

Central South Consortium

Report for Joint Committee

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Version: 8th December

The Central South Wales Educational Challenge The action plan, December 2013 to July 2014

The five local authorities that constitute Central South Wales educate more than 30% of all Welsh children and young people. Across a range of indicators the overall performance of schools is a matter of considerable concern. Consequently, urgent action is needed to address this situation. With this in mind, the five local authorities are launching a major strategy to raise standards across all schools in the region.

This document presents the action plan agreed by the five Directors in order to get things moving. It was formulated on their behalf by a group of head teachers, working with an external consultant, Professor Mel Ainscow. The strategy aims to have a rapid impact, whilst at the same time creating a framework for longer term growth across the system. It will require significant changes in the practices of many stakeholders, at the school, local authority and consortium levels.

The rationale

The approach to be used is based on experiences and research elsewhere that point to five important lessons. These are as follows:

- **Lesson 1. Education systems have untapped potential to improve themselves.** The starting point must be with contextual analysis in order to identify areas of concern and the human resources that can be used to support improvement efforts in relation to these issues.
- **Lesson 2. Networking is a means of sharing effective ways of working.** Pathways have to be created that cross the social boundaries that prevent the movement of ideas within the system.
- **Lesson 3. School partnerships are a powerful means of fostering improvements.** An essential ingredient is an engagement with data that can bring an element of mutual challenge to such collaborative processes.
- **Lesson 4. Leadership has to come from within schools.** Individually and collectively, schools have to take responsibility for their own improvement.

- **Lesson 5. Local authorities (and, in Central South Wales, their consortium) have important roles in making sure this happens.**
This requires new thinking and practices amongst the staff involved.

These five lessons provide a rationale for what is increasingly referred to as a *self-improving school system*. However, such developments do not happen by chance - they require effective leadership at the school, local authority and consortium levels. They also need national policies that help to create the conditions within which locally led action can be taken.

Moving forward

Whilst schools working together has enormous potential to drive improvements, it must not be seen as a simple and straight forward measure for addressing the problems facing schools. Unless introduced effectively it can simply be yet another fad: effective when driven by committed individuals but fading as it spreads more widely. There is also the danger that it could proliferate meetings that lead to lots of talk and little action that impacts on children's learning.

With these concerns in mind, the approach to be used in the Central South Wales Challenge will require *high leverage* activities. That is to say, it must involve actions that change the behaviour of those involved, focusing specifically on improving teaching and leadership practices in schools. Too often approaches used to bring about large-scale changes in organisations are low leverage - they tend to change the way things look but not the way they work. Examples of low leverage activity in the education field include: policy documents, toolkits, conferences and in-service courses. Whilst such initiatives may make a contribution, by and large they do not lead to significant changes in thinking and practice. The aim, therefore, must be to identify what may turn out to be less obvious, higher leverage efforts to bring about change in schools.

The plan is to begin by creating school improvement groups (SIGs). As far as possible, each SIG will involve schools from all five authorities. In the primary sector there will be 36 groups, each involving approximately ten schools; and in the secondary sector there will be ten groups, each with 6 schools. Special schools will be included in these groups. Appropriate arrangements will be made for Welsh medium schools.

Each SIG will include a mix of schools at different stages of development. Their varied strengths and weaknesses will offer possibilities for using differences as a resource to stimulate the sharing of expertise and joint efforts to innovate in order to:

- Improve the performance of every school;
- Increase the numbers of good and outstanding schools;
- Reduce the gap between high and low performing groups of learners; and
- Improve outcomes for vulnerable groups of students.

Research suggests the following conditions that lead to the greatest impact of such partnerships on pupil achievement:

- here is a collective commitment to improve the learning of every pupil, in every school in the group T
- he schools analyse statistical data, using professional insights in order to identify areas that need addressing T
- n the same way, schools pinpoint expertise within the schools that can be used to address these concerns I
- ollaborative activities involve people at different levels, including, in some instances, children and young people C
- small number of head teachers take on the role of leading these collaborative activities A

In other to get started, schools will share data with one another. They will then dig deeply into these comparative data in order to expose areas of strength that can be used to influence performance across the group, whilst also identifying areas for improvement in every school.

It is anticipated that, within the SIGs, pairings (or sometimes trios) of schools will be created in order to address particular challenges in a more intensive way. Here again, an engagement with data will be vital in order that schools go beyond cosy relationships that have no impact on outcomes. Consequently, the school partnerships that evolve will base their relationships on evidence about each other's strengths and weaknesses, so that they can challenge each other to improve.

The focus of these partnerships will be on the improvement of teaching and leadership. With this in mind, use will also be made of certain techniques that are known to be powerful in helping school partnerships to work effectively, both in terms of moving best practices around and generating new ways of working. These include various forms of learning walk, where practitioners compare their different approaches; frameworks that are used to analyse school and classroom practices; and lesson study, a powerful approach to professional development that involves small groups of teachers in joint planning, structured classroom observations and mutual critique.

There is strong evidence that, using these powerful techniques, partnerships can have a positive impact on the learning of pupils in each of the participating schools. This is an important finding in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to why a relatively strong school should support other schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself.

Implications for all stakeholders

The aim, then, is for Central South Wales to develop as a self-improving school system. This means that those within schools must take responsibility for raising standards within their own organisations. It also requires a strengthening of the partnerships between schools, such that they are able to support and challenge one another. Such an approach requires significant changes in thinking and practice, not least amongst head teachers, who will be expected to provide the leadership for these developments. It also has major implications for the work of local authority and consortium staff, particularly those who are most directly concerned with school improvement.

Experience elsewhere suggests that the development of self-improving school systems requires local authority staff (and the additional support they commission from the consortium) to focus on four *key tasks*, as follows:

Task 1. Knowing the schools – Whilst this starts with a thorough scrutiny of statistical data, it has to go much deeper. Specifically, it requires external support staff to work with head teachers in reviewing their schools regularly, through the observation of practice, scrutiny of pupils' work, and by listening to the views of different stakeholders. Some local authorities have found it helpful to develop a common framework to guide such school review processes. In addition, they have found it useful to involve practitioners from other schools in reviewing practices, in particular, successful head teachers and heads of departments. However, the most important thing is that the head of the school must take responsibility for leading the review, using external colleagues to bring different perspectives to the process. Through these internal review processes, head teachers develop a better understanding of their school's relative strengths and weaknesses. This is then used for strategic purposes to bring about improvements within the school.

Task 2. Brokering partnerships – These same review processes will enable local authority and consortium staff to develop a deeper knowledge of the schools. In this way, they can pinpoint areas of concern, as well as human resources that can be drawn on to address these challenges. Their task is then to help broker appropriate partnerships between schools, such that the best practices are made available to a wider number of learners. Although it is essential that head teachers take on the central role in leading such partnerships, experience elsewhere suggests that support staff can provide an important role in encouraging their development.

Task 3. Monitoring the impact – As such partnerships develop, local authority and consortium staff need to monitor what happens, since, as noted above, there is a danger that they lead to the proliferation of meetings that result in no actions being taken. On the other hand, there is strong evidence indicating that, when action orientated, collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarization within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. It does this by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating context specific new knowledge.

Task 4. Intervening where progress remains a concern - As part of the process of monitoring developments in the schools, local authority officers will sometimes have to make decisions as to whether an individual school has, in fact, got the leadership capacity to move their organisations forward, even with the support they are receiving from other schools. Where this is not the case, local authority staff must be prepared to use their powers of intervention. In making such decisions, individual officers need to draw on the support of their colleagues. With this in mind, some authorities hold fortnightly team meetings where concerns about particular schools are discussed. This allows individuals to think aloud about their concerns in a mutually supportive context, whilst, at the same time, encouraging sharing of ideas and knowledge of expertise available across the system in order to develop further responses. Where serious concerns continue, it has also been found helpful for pairs of local authority officers to do joint visits to a school.

It is important to recognize that these tasks are likely to require significant changes in the thinking and practices of all those involved, across the five local authorities and amongst the team within the consortium. This being the case, they too will require support and opportunities for professional development.

Next steps

The strategy outlined in this document is the agreed action plan for improving the quality of education for children and young people, in all schools in Central South Wales. As such, it will incorporate other activities (such as the Improving and Outstanding Teaching programmes) that are already underway and can contribute to the achievement of this goal.

In order to implement the Challenge strategy in a way that injects pace and urgency into the system, the following actions will be taken between January and July 2014:

1. A strategy group will be formed, consisting of head teachers who are committed to school to school support
2. A briefing meeting will be held for all head teachers in the five authorities to explain the approach
3. School improvement groups will be formed, making sure to get an appropriate mix of partners in each
4. Each SIG will nominate one of their members to act as facilitator
5. A series of workshops will be arranged for the SIG facilitators, during which they will learn about procedures that have been found to be effective in promoting effective school-to-school partnerships
6. Work will be carried out with local authority and consortium staff in order to develop their roles in ways that are appropriate
7. A regional conference will be organised in the summer, during which the SIGs will present the findings of their work

It is anticipated that all of this will lead to the formulation of a longer-term strategy aimed at the further development of a self-improving system.

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