performance. Yet little is known definitively about what impact this has for improving pupil attainment.
- Given the nature of the theory on this subject, the lack of robust evidence of the impact of school-to-school collaboration for pupil attainment is unsurprising.
- Research in this area has been dogged by weak methodology. The literature is overwhelmingly qualitative, essentially providing textbook examples of a consensus view regarding what is important in collaboration for generating school improvement. The focus is on successful schools that collaborate to problem-solve and share resources, and essentially supposes that this must contribute to their success. This does not take account of those that do this and don't succeed. This 'best practice' approach is of limited use to finding out what actually makes the difference for pupil progress and attainment.
- In seeking to identify the critical features of success, the method relies heavily on the judgement and authority of its authors, whose expertise is deemed to be self-authenticating. This makes research of this nature especially vulnerable to the shaping influences of underlying value commitments. Teachers are posited as the guardians and arbiters of the public interest in education. They should therefore take an active concern for how other schools are faring, and collaborate in a spirit of mutual aid. Hence collaboration and networking are regarded as good things in and of themselves.
- Research proceeding on this basis does not aim to test the impact of the collaborative school-improvement infrastructure on pupil learning outcomes. Instead, the principal goal is to underscore the importance of collaboration between schools for staff development and support, professional collegiality, and for the maintenance of a particular conception of the public service ethos. The result is confusion around the nature and definition of what should be schools' primary task.
- Proponents of collaboration often confuse chain and federation effects with collaboration effects, but these are different. The latter arise following corporate structural merger and integration. Recent research in this area, though unable to draw causal inferences, has opened up promising lines of enquiry. This research suggests that those types of federation most expressly purposed to improving pupil attainment, and which have organised themselves to deliver, are likely to be most impactful. Tightness of focus and management appears to make a difference. While far from definitive, this suggests that corporatisation may be more important than collaboration for school improvement.
- The influence of the theoretical frameworks and underlying value commitments shaping practice in the area of collaboration influence school leaders toward local, small-scale, and less binding/formal arrangements, designed to preserve participating schools' independence. The evidence suggests that these arrangements do not spur improvements in pupil attainment.
- Such arrangements are less likely to be subject to rigorous cost-benefit analysis. They are thus prone to a lack of clarity around objectives, what resources are likely to be required to achieve them, and to problems with oversight and accountability. This makes them time-

consuming and potentially costly undertakings for teachers and administrators alike – which may very well in turn deplete the time, effort and resources available for staff to focus on their own school and students.

- It is likely that this problem can only be ameliorated consistently in the chain, and more specifically, hard-federation context, as scale frees resources for investment in quality control and management of inefficiencies arising from variable school performance within the group. There may be much collaborative trial and error involved, however, before individual school leaders and governors become receptive to this proposition.
- Under more competitive market conditions, the process of forging effective partnerships would be more efficient. Such partnerships would be likely to emerge, alongside the establishment and growth of hard federated structures, to precisely the degree to which these competitive incentives are operable in the market.
- Devolutionary school reform has already supplied many of the conditions necessary for more competitive collaboration; what is needed is more careful alignment of other features of the system to support trialling of different school curricula and changes to leadership, management structure, and staffing – those facets of autonomy consistently cited in the literature as crucial for improvement.
- There is also much scope for further progress towards more competitive provision in respect of liberalising school supply, better information provision, and reforms to the way schools are funded. The international evidence for the effectiveness of such reforms is persuasive and growing.