# Building capacity for school improvement in multi-academy trusts – from the inside out

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**This paper describes, illustrates and critiques the growth of the academy movement in England as a strategy for school and system transformation. It argues that if the move to academisation in England is to have a transformational effect in terms of student performance, the opportunities provided by structural autonomy need to be strategically developed and reliably implemented from the 'inside – out' – ie, by the academies and academy chains themselves.**

The key arguments are:

» If the aspirations of the academy movement are to be met, there has to be an unrelenting focus on capacity building for school improvement as well as structural change

» the importance of putting the learner first and developing a school improvement strategy that works from the inside out

» the key elements of this approach - whole school design, the school improvement pathway and the underpinning teacher development

» reflecting on how best to build capacity for school improvement at the regional and system level.

**The importance of capacity building**

The dramatic expansion of the academies programme in England has been the major structural reform in education during the 21st century so far. Academies are self-governing non-profit charitable trusts directly funded by the Department for Education (DfE) under a master funding agreement with the Secretary of State. Crucially, they are independent of local authority control. As Becky Francis (2015) notes, "Five years ago there were about 200 academies, today there are well over 4,000." This reflects a global policy trend towards school 'autonomy' – the Charter School movement in the USA being the prime example. Ironically, this is despite the international evidence from PISA and other studies that there is no correlation between decentralisation and achievement.

Academy chains, operating more than one academy are either umbrella trusts or more usually multi-academy trusts (MATs). The MAT is a single legal entity with two layers of governance: the overarching academy trust is governed by foundation members, and there is also a board of

directors or governors. In terms of individual school governance, the academy trust could establish a local governing body for each academy, appoint the members of it and decide what powers to delegate to it. Alternatively, the academy trust might decide to set up an advisory body with no delegated powers, which reports to the academy trust's governing body. Whichever option is adopted, control remains with the MAT.

What is distinctive about the development of academies in England is the concomitant growth in academy chains. As Robert Hill (2015) notes: "At the end of July 2015 there were 846 multi-academy trusts in England. To put this in perspective there were 391 MATs in March 2011. So that is a pretty rapid rate of growth."

This, however, as Hill also points out, tells only part of the story. The growth in MATs is a function of the explosion in small groupings of schools – 729 MATs have five or fewer schools. This reflects a shift in government policy in circa 2012, away from a dominant group of relatively large MATs towards a proliferation of very small ones.

Early reviews of student performance in academy chains, particularly given shifts in policy, were ambivalent at best (Machin and Vernoit 2010). More recent research is also less than enthusiastic about effectiveness, but does give some clues as what to do. Two examples illustrate the point:

» *Chain Effects* (Hutchings, Francis and Kirby 2015) published by the Sutton Trust assesses the impact of academy chains on low-income students. Two conclusions stand out:

  - There is very significant variation in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, both between and within chains; and chains differ significantly in attainment against different measures.
  - Those chains that appear most successful are the ones with the greatest school improvement experience, a clear mission and a sustainable approach to growth. These seem to be the oldest and best-established chains.

» The DfE conducted an analysis in 2015 of the performance in value added terms of 100 local authorities and 20 of the larger academy chains. As Henry Stewart (2015) comments,

"only three of the academy chains have a value added that is above the national average." Of the top ten in the combined list only two are academy chains; ARK Schools and the Harris Federation, two of the longest established chains; they come in ninth and tenth.

It is clear from this evidence that simply becoming an academy is not a panacea and there are good reasons for this. Many so-called 'failing schools' have been turned into academies following that designation and the improvement process inevitably takes time, particularly given the rapid expansion of the movement.

However there is a more profound issue at work here, alluded to in the reference to school improvement in the Sutton Trust report. Chris Cook (2015) in his commentary on the DfE analysis says: "One thing that has emerged from thoughtful education writers in recent months has been a concern that we need more 'capacity building'. This means (a focus on) the nuts and bolts of how schools work and how they are managed, rather than changing who runs schools mechanically when they are troubled."

**Structural change cannot improve outcomes**

This point is echoed by Robert Hill (2015) in his blog Standards + Structures = A Strategy. Here Hill argues that structural change cannot by itself improve outcomes; there has to be an equal focus on school improvement strategies as well as systemic management, so schools can learn from each other. It is now clear that the most effective chains have thought about, evolved and systemised their approach to school improvement. Hill (2015) has analysed and reflected on the practice of our best MATs and has articulated 10 principles that need to underpin the school improvement strategies within academy chains.

» They know their academies well quantitatively. Their core purpose means that these MATs adopt a culture of high expectations, set demanding targets and monitor progress.

» They know their academies well qualitatively. It's a question of a MAT not just knowing the metrics but understanding how progress is or is not being made.

» They adapt strategies to an academy's context. The best MATs understand where each academy is on its school improvement journey, and have
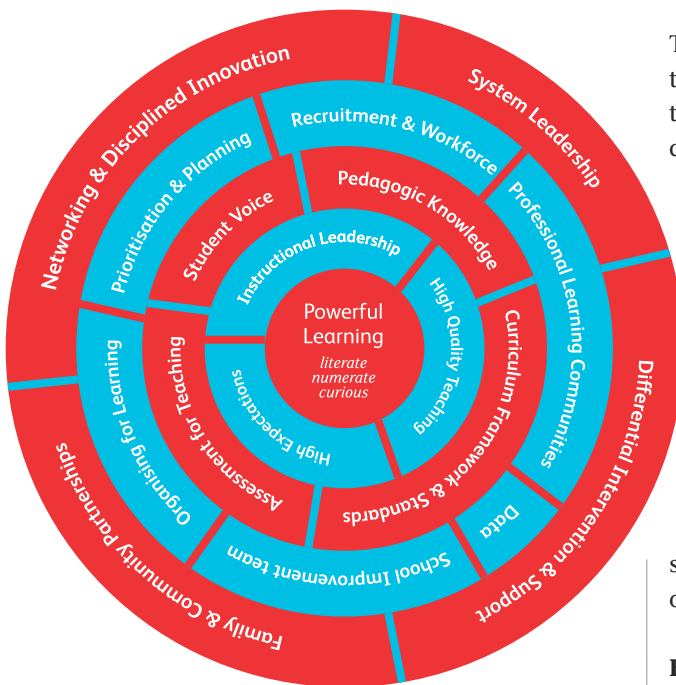
*Figure 1: Powerful learning school improvement framework*

pinpointed precisely the issues that need to be addressed.

» They deploy expertise strategically. Effective MATs broaden the leadership experience of their best and emerging leaders.

» They coach improvement in teaching and learning. Improving the quality of teaching and learning is integral to improving the performance of pupils and students.

» They use inquiry-based learning as the flywheel to accelerate improvement. This is the flip side of the coaching coin.

» They empower their middle leaders. MATs miss a trick if they limit the practice of distributed leadership to senior leaders.

» They evolve and apply some non-negotiables. Most MATs insist on some degree of operational consistency in areas such as financial, business and data systems, school policies and HR.

» They work with and learn from other schools. MATs appreciate that they need the stimulus and learning that comes from engaging with outside schools and practices.

»  They know their impact. Highperforming MATs can demonstrate the impact they are making on improving academies within the chain.

This requires strategies that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity within the school and system (Hopkins 2013). One cannot just drive to continue to raise standards in an instrumental way, as happens in many academy chains; one also needs to develop social, intellectual and organisational capital infused by an unrelenting commitment to student learning. Building capacity demands that we replace numerous individual and idiosyncratic initiatives with a coherent and effective school improvement strategy that reflects the moral purpose of the academy chain. This requires putting the learner first and then developing, as we see in the following section, a strategy for school improvement or capacity building from the inside out.

**Building capacity for improvement from the inside out**

In building capacity for school improvement a new MAT needs to focus on ensuring that learning conditions are created within the schools that enable every young person to reach their potential – wherever that may lead. This requires the school and MAT to have a clearly articulated and shared view on the strategy that they adopt for capacity building and school improvement.

The model shown in Figure 1 illustrates an action framework designed to help both those working directly in schools and those within the MAT to more effectively manage the realignment of top-down and bottom-up change over time. This approach also introduces successful change by moving from the inside out rather than the 'outside in'.

The main features of the approach are as follows.

1. In the centre is powerful learning, which represents the school's goal that every student will reach their potential, together with a definition of achievement that embraces standards of literacy, numeracy and learning capability (curiosity). Such a learning focus reflects the framework for personalised learning pathways described at the end of this section.

2. Effective schools are not simply an amalgam of disparate elements. There are some essential features that need to be in place – the foundations upon which the narrative of school

improvement is built. Without these, a school will be unable to achieve or sustain excellence. These three features, represented in the second ring of the diagram, are:

- the importance of instructional leadership
- the quality of teaching
- a culture of orderliness and high expectations.

The MAT encourages each school to build its own distinctive narrative for improvement around them.

3. The next ring is comprised of those essential ingredients of effective classroom practice necessary for powerful learning:

- the teacher's repertoire of teaching and learning strategies
- the organisation of curriculum in terms of frameworks, progression, enquiry and standards
- the way that learning is assessed in order to inform teaching
- the ways in which students are involved in developing their learning skills.

4. The organisational conditions supportive of high levels of teaching and learning are the key elements in the next ring:

- collaborative planning that focuses on student outcomes
- professional learning committed to improvement of classroom practice
- regular use of data, enquiry and self-evaluation to improve teaching
- the recruitment of teaching staff and the

deployment of the whole school workforce
- the identification of a school improvement team to provide research and development capacity
- the way in which the school is organised to most effectively promote learning.

5. The broader systemic context of the school is represented in the outer ring of the diagram, showing four opportunities enjoyed by all schools and their MATS:

- the opportunity to network with other schools in order to share good practice and engage in disciplined innovation
- the way in which schools embrace and respond to the needs and opportunities provided in their locality through parents, carers and communities
- new opportunities for heads to engage in broader forms of 'system leadership', where they take on a variety of roles in supporting other schools
- the opportunity to engage in more purposeful reflection on the effectiveness of the school's provision, using both Ofsted and the MAT's own quality assurance processes.

Underpinning this framework is the critical distinction between 'outside in' and inside out working. Most school reform, especially in England now, assumes that change comes from the outside–in. The logic goes something like this: a high quality policy is developed and then implemented, with the assumption that it will impact upon the school and be internalised through the school's planning processes. In turn, it is assumed this will impact on classroom practices and will therefore positively affect students' learning and achievement. It is as if the drive comes from the outer circle of the diagram and permeates the various layers, hopefully reaching the powerful learning of students in the centre. As we all know, sadly this is rarely the case.

The evidence suggests that in those schools that have made the jump from 'good to great', the linear logic of policy implementation has been inverted. Instead of doing outside–in better, or more efficiently, they start from the centre of the circle and move outwards; these schools begin at the other end of the sequence, with student learning. It is as if they begin by asking, 'what changes in student learning and
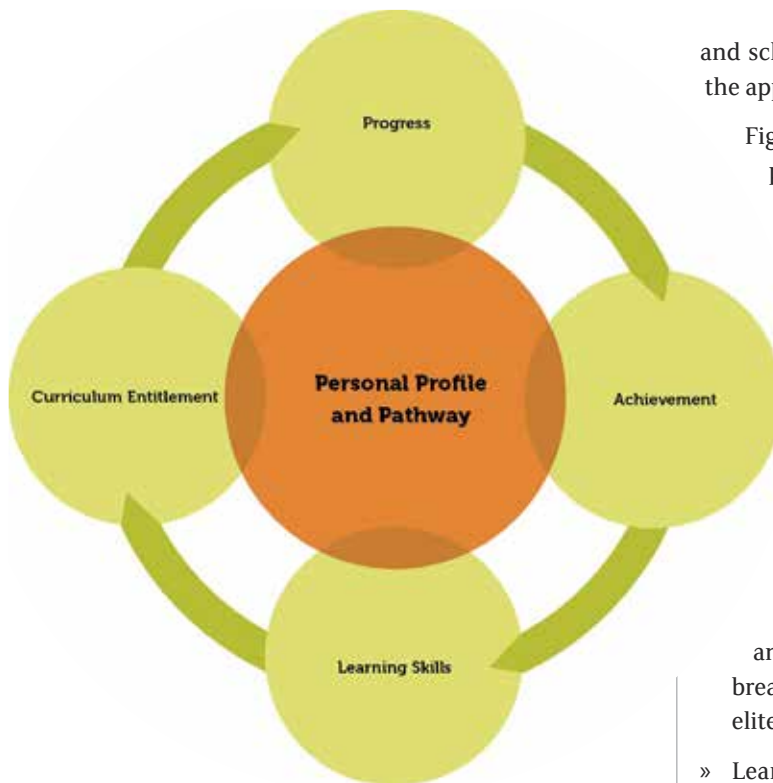
*Figure 2: Personal profile and pathway*

performance do we wish to see this year?' Having decided these, they then discuss what teaching strategies will be most effective at bringing them about, and reflect on what modifications are required to the organisation of the school to support these developments. Finally, they embed within their school improvement plans those policy initiatives that provide the best fit with the school's vision, values and goals for enhancing student achievement.

It is these schools, ironically, that also appear to be the most effective at interpreting the national reform agenda. The underlying purpose of the powerful learning framework described above is to generate this degree of confidence and agency in schools and MATS. In so doing, it exposes the paucity of simple autonomy as a recipe for systemic educational reform. It is this framework that provides the scaffolding for inside-out working.

Inside-out working is predicated fundamentally on putting the learner first. This implies treating every student as an individual and with respect, recognising that they have a unique set of gifts that it is our privilege to nurture. This aspiration is not fanciful idealism: it can be achieved through the rigorous application of the personalised learning

and school improvement strategies that underpin the approach described in this paper.

Figure 2 exemplifies a personal profile and pathway that applies the moral purpose of putting the learner first and working from the inside out. There are four key aspects to the personalised learning pathway that describes a learner's entitlement and provide a framework for action and quantification:

» Progress: all will make at least expected progress; with the aim that the majority of every cohort make greater than expected progress.

» Achievement: all will achieve in line with national norms and the great majority will outstrip this; breaking down the connection between elite schooling and the elite universities.

» Learning skills: all have a unique and personalised learner profile that will enable them to take control of their learning, understanding their areas of strength as well as areas to develop.

» Curriculum entitlement: all have a curriculum guarantee that includes access to additional experiences such as, debating, service learning and leadership, which will enrich their time at school and strengthen their view of themselves and their place in the world.

This framework and associated strategies have been validated by research and practice in achieving success for learners whatever their starting point (Hopkins 2007, 2013). These strategies and the overall approach are described in the sections below. This is not however, an instrumental or technocratic approach to capacity building; it also needs to be rooted in the school's and MAT's values, reflecting their moral purpose.

**Key components of the inside out approach**
Space precludes a detailed exposition of the 'inside out' capacity building approach (see Hopkins 2013). Three of the key components are the whole school design, the school improvement pathway and the primacy of teacher development.

### Leadership

As has been seen, outstanding schools are driven by a moral purpose ensuring that all learners reach their potential both academically and socially, within a humanising school ethos. Such leadership will have a total and persistent focus on high quality teaching and learning, a rigorous, coherent and enquiry-led curriculum, and developmental performance management. Leadership will be shared within and across schools through the use of school improvement teams.

### Personalised learning

These schools also personalise the learning experiences of all students. This includes, as seen above, the creation of personalised learning pathways, the active use of personal tutoring and the acquisition of a range of learning skills. There is a commitment to assessment for learning and the provision of personalised support that embraces the voice of the learner. These strategies are designed to ensure that students have high quality learning experiences, make excellent progress and are motivated to achieve the highest standards.

### Curriculum frameworks

High performing MATs have an unrelenting focus on literacy and numeracy within a wide-ranging curriculum entitlement. Crucially this involves a strong focus on vocational education, ICT and coding. This also includes the active use of learning platforms and new technologies, the creation of personalised curriculum pathways and the facilitation of cross-curricular enquiry-based learning expeditions. These frameworks are designed to ensure curriculum progression, cohesion and rigour that will enable learners to acquire the appropriate skills and qualifications that lead to employment, further education and higher education opportunities .

### High quality teaching

In outstanding schools, high quality teaching is ensured by a common framework for teaching and learning being adopted across the school, with professional development being influenced by 'instructional rounds' that result in a deeper understanding of the link between teaching and learning (Hopkins, Craig and Knight 2015). This will be driven by evidence-based strategies for improved learning and teaching and the development of best practice through collaborative working.

### Partnerships

Schools within a MAT should also promote partnerships that increase capacity and improve outcomes for learners, schools and families through strong parental involvement, active community and employer connectivity, and excellent student progression, 3–19 and beyond. In designing and developing partnerships to support this progress there will be a strong emphasis on understanding community needs and the effective facilitation of collaborative working at all levels.

### Accountability

Accountability for the highest of standards is a fundamental aspect of an effective MAT's ethos. In this regard, there is an expectation that schools will share a commitment to meeting the most demanding of external accountability measures. Of equal importance is the need to rigorously address internal accountability measures through the adoption of effective practices in assessment and data management. This includes developing robust systems and processes to embed effective practices in school self-evaluation, and tracking students' progress on a regular (typically, six-weekly) basis.

*Figure 3: Six core elements*

### Whole school design

The most effective MATs deliver on their moral purpose for student achievement by the adoption of a whole-school design that comprises six core elements, implicit in the framework described in the previous section and as outlined in Figure 3. At the heart of this model of school improvement are the values, entitlements and guarantees referred to previously, which give the schools their distinctive ethos and that are reflected in the key components of the whole-school design. These six elements are the essential features of an outstanding school and each is underpinned by a set of proven practices that will be consistently adopted across the MATs family of schools (Hopkins 2001, 2012).

The important point is that these are not a set of prescriptive practices to be implemented slavishly. They are a set of principles to which all sign up – a sort of covenant – with the ensuing practices being co-constructed. In some instances, the MAT will be proposing strategies and materials that have already been developed as part of action research with other schools. Converter schools will contribute their own practices to the overall model and sponsored academies will be encouraged, where existing practice lacks impact, to adopt one of the trust's proven approaches. In that way, the best of practice will be identified, developed and then shared across the MAT.

### Progressing on the school improvement pathway

As is now evident, this approach to school improvement is based on proven research and practice (Fullan 2011; Hattie 2015; Hopkins 2013). One of the critical features of the strategy is the adoption of a phased approach to school improvement. Whether the school is a converter or sponsored academy, the intention is that all those in the family of schools will be on an improvement journey that leads to excellence, shown in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: School improvement pathway*

As a result of recent and ongoing school improvement work (Hopkins 2013, Hopkins and Craig 2016), there is now specific knowledge about the combination of strategies needed to move a school and a system along the performance continuum towards excellence. When systems and schools use this knowledge strategically they make significant and rapid progress.

Each of the four phases of the performance continuum includes five improvement dimensions:

» curriculum

» teaching

» learning

» assessment/data and accountability

» leadership.

Key issues that emerge at each step along the pathway are identified and described, and a series of questions then helps progress development, by helping school leaders to complete an honest diagnosis of their school's current performance, and prepare a plan for progress towards excellence.

The milestones in the diagram illustrate the progress to be made, and the descriptions in each cell are deliberately stark in order to generate discussion. The critical point is that the school leadership needs to make a realistic and accurate diagnosis of their current performance.

### Figure 4: School improvement pathway

It is only when there is accurate self-evaluation that a precise plan for continual improvement can be developed. At times, and often because of hubris, a too positive assessment is made. This leads to elevated expectations: the wrong strategies for professional learning are identified, which are incompatible with the learning needs of the school's students. It should also be recognised that in reality, any school's characteristics are not confined to just one column and that the overall profile may draw from a number of columns recognising the relative strengths and weaknesses of any school, but rarely is the spread across all the diagram.

The following provides a very brief summary of the appropriate intervention and support and the characteristics of each school type at each phase of development.

*Getting on to the improvement pathway*
Schools that are 'getting on to the improvement pathway' lack the capacity to improve. They need a high level of external support and direction in order to get the basics in place and to establish the preconditions for success. Within these schools a number of early interventions and changes need to be made which have a direct focus on basic organisational issues.

*Schools on the journey to good*
Schools that are 'on the journey to good' need to refine their developmental priorities, focus on specific teaching and learning issues and build capacity within the school to support this work.

*Getting to outstanding schools*
'Getting to outstanding' schools need in this phase of their journey specific strategies that ensure the school remains a 'moving' school, continues to enhance pupil performance and engage in networking with other schools in the MAT and beyond. The key issues here are about sustainability, succession planning and moving to consistent system/MAT level teaching and leadership approaches to developing staff at all levels.

*Outstanding schools that sustain excellence*
The signal characteristic of 'outstanding' schools and schools that do sustain excellence is the way in which they continue to search for excellence internally and support other schools in their own journeys of improvement externally.

There is now clear evidence of the characteristics of those schools that have moved along the improvement pathway and sustain excellence (Ofsted, 2009). These are the characteristics that all MAT schools should endeavour to display and be working towards:

» They have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed.

» They excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time.

» They prove constantly that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, and that schools really can be learning communities.

» Their achievements do not happen by chance, but by highly reflective, carefully planned and implemented strategies that serve these schools well in meeting the many challenges that obstruct the path to success.

» They gain the trust of parents/carers and the support of the community, and are constantly looking for ways to improve further.

**The primacy of teacher development**

The key strategic question is: how does one reliably deliver on aspiration over time and across a range of schools for students to achieve their potential? The last decade and a half of educational research has given us some robust answers (see for example: Fullan, 2011; Whelan, 2009; McKinsey, 2007, 2010). Four stand out:

» It is now clear from all the international comparisons of school systems that 'the quality of a school or system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.'

» In most Western countries the variability between schools is far smaller (34%) than the variability within schools (64%). The implication being that there is a great deal of variance that individual teachers have on student learning.

» The most powerful teacher effects are related to the way teachers establish, implement and monitor the conditions for student learning in the classroom in a precise and reflective way (Hattie, 2009).

» There is in addition a strong leadership effect related to the way a culture of teaching and learning is established within the school.

The implication for the MAT is that if the aspiration of personalised learning is to be realised, then schools need to be places where teachers and leaders learn as much as students. This is why the most outstanding MATs place such a high premium on teacher and leader development based on the following principles:

» All development is focused on the professional behaviours that reliably enhance the progress of students.

» Teacher and leader development is best achieved through the extension of individual professional skill within a collaborative setting. It also depends on the school and trust seeing professional growth/ development and accountability as opposite sides of the same coin.

» Every teacher and leader within school is on a professional development pathway that leads to the extension of professional practice, is amenable to accreditation and can lead to the acquisition of a higher degree. The SSAT is currently developing this opportunity in conjunction with The University of Bolton.

The Teacher Development framework that the SSAT is developing with the University of Bolton is built around the following components:

» Every teacher and adult works towards the award of either the Trust Certificate in Teaching Learning or Professional Certificate in Teaching Learning as part of their probationary/ induction programme at the school.

» Successful completion of the Professional Certificate gives access to the trust's customised Masters programme that has been designed to specifically support the school improvement strategy described in this paper.

» The Leadership for Powerful Learning module that focuses on the contribution leadership makes to the progress of student learning becomes part of the MAT's leadership development strategy.

» Opportunities are also available for those teachers and senior leaders wishing to pursue their professional practice at Doctoral level.

*Figure 5: School improvement pathway*

**Building capacity at the regional and system level**

In outstanding MATs, capacity is also built at the regional level to ensure that all those in the trust's family of schools progress as rapidly as possible towards excellence. Figure 5 illustrates how this works:

» Central to regional capacity building is the regional director or executive principal who provides leadership, develops the narrative and acts as the trust's champion in that geographic area.

» One of their key tasks is to build local capacity by training a group of lead practitioners in the MAT's ways of working, materials and strategies.

» The training design used to develop trainers is the Joyce and Showers (1995) coaching model.

» These trainers then work with the school improvement teams in each school to build within-school capacity and consistency.

» Inter-school networking allows for authentic innovation and the transfer of outstanding practice, thus building the capacity of the network as a whole.

The three key aspects to this strategy – school improvement teams, staff development processes and networking – should provide the focus for much of the training for executive principals or equivalent within the MAT, as they play their critical role in systemic improvement:

The *school improvement team* is cross-hierarchical, and could be comprise 2-6 people in comparatively small schools, to 6-10 in large schools. Though one of the team is likely to be the head or principal, it is important to establish groups that are genuinely representative of the range of perspectives and ideas available in the school. School improvement team members should also not come together in any already existing group within the school, such as the senior management team or a heads of department group; this is to minimise the problem of 'pooled rationalisations'.

**Figure 5: Regional capacity building model**

The school improvement group is responsible for managing school improvement efforts on a day-to-day basis within the school. They are supported

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through a core-training programme, through networking with school improvement teams from other schools and by external consultancy support and facilitation. The establishment of such a team creates the research and development capacity for the school while also retaining the existing structures required for organisational stability and efficiency. It also unlocks staff potential that is often stifled within formal structures, and opens up new collaborations.

The design of staff development that leads to enhanced levels of student achievement needs to be based on the following six principles:

» Make space and time for enhancing teacher enquiry and creating a 'professional practice'.

» Utilise evidence from research and practice in developing a range of teaching strategies that impact on student learning.

» Study the impact on student learning and use data formatively and habitually.

» Invest in school-based staff development, both deductive and inductive, for extending teachers' repertoires.

» Link the classroom focus with whole-school development and embed teaching strategies within curriculum plans.

» Use this emerging professional practice as a basis for networking and system-wide capacity building.

At the basic level, networks facilitate the sharing of good practice; at the highest level they can act as agents of system renewal. The emerging typology of networks along this continuum looks something like this:

» At its most basic level, a network could be regarded as simply groups of teachers joining together for a common curriculum purpose and for the sharing of good practice.

» At a more ambitious level, networks could involve groups of teachers and schools joining together for the purposes of school improvement with the explicit aim of not just sharing practice, but of enhancing teaching, learning and student achievement throughout a school or group of schools.

» Over and above this, networks could also not just serve the purpose of knowledge transfer and school improvement, but also involve groups of stakeholders joining together for the implementation of specific policies locally (and possibly nationally).

» A further extension of this way of working is found when groups of networks (within and outside education) link together for system improvement in terms of social justice and inclusion.

» Finally, there is the potential for groups of networks to work together, not just on a social justice agenda, but also to act explicitly as agents for system renewal and transformation.

This typology not only provides a way of categorising networks, but also demonstrates how they have an explicit role to play in systemic change. As academisation matures as a structural change strategy in England, MATs and their networks will undoubtedly aspire to collaborate as agents for system renewal and transformation. We have only just embarked on this phase of our journey!

**Conclusion**

It is clear from international benchmarking studies of school performance (Hopkins 2013) and the evidence quoted in this paper that:

» Decentralisation by itself increases variation and reduces overall system performance. There is a consequent need for some 'mediating level' within the system to connect the centre to schools and schools to each other – academy Chains and MATs can provide this function.

» Leadership is the crucial factor both in school transformation and system renewal, so investment, particularly in head/principal and leadership training, is essential – hence the use of frameworks such as the whole-school design and improvement pathway to guide action.

» The quality of teaching is the best determinant of student performance, so any reform framework must address the professional repertoires of teachers and other adults in the classroom – thus the focus in high performing trusts on the progress of learners and the development of teachers.

» Outstanding educational systems find ways of learning from their best and strategically

use the diversity within the system to good advantage – this is why capacity needs to be built not only within trusts, but between them, increasingly at the system level.

**Implications: questions to consider**

*For practitioners:* What are the key leadership and pedagogic strategies that will enhance the progress and reduce the variation of performance between our students?

*For policymakers:* What are the policy levers that will reliably ensure that academies build capacity, can work from the inside out, reduce the variation in school/student performance and become agents of social equity and justice within our system?

*For researchers:* How can we effectively develop frameworks and specifications of practice from research evidence that will enable our teachers and leaders to more effectively create the conditions for powerful learning in their schools? And, further, assist policymakers in creating frameworks for educational equity within our system?

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