

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Flaenoriaethau'r Chwched Senedd](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) consultation on [Sixth Senedd Priorities](#)

CYPE SP 33

Ymateb gan: Mel Ainscow CBE - Athro Addysg Emeritws, Prifysgol Manceinion / Athro Addysg, Prifysgol Glasgow

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Beth yn eich barn chi yw'r prif flaenoriaethau neu'r materion y dylai'r Pwyllgor eu hystyried yn ystod y Chwched Senedd? Os oes modd, nodwch eich barn o ran sut y gallai'r Pwyllgor fynd i'r afael â hyn.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Sixth Senedd? Where possible, please set out your view about how the Committee could address them.

Thema 1: Addysg oedran ysgol | Theme 1: School-age education

Despite considerable efforts over recent years, significant numbers of children and young people in Wales are let down by the education system, many of who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This suggests that the overall priority should be to continue the improvement of the national education system, focusing in particular on the principle of equity, summarised by UNESCO in a Guide published in 2017 as: 'Every learner matters and matters equally'.

In taking this agenda forward, important lessons can be drawn from Schools Challenge Cymru. Between 2014 and 2017 I led this national initiative to promote equity across the country, the design of which was much influenced by what had previously happened in the City Challenge programmes in London and Greater Manchester (see detailed accounts in: Ainscow, Chapman & Hadfield, 2020; Ainscow, 2021).

Lessons from these experiences point to the need for radical changes in the way that the Welsh education system is organised. Central to these changes is a much greater



emphasis on school working together in taking greater responsibility for their own improvement.

Schools Challenge Cymru

The overall purpose of Schools Challenge was to accelerate progress across the education system. In particular, it aimed to bring about rapid improvements in the performance of schools serving the more disadvantaged communities and use lessons from these developments to strengthen the capacity of the education system to improve itself (Ainscow, 2016).

Building on earlier experiences in London and Greater Manchester, the Welsh initiative worked with 40 secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities (designated as 'Pathways to Success' schools) and their local primary school partners. Similar to City Challenge, a team of expert advisers were involved in supporting these schools. In addition, a small group of champions advised on the overall strategic direction of the initiative.

The advisers and champions were directly accountable to the Minister for Education and Skills. As was the case in City Challenge, the Minister was closely associated with the initiative, visiting each of the schools at least twice over the first 18 months. This provided the political mandate that is essential to improvement strategies that mainly emphasise bottom-up action.

Impact

The results showed that the rate of improvement in the Pathways to Success schools was faster than the overall progress made across Wales over the same period. Importantly, the attainment of students entitled to free school meals across the schools improved significantly.

In making sense of these trends, it is important to remember that the participating schools were chosen because of the challenges they face and the fact that they had, to varying degrees, performed poorly over many years. Some of them became striking examples of what is possible when the expertise and energy within schools are mobilised.

Beyond the 40 schools, there was evidence, too, that Schools Challenge Cymru began to have a 'ripple effect' across the education system in ways that raised expectations about how rapidly improvements can be achieved. This has implications for future efforts to improve outcomes for learners from low-income families, where low expectations can be a factor in preventing their progress.



An independent evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru concluded that the quality of leadership and management had improved in the majority of the Pathways to Success schools. Involvement in the programme was considered to be largely, or wholly, responsible for the changes in pupil engagement. The report also concluded that the programme had strengthened professional development within the schools and, in some cases, extended it.

It is worth noting, too, that the most significant progress occurred in the Central South Wales area, where the implementation of the initiative was coordinated by a team of headteachers from across the five partner local authorities (Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018).

The work of Schools Challenge Cymru showed that schools in Wales have untapped potential that needs to be mobilised in order that they can be more effective in improving themselves. The major contribution of the advisers involved in the programme was in using their expertise and wide experience to identify and make better use of this latent potential.

Drawing lessons

Our analysis of what happened over the three years of Schools Challenge Cymru suggests six interconnected lessons that arise from the efforts to move forward schools that had previously been stuck:

Lesson 1: Start by analysing the context. Whilst there were some common factors that have previously prevented progress across the forty schools, each one had to be analysed in detail. This analysis involved advisers in working alongside school leaders in collecting and engaging with context specific information related to factors such as culture, capacity and confidence. Whilst this always started with statistical performance data, it required much more in-depth probing, through classroom observations, scrutiny of students' work, and discussions with students, staff and governors.

Lesson 2: Mobilise leadership from within the school. Contextual analysis continued throughout the period of Schools Challenge in order to monitor the impact of the improvement strategies that had been introduced. In this way, barriers to progress were identified and addressed. As a result, strategies were customised in response to the developing situation in each context, using evidence as a catalyst for change.

Lesson 3: Promote a culture of learning amongst students and staff. Across the schools, the progress made led to changes in expectations regarding what is possible



and higher aspirations of what students can achieve. Strategies used to achieve these changes varied from school to school. There were, however, certain overall patterns. So, for example, it was evident at the start of the programme that most of the Pathways to Success schools lacked effective arrangements for tracking student progress in order to target appropriate support. Improving this factor proved to be relatively straight forward, usually by drawing on the expertise of schools that already have effective mechanisms in place.

Lesson 4: Connect to relevant external support. We know from research that a feature of schools that face challenging circumstances is that they tend to become isolated and inward looking. With this in mind, advisers placed considerable emphasis on linking the Pathways to Success schools to other schools, often across local authority borders.

Lesson 5: Find ways of injecting pace. Moving forward with urgency was a central emphasis within Schools Challenge Cymru, not least because overall progress within the Welsh education system had been relatively slow over many years. The approach taken by the advisers was vital in this respect. In particular, they got close to the schools - particularly senior members of staff - through regular visits, supplemented by frequent contacts through phone calls and email. They also established a presence within the schools, so as to connect directly with others who can help to move things forward, including governors.

Lesson 6: Improve the image of the school within its community and more widely. Within a context where schools are, to varying degrees, in competition with one another, external image is a vital factor. The problem was that many of the Pathways to Success schools had a poor image within their local communities, often going back over many years. As a result, they found it difficult to attract students, particularly those from more aspirational families. This meant that they often had spare places that were eventually filled by students excluded from other schools. Given these circumstances, emphasis was placed on promoting the progress made in the Pathways to Success schools in their local communities and, indeed, more widely. This helped to build belief within the schools. Being part of a high-profile national initiative with Government backing helped with this.

Addressing barriers to school improvement

As more effective improvement measures were introduced into the Pathways to Success schools, they experienced various forms of 'turbulence', as taken-for-granted



assumptions about what is possible were subject to challenge. This threw light on some of the factors that had prevented earlier improvement. Our purpose was to demonstrate what is possible and, in so doing, find ways of identifying and overcoming barriers that have held back progress in the past.

Our ongoing monitoring of the developments that occurred suggested that these barriers mainly related to existing ways of working, which, although well intended, consume time and resources, and delay action in the field. They include the following:

- The over emphasis placed by some local authorities on putting schools, particularly those facing challenging circumstances, under increasing pressure.
- Multiple accountability arrangements.
- Lack of effective support for school improvement.
- Actions by local authority (and consortia staff) that limit the freedom of school leaders to take responsibility for their own improvement.
- Poor knowledge amongst staff in local authorities about the strengths and weaknesses of the schools with which they work.
- Governors who, in some instances, seem to be unclear about their roles and responsibilities.
- Local authorities that remained reluctant to make use of their powers of intervention in the case of schools that are a cause for concern.

Looking to the future

In thinking about how the lessons that emerged from Schools Challenge Cymru might be used more widely it is essential to recognise that they do not offer a simple recipe that can be lifted and transferred between contexts. Rather, they define a different approach to improvement, one that uses processes of contextual analysis in order to create bespoke strategies that fit particular circumstances. In so doing this helps to identify resources that can inject pace into efforts to push things forward.

The aim therefore must be to 'move knowledge around' through strengthening collaboration within, between and beyond schools. What is distinctive in the approach is that it is mainly led from within schools, with head teachers and other senior staff having a central role as 'system leaders'. As noted above, this requires changes in thinking, practices and relationships across the education system.

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authority staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of



improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, local authorities can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.

If this thinking is to be implemented, there are significant implications for national policies. Put simply, there is a need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners and other stakeholders have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these should be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

Further relevant reading:

Ainscow, M. (2016) Schools Challenge Cymru: A Catalyst for Change? *Wales Journal of Education* 1 (1), 6-22

Ainscow, M. (2021) Promoting equity in education through system change: lessons from the United Kingdom. In C. McLaughlin and A. Ruby (Eds.) *Implementing Educational Reform: cases and challenges*. Cambridge University Press

Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2020) *Changing education systems: a research-based approach*. Routledge

Hadfield, M. & Ainscow, M. (2018) Inside a self-improving school system: collaboration, competition and transition. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(4), 441-462

UNESCO (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*. Paris: UNESCO

Thema 2: Addysg bellach ac addysg uwch | Theme 2: Further and higher education



Thema 3: Iechyd a lles, gan gynnwys gofal cymdeithasol (i'r graddau y maent yn ymwneud â phlant a phobl ifanc) | Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)

Thema 4: Plant a phobl Ifanc | Theme 4: Children and young people

