

The habit of collaboration

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I would ask which organisation was responsible for resolving a particular problem in education, only to be told: 'Don't worry, Minister – it's no longer the DfE. That is now a responsibility of the School-Led System. They will be delivering it.' Often, when you probed a little deeper, you discovered that the school-led system was nowhere near as well formed and ever present as some Ministers and senior civil servants liked to think.

David Laws,
Minister for Schools

David Laws in government put down a marker from a Ministerial perspective about the absence in practice of a developed school system.

Secondary headteachers in East Sussex have been practising the school-led system for a while now. Through trial, error, resilience – and a deep commitment to the values of working together – they have established a pioneering and proven model which others might wish to learn from. The habit of collaboration is real.

The East Sussex system comprises 26 secondary schools, 26,000 students, and a workforce of 3,200 teachers and support staff.

Schools share a vision and set of goals, reviewed annually. They explicitly share a collective responsibility to improve outcomes for young people in East Sussex 'where all young people receive a high quality of education and are prepared for success in life whatever they choose to do.'

Each school/academy is autonomous, accountable to different governance, and occupies a particular geographical and social context. Equally, schools are mutually accountable and champion one another's successes. They compete, they share, they respect differences. Schools trust each other.

'Equity' and 'excellence' are underpinning watchwords. Headteachers have recognised that a shift in culture over time has been required. Attaining real step

change has demanded that schools and staff challenge their own performance as well as the normalised levels of expectation amongst students, their families and their communities.

The schools come together through a Secondary Board accountable to secondary headteachers and East Sussex local authority. It comprises nominated headteachers, local authority officers and an independent chair: deliberately small in number, nimble and thoughtful in action, and expertly administered. Members operate with integrity and transparency, and without fear or favour.

It seeks to demonstrate the power and effective practice of a coherent school-led system, shaping trusted professional practices between schools, academies, regional and local authorities. Succession planning is considered critical.

The Board's impact is judged annually on the extent to which it helps schools advance these four key goals:

1. All students benefit from what their local schools offer, realising their personal attributes to thrive as global citizens. All schools have committed to maximize attendance and minimize exclusions.
2. Affirmative action to raise achievement – and close 'achievement gaps' where they exist - in the best interests of students and strong social cohesion in our communities.
3. Classroom teaching and leadership at all levels are of the highest quality when benchmarked nationally.
4. Consistency of rich curriculum provision, including virtual learning, systematically reducing any in-school variation of performance by subjects.

In practice

At the heart of operations, three headteachers are seconded one day a week to work alongside external education advisers, employed for a day and a half a week. They identify which schools need particular support and which schools are well positioned to offer that support, believing that the solutions lie largely within the network of 26 schools. Where needed, additional interventions are commissioned, on a timely basis, from outside the county.

The Board indicates in its regular reports that the following have had particular impact on its declared goals:

- headteachers sharing openly and confidently a wide range of performance data, to scrutinise and debate
- detailed knowledge of school performance and capacity across the county
- collaboration with teaching and research schools and effective deployment of local and national leaders in education
- the networking and practical focus of subject hubs and deputy heads' group
- imaginative and well-led projects to successfully reduce exclusions and address disadvantage
- locally agreed actions to manage admissions across schools and ensure that all schools remain viable
- bespoke, high quality leadership coaching
- effective brokering of school to school support, including pairing schools with clear agendas for rapid improvement
- strong links, mutually influencing policy and practice, with the Hastings Opportunity Area.

In common with many schools nationally, the unparalleled events of recent months have seen a deep sharing of ideas, plans and resources. This is undoubtedly rooted in the active and trusting mutual support systems which characterise the East Sussex school-led model.

The habit of collaboration has been practised by this group of headteachers for a number of years now. The habit is integral to the sector's achievements.

With acknowledgements to Elizabeth Funge, Head of Education Improvement & Caroline Barlow, Chair East Sussex Headteachers. Roy Blatchford chairs the Secondary Board.