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Schools Challenge Cymru: what are the lessons?

A discussion paper

The suggestions made in this paper have been generated through discussion with school leaders and advisers involved in the programme.

Over the last two and a half years or so, Schools Challenge Cymru has worked with forty 'Pathways to Success' secondary schools that had previously experienced considerable difficulties in improving the attainment of their students. All the schools serve communities that are, to varying degrees, disadvantaged. Broadly stated, the aims have been to bring about rapid and sustainable improvements in these schools, and to use the lessons from these developments to strengthen the capacity of the education system to improve itself.

In a relatively short time, the forty schools have all, to varying degrees, made significant progress. In some cases, the gains in terms of examination results have been remarkable. Attainment across the schools on the GCSE Level 2 Inclusive measure has improved by 7 percentage points, with progress for pupils eligible for free school meals improving by 8.2 percentage points. This rate of improvement is faster than the overall progress made across Wales over the same period. A small number of the schools have proved more difficult to move. However, significant progress has been made in strengthening leadership and governance in these schools, such that there are now reasons to be optimistic about their future.

This success has been achieved as a result of actions taken by the schools themselves, with bespoke support from a team of highly experienced advisers. This is reflected in comments such as the following from head teachers:

The Schools Challenge Cymru programme has had a more profoundly positive impact on our school's standards than any other national or regional programme in which the school has participated over the last decade.

Without the support of the programme the rate of progress in raising standards at the school would undoubtedly have been considerably slower.

We really benefited from the School Challenge Cymru programme, and this has been a key driver in our school improvement. The philosophy underpinning the programme was communicated with absolute clarity, complemented by financial and practical help and support.

This paper summarises the lessons that can be drawn from these experiences. Together, these lessons provide a basis for a more effective strategy for strengthening the national approach to school improvement, particularly in relation to schools facing challenging circumstances. Consideration is also given to systemic barriers that need to be addressed in order to implement such a strategy.

Drawing the lessons

The work of Schools Challenge Cymru suggests 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 has been in using their expertise and wide experience to identify and make better use of this latent potential. Importantly, they have worked as a team in carrying out this demanding task, meeting regularly to share ideas and sometimes visiting schools together where a second opinion has seemed necessary.

Our analysis of what has happened suggests six interconnected lessons that arise from the efforts of advisers to move forward schools that had previously been stuck:

Lesson 1: Start by analysing the context. Whilst there are some common factors that have previously prevented progress across the forty schools, each one has had to be analysed in detail. This analysis has 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 starts with statistical performance data, it requires much more in-depth probing, through classroom observations, scrutiny of students' work, and discussions with students, staff and governors.

In carrying out an initial review, advisers were able to assess the capacity of the head and senior staff to lead a push for improvement. In some cases, this led to the conclusion that urgent changes in leadership were necessary. Similarly, some situations required changes in the membership of governing bodies. These changes required advisers to work closely with local authority staff and, occasionally, pressure was required to ensure that changes were made. An adviser described what happened following a school being placed in special measures:

An outstanding headteacher was appointed who has now developed a very effective senior team to lead the school. With the support of Schools Challenge funding and support, they have transformed the ethos and aspirations of the school through setting a clear vision and implementing strategies that focus on teaching and learning.

Having seen a massive leap in the school's examination results during less than a year, the adviser added:

It is now a self-improving school with a motivated staff and a high level of challenge from a very committed governing body that will enable them to become an excellent school providing high quality education for all the pupils.

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

Much of the work of advisers has concentrated on working with senior staff to build confidence and strengthen their leadership skills. So, for example, in a previously failing school that has now made outstanding progress, the adviser commented:

All staff at the school have fully embraced the opportunities offered to them through the Schools Challenge Cymru programme and it has been rewarding working alongside the leadership team and supporting them to raise standards. Teachers at the school now have the necessary drive, resilience and skills to further improve outcomes with a sharp focus on improvement planning and doing things in the right order. The school is built around strong relationships, trust and a sense of community.

Talking about the impact on schools, another adviser commented:

The visible difference in resilience and confidence of leaders at all levels was excellent to see in comparison to where they were three years ago.

It is also evident that, in many cases, advisers have been able to identify other staff within the schools, including some relatively inexperienced teachers and support staff, with the potential to lead improvement efforts. An important factor here has been to ensure that head teachers and other senior staff encourage and support this process of capacity building.

Additional resources and support have been used tactically to support these developments, as a head explained:

The additional funding and wider challenge the school received as part of the Schools Challenge Cymru programme were the catalysts for the accelerated progress made across the main indicators.

The success of these interventions has strengthened the capacity of the schools to manage change through effective school-based professional development activities. This invites a degree of optimism that these changes will lead to sustainable improvement, as noted by another of the advisers:

I was recently reminded by one of the head teachers that, even more significant than the improved pupils' outcomes made in the past two years, is the development of classroom culture and leadership capacity to ensure that these gains will continue to improve year on year.

Lesson 3: Promote a culture of learning amongst students and staff.

Across the schools, the progress that has been made has led to changes in expectations regarding what is possible and higher aspirations of what students can achieve. This is promoting cultural change, leading to what the business guru Peter Senge describes as a 'learning organisation', i.e. a group of people working together collectively to enhance their capacities to create results they really care about. For example, two of the heads explained what this involved in each of their schools:

There is a much more collaborative culture, with more effective targeted professional development and a more collegiate approach to school improvement.

The school has moved from quite a hierarchical approach to reviewing teaching and learning to a more collegiate model at the heart of which has been an attempt to ensure that classroom doors are open, that we celebrate the very best classroom practice at every opportunity, and develop, support and challenge bespoke programmes where underperformance is evident

Strategies used to achieve these changes have varied from school to school. There are, 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. A head explained:

A significantly improved data tracking system recognises underperformance very quickly and support is directed accordingly.

Another head commented:

Once the student outcomes started to improve, the ambition of younger students increased. This caused a snowball effect as teachers' expectations of the students grew.

There was also a sense of fragmentation within many of the schools, with teachers often working alone to solve the problems they face. With this in mind, efforts have been made in all the schools to promote within-school collaboration through the introduction of participatory, inquiry-based professional development strategies. For example, a head saw the impact in terms of:

.... significantly enhanced professional development, bespoke high quality mentoring and coaching from our challenge adviser. The flexibility to allocate resources promptly, all underpinned the change process.

Another head commented:

... the development of lead practitioners within the school to provide a coaching model to others has provided sustainability, evidenced in the increasing number of good and excellent lessons and rapidly improved outcomes.

In some schools, the students themselves have also been mobilised to further strengthen the culture of learning. Once again, this points to underused resources within schools that need to be used more effectively.

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 have placed considerable emphasis on linking the Pathways to Success schools to other schools. A head commented:

As a Pathways to Success school we have worked in partnership to improve our academic results and refine the school improvement systems that lead to sustainable, stable and improving schooling.

In many cases, the partnerships have built upon the existing local area clusters, a feature that is a strength of the Welsh education system. In some instances, these groupings have been further strengthened by the development of joint professional development programmes that have enabled the sharing of cross-phase expertise.

In many cases, too, more intensive partnerships have been brokered with other secondary schools. These partnerships, which take many forms, often involve crossing the borders between local authorities. In some cases, they involve two schools, where the strength of one is used to provide support in addressing concerns in another. Other schools have multiple partners for different purposes. As such partnerships develop, advisers continue monitoring what happens, since they can sometimes lead to the proliferation of meetings that result in no actions being taken.

Commenting on highly successful partnerships in two of the Pathways to Success schools he supported, an adviser explained:

The leadership of both schools see it as a partnership of equals. The head teachers having mutual respect for each other is key. But, just as important, the staff who work with each other across the schools see that it has mutual benefit. Through this work, colleagues have developed their confidence to ask questions of their own practice in order to improve.

Most notably, we have seen how between-school partnerships have led to striking improvements in the performance of schools facing the most challenging circumstances. Commenting on this, an adviser said:

The move from the school as an inward looking organisation to one that has embraced partnerships and contact with other schools, the consortium and other providers, was a critical cultural change and is a significant element in the sustainability of the project.

It is important to recognise, however, that such collaborations are complex. They therefore need careful brokering and monitoring in order to ensure they have an impact. Significantly, we have found that, where they are effective, such collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of students in all the partner 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 relatively strong schools should support other schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself.

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

I have just done a support visit to the Maths departments in each of my schools and it was very pleasing to note the urgency and pace they had all responded to the task ahead of improving outcomes by August. They all have clear actions plans and robust high impact strategies up and running.

Commenting on ways of achieving pace, another adviser argued:

The significant funds made available, combined with ministerial clout, allowed for quick decision making and the rapid implementation of plans and innovations.

Pace has also been encouraged through the involvement of advisers in each school's accelerated improvement board, where those involved hold one another to account for carrying out agreed tasks. Crucially, they involve only a small group of key stakeholders, chaired by the head teacher. This reinforces the point that they and their colleagues are responsible for the improvement of their schools. The notes of the monthly meetings of these boards also provide an efficient means of keeping other stakeholders informed in ways that avoid time-wasting reporting arrangements.

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 is that many of the Pathways to Success schools have had a poor image within their local communities, often going back over many years. As a result, they find it difficult to attract students, particularly those from more aspirational families. This means that they often have spare places that are eventually filled by students who are excluded from other schools. This situation is then made worse by the fact that the schools have difficulty in employing suitably qualified teachers, particularly in those subjects where there is a shortage.

Given these circumstances, emphasis has been placed on promoting the progress made in the Pathways to Success schools in their local communities and, indeed, more widely. This has helped to build belief within the schools. Being part of a high-profile national initiative with Government backing has helped with this, as noted by one head whose school has had a long-term bad image:

We never felt a stigma attached to the programme. Rather, the identification that we are amongst a group of schools uniquely placed to make a real difference to young people's lives, including those who are amongst the most disadvantaged.

Clearly, the rapid progress that many of the schools have made in terms of examination results has helped in this respect, alongside other achievements related to the arts, sport and outdoor activities. Reports of these developments in the media have been systematically orchestrated, and, as a

result, representatives of some of the schools have been invited to make presentations at local and national conferences. Meanwhile, some of the schools are now developing as centres of professional development for staff in other schools.

In these six ways, as intended, Schools Challenge Cymru is having a ripple effect across the education system by demonstrating what is possible with learners from less advantaged backgrounds and then sharing their expertise with others.

Addressing barriers to school improvement

As more effective improvement measures have been introduced into the Pathways to Success schools, we have been experiencing various forms of 'turbulence', as taken-for-granted assumptions about what is possible have been subject to challenge. This has thrown light on some of the factors that have prevented earlier improvement. Our purpose has been 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 have occurred suggests that these barriers mainly relate 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 (and consortia staff) on putting schools, particularly those facing challenging circumstances, under increasing pressure.** This tends to demoralise the key agents of change, i.e. the staff in the schools. It also leads to considerable time being wasted on debating and disputing plans and targets. Whilst target setting is helpful, without powerful support strategies it is unlikely to lead to sustainable change.
- **Multiple accountability arrangements.** This means that school leaders are spending too much time preparing reports for different audiences, and attending various review and scrutiny meetings and, being given different (and at times conflicting) advice on the improvements required and how they can be implemented.
- **Lack of effective support for school improvement.** The challenge advisers working in the consortia are spending far too much time monitoring and reporting on school progress in relation to national accountability procedures. This leaves little time for working closely with schools to support authentic improvement processes in the way the Schools Challenge Cymru advisers have been able to do.
- **Actions by local authority and consortia staff that limit the freedom of school leaders to take responsibility for their own improvement.** As a result, this leads to a sense of dependency on

outsiders to lead improvement efforts, rather than those within schools taking responsibility and being accountable for improved outcomes.

- **Poor knowledge amongst staff in local authorities about the strengths and weaknesses of the schools with which they work.** Too often their descriptions of schools are expressed in terms of superficial patterns of student performance based on headline figures, rather than detailed understandings of teaching and leadership practices, attitudes, expectations and organisational cultures. As a result, latent potential for leading improvement is too often overlooked.
- **Governors who, in some instances, seem to be unclear about their roles and responsibilities.** These community representatives represent another untapped potential that needs to be mobilised to support the efforts of schools to improve themselves. However, we have found that, in some instances, they are a significant barrier to progress. There are important implications here for local authority relationships with governing bodies.
- **Local authorities that remain reluctant to make use of their powers of intervention in the case of schools that are a cause for concern.** In some instances, it may be that they believe that their continued use of lesser actions, such as issuing warning notices, is sufficient. Our concern is that, as a result, difficult situations are sometimes allowed to further deteriorate, leading to a collapse of confidence within schools and the communities they serve. Very often, too, this leads to increased union involvement that creates yet further barriers.

Some of these difficulties arise because of a lack of clarity amongst local authority and consortia staff about their respective roles and responsibilities, although this is definitely improving. The need for certainty in this respect is particularly vital as national efforts are made to develop self-improving school systems, a change that requires radical changes to thinking, practice and relationships at every level.

All of this implies a rethink of national education policy. In particular, policy makers have to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners 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 have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

It is worth adding that some of the practices of Estyn, although often a positive stimulus for change, can also unintentionally act as barriers to progress. For example, we have observed that they can sometimes discourage the efforts of

schools by failing to recognise and celebrate the progress being made. The pattern of frequent monitoring visits to some schools can also act as a distraction from their improvement activities. At the same time, the apparent preoccupation with monitoring paperwork as a means of ensuring consistency in the way local authority and consortia staff work tends to encourage an atmosphere of compliance, leading to a satisfaction with mediocrity and a reluctance to explore new responses. The changes currently underway in Estyn are encouraging in this respect and we have been grateful for the supportive contributions of HMI colleagues to the programme.

Looking to the future

In thinking about how the lessons that have 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 is 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 will require new thinking, practices and relationships across the education system. In this context, the regional consortia have a crucial role in helping to make this happen.

In moving forward, then, the next step must be to use the lessons from Schools Challenge Cymru to encourage rapid improvement across the education system, focusing most urgently on schools facing challenging circumstances. In so doing, it will be important to prevent the diluting of the approach as it is used more widely and to ensure that it is implemented with pace. In this respect, consistent leadership and support from Government will be vital.

**Mel Ainscow
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