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Report

Enabling school-driven system leadership

Rapid review

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1   Executive summary

This rapid review is part of a broader project that investigates how schools are accessing services and support for school improvement and the role of the emerging 'middle tier' or 'mediating layer' in such work. The project as a whole seeks to identify the key features of an effective middle tier in order to inform practice and identify areas where education provision does not currently meet need. The project as a whole will be reported in spring 2013.

NFER funded this rapid review which examines the following questions:

1. What collaborative support mechanisms or initiatives (school-to-school, peer-to-peer and other) have high-performing countries used to improve their performance?

2. What are the barriers to, and enablers of, effective school-to-school support?

3. Are there significant advantages in a middle tier covering all three of the roles of ensuring supply of school places, tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable children?

This is a challenging area for schools and LAs and it is hoped that this report will help identify the key issues and set the parameters for future work. The review is based on 15 English language texts from the UK and abroad published between 2008 and 2012. Staff in NFER's Centre for Information and Reviews worked with staff in the Centre for Tailored Projects and Consultancy to agree and apply the search strategy, a screening strategy, and an appraisal and synthesis strategy. A summary of the search and review processes are presented below and are outlined in detail in the appendices to the report.

Methods and evidence base

A search strategy, a screening strategy, and an appraisal and synthesis strategy were used to identify key recent research literature and commentaries on the middle tier and school support. This involved systematic searching and a consistent, best evidence approach to the selection of literature. Nine of the items examined are from the UK while the other six draw international comparisons. More than half of the selected works explore the impact of different approaches to supporting schools. Another two are case studies of specific approaches. Other works include longitudinal research on the impact of academies, a discussion of approaches being developed in Wales, and another which identifies the characteristics of a high-performing education system (Finland).

Six items draw on syntheses of evidence including literature reviews. One is based on a piece of action research while the remaining works combine quantitative evidence (mainly based on published statistics, such as those collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)), supplemented

by qualitative research including interview data and case studies of specific programmes or initiatives.

What collaborative support mechanisms or initiatives have good and high-performing countries used to improve their performance?

Each of the successful systems identified in the literature had some form of middle tier that was distinct from national government. They include local authorities (LAs) or municipalities, networks of schools e.g. by type (academy chains, etc.), by locality, etc., federations of schools, and schools associated with national organisations (e.g. National College for School Leadership (NCSL)) or national organisations of schools (e.g. teaching schools, local leaders of education or national leaders of education).

There is no common model of a middle tier in successful countries and there are important differences in the extent to which they are formalised into a set structure. However, successful middle tiers display common characteristics and behaviours that enable effective collaboration between schools.

These characteristics ensure that the middle tier works in a way that is flexible and is responsive to schools' needs and priorities. This means that all key players have a role in realising shared aims.

What are the barriers to, and enablers of, effective collaborative support?

In all successful systems, stakeholders are committed to working together and to sharing experience. This is irrespective of whether there is a tradition of competition between institutions.

At the same time, successful systems harness the expertise of all staff through distributed leadership. This broadens the range of expertise which is deployed to enable the education system to thrive,

The middle tier role often encompasses traditional 'support and challenge' functions alongside the work of brokering and enabling ways of working that respond to schools' needs. Successful work by the middle tier role, therefore, evolves as schools move through different stages and are at different stages of that process. Successful middle tiers are most effective where they are robust enough to be able to challenge schools based on rigorous evidence in a process which leads to necessary change.

Barriers to effective collaboration exist where there is a lack of trust between the middle tier and schools or where difficult conversations are avoided, leading to long-term decline. Challenges have also been identified where schools are inward looking and where they confine their efforts to their own institutions and do not assume responsibility for the success of the system as a whole. Barriers have also been encountered where the middle tier lacks sufficient capacity to support and challenge

schools, especially where this prevents them from taking an enhanced role in supporting and facilitating school-led activity.

Are there significant advantages in a middle tier covering all three of the rolesof ensuring the supply of school places, tackling underperformance and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable learners?

The third research question considers what international evidence exists to inform the discussion by Parish *et al.* (2012) about the extent to which there are significant advantages in a middle tier covering all three of the roles (identified by Parish *et al.*) of supplying school places, tackling underperformance and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable children.

These are functions that have traditionally been undertaken by LAs in England and there has been a move to separate those roles in recent years as structures such as academy chains and other networks have taken responsibility for such work.

There is a growing concern about the capacity of LAs due to both changes in overall funding levels and the policy decision to redistribute funding which they had received because of the changes in the school system in England.

There is no clear steer in the international evidence on this specific issue. However, the message that the role of the middle tier depends on its focus and effectiveness rather than on how it is constituted or structured, is key to answering this question.

1   Background

1.1   Introduction

This rapid review is part of a broader project that investigates how schools are accessing services and support for school improvement and the role of the emerging 'middle tier' or 'mediating layer' in such work. The project as a whole seeks to identify the key features of an effective middle tier in order to inform practice and identify areas where education provision does not currently meet need.

The specific objectives of the overarching research are to:

   I.   review current thinking and commentaries on the middle tier/mediating layer and explore how it might develop in the future

  II.   refine and utilise a common analytical framework to carry out research

 III.   identify and evaluate examples of school-led practice and of the emerging mediating layers that are supporting them assessed against the outcomes achieved

 IV.   identify the principles underpinning effective operation of the middle tier

  V.   explore what roles the middle tier should play and whether there is any advantage or disadvantage in the roles being separated

 VI.   explore with schools where they believe there are gaps in current provision of resources and support

VII.   examine the intended impact of this model of working in relation to the difference it makes for learners.

1.2   Project aims and methodology

NFER funded this rapid review which examines the following questions:

1.   What collaborative support mechanisms or initiatives (school-to-school, peer-to-peer and other) have high-performing countries used to improve their performance?

2.   What are the barriers to and enablers of effective school-to-school support?

3.   Are there significant advantages in a middle tier covering all three of the roles of ensuring supply of school places, tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable children?

This is a challenging area for schools and LAs and it is hoped that this research will help to identify the key issues and set the parameters for future work.

The review considers each of these questions in turn, examining the research evidence from the specific angle of each theme. There are strong similarities in the

key messages that emerge when considering each individual research question. Therefore, the overall conclusions are summarised in section 5 in order to draw together the issues at the heart of the discussion about enabling school-driven system leadership. A summary of the search and review processes is presented below and is outlined the appendices to the report.

Methods

Staff in NFER's Centre for Information and Reviews worked with staff in the Centre for Tailored Projects and Consultancy to agree and apply the search strategy, a screening strategy, and an appraisal and synthesis strategy to identify key recent research literature and commentaries on the middle tier and school support. This involved systematic searching and a consistent, best evidence approach to the selection of literature. We focused on published evidence from 2008 to 2012, encompassing literature from within the UK and internationally published in the English language. The research databases consulted were: AEI (Australian Education Index), BEI (British Education Index), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Idox Information Service, and Social Policy and Practice. In addition, we included relevant websites such as ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services), DfE (Department for Education), Local Government Association, Local Schools Network and NCSL.

We identified the 15 pieces of literature which represented the best available evidence, after consideration of their quality and relevance to the review. We then appraised the full text of these items using a common template.

Evidence base

This review draws on 15 pieces of literature. The majority, a total of nine items are from the UK while the other six draw international comparisons. More than half of the selected works explore the impact of different approaches to supporting schools. Another two are case studies of specific approaches. Other works include longitudinal research on the impact of academies, a discussion of approaches being developed in Wales, and another which identifies the characteristics of a high-performing education system (Finland).

Six items draw on syntheses of evidence including literature reviews. One is based on a piece of action research while the remaining works combine quantitative evidence (mainly based on published statistics, such as those collected by the OECD), supplemented by qualitative research including interview data and case studies of specific programmes or initiatives.

Please note the following points about the way we have presented the evidence in this review:

- We have mapped the evidence from the research into the three research questions. While this has led to some duplication of evidence, it enables each

of the key issues to be addressed in turn. These are brought together in the final chapter of this report.

- We have provided a brief description of each item of literature, together with our ratings of relevance and quality, in Appendix 1.
- In reporting the research, we have given the most weight to those studies that we judged to be of higher quality and relevance.

2 What collaborative support mechanisms or initiatives have good and high-performing countries used to improve their performance?

This chapter sets the review in context, looking at the way successful systems have evolved ways of working based on networks. These are usually practitioner led and encourage a sense of responsibility for the education system as a whole rather than for individual institutions. The chapter then considers the role of the middle tier in such systems, offering a typology of the structures that have been adopted and examining their governance arrangements. Finally, it looks at different examples of what constitutes a middle tier in England and in some other countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland and the United States.

2.1 Context

During the last ten years the educational landscape has been transformed, as established structures that traditionally promoted school improvement have given way to a more fluid system based on school-focused networks. The role of networks in promoting educational improvement has been fostered and promoted by government departments, LAs, research literature and by organisations responsible for school improvement and educational attainment. For example, Bennett et al (2003) sought to promote networked learning which it defined as:

> a cluster of schools working with others such as Higher Education Institutions, Local Education Authorities, FE Colleges and community groups to:
>
> - raise standards by improving the learning of pupils and staff, and school-to-school learning
> - develop leadership for learning by developing and harnessing the leadership potential of a wide range of people
> - build capacity for growth and continuous improvement by schools by developing evidence-informed practice and combining resources.

Such work was expected to raise standards, develop capacity and harness expertise across the system through a range of activities including collaboration between institutions as a source of mutual support, specific programmes to mentor and support practitioners, practitioner research and leadership development. This was underpinned by a strong focus on evaluation and reflective practice.

Such approaches have been refined and developed and constitute a key feature of good and improving education systems across the world. Not surprisingly, therefore, the role of networks, both in driving and supporting school improvement, features

prominently in the literature. Networks offer distinct organisational approaches to educational reform (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009) that reject prescriptive, top-down approaches to promoting change. Instead they provide a means of supporting a diverse range of activities in ways that are designed to harness the professional expertise that rests within the school system. As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) observe:

> *More and more systems are turning to professional networks of teachers, leaders, and schools to energise and orchestrate improvement. Big, bumbling bureaucracies in isolated and inward-looking districts are coming to be seen as change obstacles rather than improvement assets. In contrast, networks offer a flexible and professionally motivating mechanism of improvement within and beyond districts* (p. 50).

Such work acknowledges schools' shared mission and interdependence and offers a very different model to market- or competition-based models (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009; Pont *et al.*, 2008) in which the best schools flourish solely on the basis of their own innovation and success.

Effective networks rest on a concept of school leadership that moves beyond a traditional focus on a single institution to encompass a much broader responsibility for the education system as a whole. As noted by Pont *et al.* (2008), a new role for school leaders is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. It includes focused work, for example, the support or delivery of individual projects, troubleshooting and taking responsibility for immediate challenges. The new role also encompasses capacity building to generate a system-wide ability to improve, and the work of disseminating good practice, issues which are discussed in detail below. This has clear implications for the way in which school leadership is supported and developed.

While the role of school leaders is essential, effective collaborative processes involve a much broader range of practitioners, who often create their own structures to facilitate change. This process harnesses the potential of distributed leadership, defined as 'leadership as the product of concretive or conjoint activity, emphasising it as an emergent property of a group or network' (Bennett *et al.*, 2003, p. 7). This has resulted in a situation whereby, as Pont *et al.* (2008) state:

> *More and more educational leaders – principals and teachers – are therefore becoming engaged in lateral, networked leadership that promotes effective participation in networks while ensuring that the networks remain tied to clear purposes that are connected to improved learning and achievement* (p. 74).

2.2 The middle tier

While networks rely heavily on the voluntary participation of individual institutions, there is clear evidence that in the most successful systems this is supported and facilitated by a middle tier or mediating layer that is distinct from national government. One of the middle tier's key roles is to contribute a strategic perspective that is influenced by a thorough understanding of the specific contexts in which the schools concerned are working. As Mourshed *et al.* (2010) observe in an international study of good practice in the most improved school systems (p. 9), the middle tier plays an important role across each one. It does this in a number of ways, for example, by:

- ensuring effective channels of communication
- facilitating the necessary conversations and partnerships between individual institutions
- mediating between the centre (central or regional government) and what is happening on the ground in individual localities.

At the same time, the middle tier plays a key role in enabling institutions and individual school leaders to collaborate for mutual benefit in an environment which is often still influenced by a culture of competition between schools (Pont *et al.*, 2008). For example, Pont *et al.* (2008) cited practice in Belgium where the middle tier enables communities of schools to cooperate in a way that has forged collaboration between individual institutions which had been working in a highly competitive environment. Similarly, collaboration through networks was emphasised by Sahlberg (2011) when describing the Finnish education system, which relies heavily on communities of practice and local diversity as a driver of success.

2.3 Typology of middle tier structures

As noted above, there is no one uniform model of supporting collaboration in good and high-performing schools. A range of different approaches are described in the literature. These are centred on several possible groupings. These include middle tiers that are based on localities, school clusters that are not necessarily in the same area, subject-based clusters and phase-based clusters. Different systems' middle tiers often have different levels of formality and focus. A typology of middle tier structures is presented in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Typology of middle tier structures
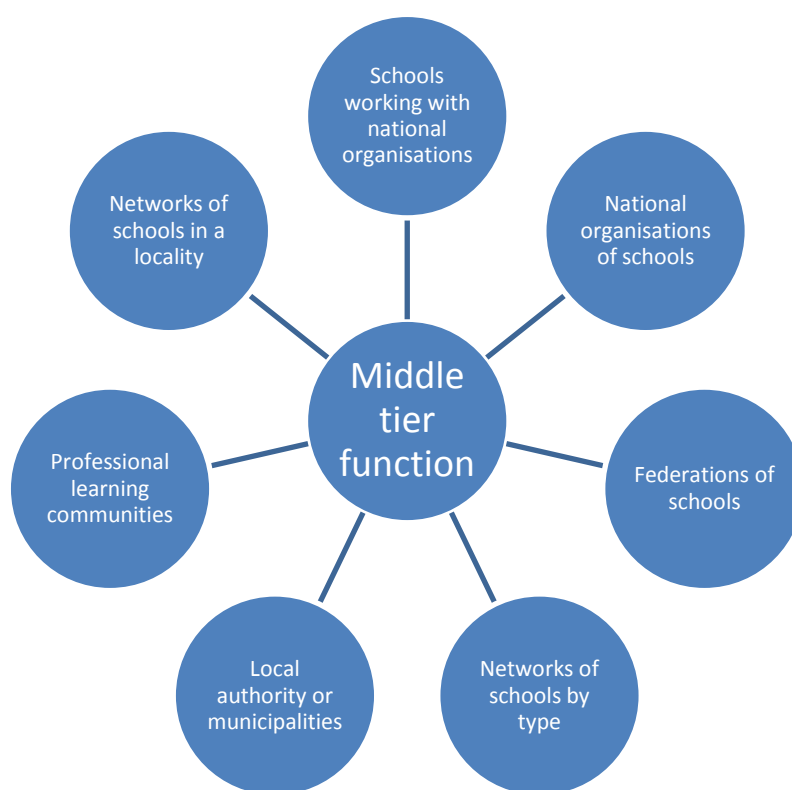
The structures can be summarised as follows:

- LAs and municipalities, including multi-purpose and single-function authorities. These include municipalities in Finland, School Boards in Ontario and Districts in Western Cape, as highlighted in work by Mourshed *et al.* (2010). In other areas the work is led by regional tiers of government such as Provincial Offices in South Korea (Mourshed *et al.*, 2010), the regional structure in Victoria (Australia) (Pont *et al.*, 2008) or a combination of regional and school-based support services as delivered in Hong Kong (Mourshed *et al.*, 2010).

- Networks of schools sharing a common status or designation, such as academy chains and multi-academy trusts, or sponsor-based academies with the sponsor as the middle tier (Parish *et al.*, 2012).

- Federations of schools, including partnerships of strong and weak schools, schools in a particular area, cross-phase federations and schools with common characteristics, in which the Federation acts as the middle tier.

- Networks of schools, usually in a locality, that come together to drive school improvement, such as the Collaborative School Improvement (CSI) model working through District Transformation Teams in the United States.

- Schools associated with national organisations promoting school leadership, such as the National College in England or the Leadership Academy in Australia that leads the work of promoting system leadership (Pont *et al.*, 2008).

- National organisations of schools or professionals with a particular focus such as the National Network of Teaching Schools, Local Leaders of Education and National Leaders of Education (Bassett *et al.*, 2012).

- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as are being developed in Wales as a feature of tri-level reform involving schools, LAs or regional consortia, and the Welsh Government.

The different types of structures are described in the literature, although most of the focus is on the diverse structures that have emerged in England in recent years. These are discussed below followed by a description of some international comparators.

2.3.1 Governance arrangements: England

The literature highlighted the increasing role played by academy chains in the English education system in supporting, challenging and mediating between individual institutions. Chains have developed in ways which have included systematically developing capacity through joint practice development and applying common quality assurance processes across all institutions in a chain. According to Hill *et al.* (2012), their effectiveness draws a great deal from the 'shorter and more focused' decision-making processes which they use and their ability to exert a strong influence over the way individual academies work. Pritchard (2012) cited evidence which suggested that:

> *Academy chains are a positive development within the English education system. They are bringing innovation and systematic improvement and helping to raise attainment in some of the most deprived parts of the country. They are nurturing an able new generation of school leaders with experience and expertise in leading in different contexts* (p. 43).

School federations are comprised of groups of schools which work together on the basis of clusters, and include phase-type federations, faith group federations or federations established to address particular challenges associated with school performance. While the exact nature of the work varies, involvement in a federation requires a commitment to collaboration, joint working and sharing good practice. School federations are seen to have made schools more outward facing, especially where high-performing and low-performing schools partner each other and where staff have opportunities to work across more than one school (Chapman *et al.*, 2011). Staff are able to access opportunities to explore professional pathways that would not have been available otherwise, especially the chance to shadow good practice (Chapman *et al.*, 2011). Much of the literature on federations of schools focuses on the different models and their impact on student outcomes. While the literature suggests that federations are effective in promoting collaboration, certain types have had greater impact than others; for example, 'performance federations' have had more impact than 'cross-phase' federations.

Teaching schools have a specific responsibility to support school improvement that has led them to establish a range of school-based services. These encompass support for initial teacher training, school-to-school support, continuing professional development (CPD) and leadership development. Teaching schools have, therefore, become important routes for schools to source high-quality support for other schools

(Parish *et al.*, 2012, Pritchard, 2012). This is mirrored in the executive headteacher role, which gives school headteachers a broader role while they remain heads of their own schools (Pritchard, 2012).

The National Leaders of Education (NLE) and Local Leaders of Education (LLE) programme provides a route for serving headteachers who have a proven track record of school leadership. NLEs are required to have the expertise to support schools in challenging circumstances and to use that background to work with institutions in the most challenging circumstances. A similar but distinct role is played by LLEs who usually work within their own LA area with schools which need to improve, for example, satisfactory schools needing to move to good. As Pritchard (2012) notes, this approach is cited as one which has great potential as a model of school-to-school support, but is very much in its early stages and has not evolved sufficiently for firm conclusions to be drawn about its effectiveness.

Regional and local authorities (including municipalities) have varied roles in different contexts, but are linked together by the common feature of sustaining school improvement by delivering targeted support. This includes providing a support and challenge role through processes that include data analysis and discussing outcomes with school leaders, and taking action where schools are causing concern. In some countries, LAs' roles have contracted, partly because of the diminishing resources at their disposal and also because their focus is now on a narrower range of functions (Pritchard, 2012). This is increasingly evident in England, where the LA role is becoming defined in terms of enabling schools to identify solutions, nurturing them to draw their own conclusions rather than offering a prescriptive requirement of what schools should be doing. The LAs' role in networks developed and led by schools varies. In some areas, the LAs' role in fostering networks is limited whereas in others they have played a key role in brokering and designing school-to-school structures (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009; Parish *et al.*, 2012). However, the potential of LAs as a middle tier is recognised, not least because they can provide a degree of continuity and structure in contrast to the more fluid, ad hoc nature of some networks (Pritchard, 2012).

2.3.2 Governance arrangements: international comparators

Successful systems' middle tiers have a range of different governance arrangements, several of which we outline below.

In Canada, where education is a provincial responsibility, Ontario organises its system of four main types of school (reflecting language and religious affiliations) through school boards which act as the equivalent of the middle tier. Within this structure, Student Achievement Officers facilitate professional learning communities across School Boards alongside targeted support to schools within a Board's responsibility.

In Australia responsibility for the education system rests with the states. In Victoria most primary and secondary schools are provided by the state government.

However, an Australian national curriculum is being introduced. Considerable emphasis is placed on drawing on the lessons of international practice. Regional structures are used within the state alongside networks to facilitate a system whereby system leaders support peer schools.

In Finland municipalities and schools have the central role in the education system. The system uses a devolved, collaborative and self-directed approach in order to achieve and provide high-quality education. Curriculum development is a matter that is driven by schools rather than the state and there is a significant emphasis on customising teaching and learning to meet the needs of each individual child, on creative learning and encouraging risk taking. This approach is recognised to be very different from the standardised approaches (including a prescribed curriculum) and rigorous accountability that are more typical of other education systems.

In the United States an approach based on a way of working across a whole school district rather than in individual institutions has been adopted in school districts in Phoenix, Arizona, Southern Indiana and Portland, Oregon. In these areas District Transformation Teams have used the Collaborative School Improvement (CSI) model. CSI focuses on collaborative inquiry-based improvements that influence practice across schools to promote improvement. It is not structured around a specific programme of school improvement but instead promotes a set of practices and behaviours which are embedded in the way individual institutions work (Kaufman *et al.*, 2012).

The evidence identified in the literature suggests that there is no one specific model by which the role of the middle tier should be delivered. Successful systems do not have any single way of working or structure of governance and accountability that distinguish themselves from others. Instead, they range from formal partnerships to very loose arrangements (Bassett *et al.*, 2012; Chapman and Hadfield, 2009) that allow for different degrees of formality. A number have been designed in ways that are integrated with school structures while others are stand alone (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009). Successful systems take decisions about which method to adopt based on what works in individual circumstances (Pritchard, 2012; Chapman and Hadfield, 2009). They work closely with individual schools and draw on their capacity. Moreover, they are characterised by certain values, attitudes and working practices that nurture a culture of improvement, issues which are discussed below.

3 What are the barriers to, and enablers of, effective collaborative support?

This chapter identifies the factors which act as enablers of, and barriers to, effective practice by describing the key features of the middle tier that have been identified in the literature on successful systems. It looks at the middle tier's role and how it needs to relate to other stakeholders in order to fulfil its mission. It explores specific areas such as the way the middle tier nurtures work at school level and how it adds value by enabling effective practice to inform work across whole systems, rather than individual schools. It then considers what are the key messages for the way in which the middle tier operates in successful systems, how it should conceptualise its role, and what the evidence says about the values and attitudes that are needed to underpin effective practice.

3.1 Focus of the work

In order to identify the features of effective collaborative support (and the barriers to such work) it is necessary to understand the key elements of effective school improvement processes and how these relate to the roles of different stakeholders.

The literature contains strong messages that school systems are at their most effective when institutions work together, and where they draw on one another's experience and expertise to address the identified needs in individual institutions. Processes need to focus on practice at a school level and they must then harness schools' capacity to improve through distributed leadership.

A key element, therefore, is the need to put in place the structures to enable progress to be made and to embed the necessary attitudes in individual classrooms and in schools' broader ethos. Moreover, effective processes are not confined to the role of school leaders working together but harnesses the potential of a much broader range of school stakeholders through distributed leadership. These twin elements – school-to-school working and the potential of distributed leadership – add value by incorporating a broad range of expertise. It is, therefore, necessary to nurture a sense of responsibility for the system as a whole, rather than for an individual school.

Effective school-to-school working based on distributed leadership is founded on an understanding of the expertise which exists within the system. This means there is a need to map where the relevant knowledge and skills can be found in order to build capacity across the system to maximise the benefits of schools' own initiatives . This calls for the middle tier to work with schools to identify needs, articulate how these can be met and then contribute to processes that will enable schools to address the issues confronting them. Such approaches are distinct from more traditional models, which were based on assumptions that expertise lay at the centre rather than at the school level.

The role of the middle tier includes practical support functions which are undertaken in close collaboration with schools. Much of the focus is on supporting schools' collaborative efforts in a way which responds to needs that practitioners have addressed. Therefore, as Chapman and Hadfield (2009) note in a discussion of the way the LA middle tier engages with school-based networks, what is emerging is 'not a single plan or even focus, but a series of approaches to negotiating and mediating the plans of the various different collaboratives and networks in their authority into a coherent local approach' (p. 229).

Likewise, Kaufman *et al.* (2012) emphasise 'the development of skills that cultivate effective collaboration and teaming' (pp. 179–80). Echoing Chapman and Hadfield, they note, 'Collaborative School Improvement is a set of practices not a programme, in which change is fostered through an approach based on democracy and professionalism rather than either a bureaucratic or market-based model'..

The following sections consider the evidence about the focus of the middle tier, its role in supporting school-based approaches and the key features which the middle tier needs to possess in order to ensure effective practice.

3.2 A school-based approach

As is reported in section 2.1, a school-based approach is the cornerstone of the successful systems identified as part of this research. Their characteristics can be summarised as:

- a collaborative culture (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009)
- a need for the work to draw on the strength of positive and powerful professional relationships (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009)
- a commitment to distributed leadership, summarised as 'leadership as the product of concretive or conjoint activity, emphasising it as an emergent property of a group or network' (Bennett *et al.*, 2003, p. 7)
- a willingness on the part of schools to engage and a role for the middle tier in facilitating and supporting work on the ground.

The importance of a system-wide approach is a point emphasised forcefully in the literature (Harris, 2010). Successful systems across the world rely on collective capacity rather than individual schools working independently of one another to drive improvement (Harris, 2010). For example, this is true of the Finnish education system, where network-based school improvement collaboration between schools and other stakeholders is one of its essential characteristics (Sahlberg, 2011).

For such work to be enhanced in the future, it is argued, it is necessary for school leaders to be given opportunities to take the lead beyond their own schools. Pont *et al.* (2008) states that 'If the magnitude of school leadership effects is to be increased, leaders will increasingly need to lead "out there" beyond the school, as well as within it, in order to influence the environment that influences their own work with students' (p. 74).

Whilst the literature recognised that this is not always easy in a competitive environment, it nonetheless emphasised that there was a collective need for all schools to improve. This creates a situation where, according to Pont *et al.*, if every school needs to improve, then every school has an incentive to collaborate. They emphasise that such practice involves the development of a new culture in which 'The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience will create much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions' (Pont *et al.*, 2008, p. 11).

As noted above, effective working needs to involve a broad range of stakeholders in the collaborative processes. The work should not be confined to a few elite leaders but should be based on notions of distributed leadership (Pont *et al.*, 2008). Such approaches provide firm foundations for school improvement work across all the successful education systems examined in this review. As Kaufman *et al.* (2012) noted, 'In our experience, schools that achieve high-impact, widespread changes to instruction are those in which teachers drive the work of the school transformation team' (p. 45). Likewise Pritchard (2012) maintains that 'It is continuing collaboration amongst teachers using reflection, shadowing, coaching, joint planning and an unrelenting focus on improvement and on data analysis and knowledge of pupils, which drives ever-increasing improvement' (p. 6). This is echoed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) who note the importance of providing opportunities for teachers to watch, listen and learn from one another in order to spread knowledge and understanding.

Distributed leadership is a strong feature of the Raising Attainment Transforming Learning (RATL) network in England which enables schools experiencing difficulties to learn and support one another as a means of improving, a process that is underpinned by mentoring and support from other school leaders and the delivery of technical systems designed to assist schools (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). This allows the focus to be placed specifically on the classroom.

Similarly, as Sahlberg (2011) notes in a discussion of the Finnish education system, one of the major weaknesses is that 'The voices of practitioners are rarely heard in the education policy and reform business. Education change literature is primarily technical discourse created by academics and change consultants' (p. 104).

3.3 The role of the middle tier

The traditional focus of the middle tier can be categorised as the type of support and challenge that was traditionally undertaken by LAs such as:

- monitoring, and evaluating schools' work through internal processes
- providing advice and guidance and a fresh perspective on issues confronting schools
- peer challenge based on effective professional dialogue and a willingness to pose difficult questions.

This role has evolved as the middle tier has embraced a more complex and diverse role as an enabler, working with other stakeholders to help them develop their own solutions. This role has encompassed brokering support (Bassett *et al.*, 2012), convening partnerships (Parish *et al.*, 2012), helping schools to identify and commission their own support structures, and enabling them to access what they have designed. As Mourshed *et al.* (2010) note:

> *Across all the systems we studied, despite their differences in structure, the mediating layers were effective in opening up channels for communication, sharing support and standardisation between the schools themselves and from the schools to the centre* (p. 97).

Such work is often undertaken alongside specific practical tasks, such as facilitating or maintaining networks, (Mourshed *et al.*, 2010), implementing performance management systems, providing data interpretation services and delivering 'back office' functions (Muir, 2012; Hill *et al.*, 2012).

3.3.1 Factors which promote effective working

In effective systems, the middle tier contributes to continuous improvement by taking schools through successive stages in the 'improvement journey'. For example, Mourshed *et al.* (2010) identified the need to support schools at three key stages on this journey:

Diagram 2   Phases of school improvement journey
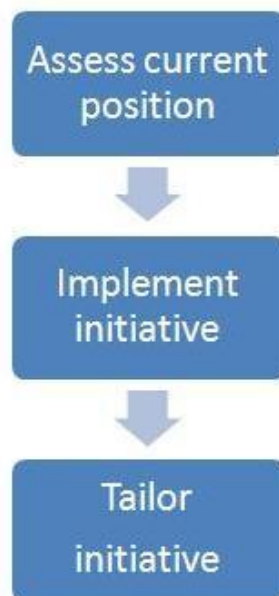
This requires a deep engagement with schools to create opportunities to develop and refine practice (Bassett *et al.*, 2012) and instigate a process to build capacity to sustain improvement (Kaufman *et al.*, 2012).

Effective middle tiers work in ways that are flexible, do not rely on rigid bureaucratic structures and recognise the fact that they draw their legitimacy from the quality of their work rather than their position in a hierarchy. As Chapman and Hadfield (2009) note, their role is based on 'their competence and expertise not by their position within a bureaucratic structure or their formal role within an external inspection regimes or external network' (p. 238). Therefore, the middle tier's work needs to focus on developing ways of working and a set of values that can underpin a range of different school improvement strategies (Hill *et al.*, 2012). As is noted by Pont *et al.* (2008), 'The intention must be not to create a new bureaucracy but to facilitate relationships between schools so that they can collaborate for the good of students' (p. 11). Therefore, the middle tier has a role in the emergence of what Chapman and Hadfield (2009) describe as 'epistemic communities' which create and warrant knowledge that can be used for the benefit of the system as a whole.

The middle tier brings added value where it has the knowledge of the education system more broadly and uses it to assist schools to identify appropriate support. This is in a context where hard and soft data is used to inform discussion, (Pritchard, 2012; Kaufman *et al.*, 2012) and where the middle tier has a thorough understanding of the major topics that need to be addressed (Kaufman *et al.*, 2012). As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue, this requires a productive partnership between individual schools and the middle tier to utilise the knowledge and understanding of the broader network of schools, and inform effective work at school level. This approach has been adopted in Finland where the role of the middle tier includes deploying staff to work in different institutions from their own in order to support schools to address challenging issues (Hill *et al.*, 2012). Effective practice is highlighted where a collaborative culture provides a basis for 'lasting and impactful school improvement' (p. 51) and where 'a school system "hardwires" the values and beliefs implicit in its system into a form manifest in day-to-day teaching practice' (Mourshed *et al.*, 2010, p. 84).

However, while success depends on systems' ability to harness the capacity and expertise of schools, the literature emphasises that the middle tier needs to be sufficiently strong to be able to hold robust discussions with schools where necessary. This requires an ability to provide firm leadership and what Mourshed *et al.* (2010) describe as the 'ignition of leadership' which often can only come from outside a school. These views are echoed by Pritchard (2012), who emphasises the need for openness in discussions, including a willingness to hold difficult conversations that lead to meaningful and specific actions, avoiding the emergence of a culture in which there is a great deal of discussion but little action (Pritchard, 2012; Parish *et al.*, 2012). This requires confidence on the part of schools to receive rigorous challenge (Parish *et al.*, 2012). Where challenges are identified, the middle tier needs to be in a position to intervene swiftly, ensuring that schools do not languish for a prolonged period (Pritchard, 2012; Parish *et al.*, 2012).

3.3.2 Factors which act as barriers to effective working

The literature suggests that the greatest challenges have arisen where the middle tier has not demonstrated the positive characteristics described above. Weaknesses have been identified where the middle tier acts in a hierarchical way, and does not convince and engage practitioners. Likewise, the system is weakest where competition between institutions fosters a reluctance to collaborate, and where the needs of individual institutions are placed above those of the system as a whole. This is often accompanied by a feeling of isolation in which school leaders consider that their circumstances are unique and cannot be understood by practitioners working in other contexts.

At the same time, the relationship between schools and the middle tier needs to be based on trust and an open relationship that enable robust conversations to be held about issues of underperformance. The middle tier fails to support effective practice where it does not act, or where it confines its support to what it can itself provide rather than brokering support from elsewhere. The latter often leads to short-term and unsustainable support for schools that does not have a lasting impact.

The literature highlighted a number of practical factors which are perceived to impact on the extent to which the middle tier is able to function effectively and deliver the range of activities for which it is responsible. In most cases, these relate to issues of capacity. In England, for example, concerns have been expressed about the downsizing of LA capacity (Parish *et al.*, 2012) and similar issues have been highlighted in Wales, not least because of the number of small authorities, promoting the move to the establishment of regional consortia (Harris, 2010). Capacity issues have also been raised in relation to the extent to which schools are able to engage and commission, (Parish *et al.*, 2012) irrespective of a school's governance arrangements. For example, it has been noted that there are differences in extent to which academies, especially primary schools, are brokering support from other academies or chains. Likewise, LA-maintained schools access support services to varying degrees. Some have questioned whether such arrangements rely too much on the role of a particular school leader and how such work can be sustained. (Bassett *et al.*, 2012)

In conclusion, while the international literature suggests that there is no single enabler of effective collaborative support, such work usually rests on a number of principles that guide stakeholders. These include a need for a clear and shared vision of what is required to enable schools to succeed, strong leadership that motivates and respects practitioners and a commitment to the success of the whole system. This constitutes part of a wider culture in which practitioners' professionalism is respected and where they are able to participate in interactive learning communities.

The factors that promote and act as barriers to effective collaborative support are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of enablers and barriers to effective support

Enablers	Barriers
A clear and shared vision of what is required based on evidence	A failure to convince and engage practitioners
Strong leadership that motivated practitioners	Competition between institutions leading to a reluctance or failure to collaborate with other institutions
A commitment to systemic success, i.e. that schools had a duty not only to improve their own performance but also have a broader responsibility to the wider system	A refusal to engage with partners either because of perceptions that they were in competition or because they were seen to be working in very different circumstances
A sustained approach in which the necessary changes become embedded	A tendency to become inward looking, confining activity or interest to a particular group of schools, e.g. a chain of academies
A recognition of the value of teachers' professionalism	Failure to embed or sustain change and the adoption of short-term solutions rather than working to embed change
The creation and encouragement of lively learning communities	A failure to intervene to address under-performance, and an approach that is overreliant on internal expertise instead of recognising the need to broker support from a broader range of partners
A need to intervene early and ensure that external factors (e.g. the political difficulty of closing a school, the challenges of changing school leadership, etc.) do not become obstacles to necessary change.	A lack of trust between schools and the middle tier
	A culture in which decisions are perceived to be taken without due reference to contextual issues or where the middle tier is perceived as either 'overbearing' or out of touch.

4 Are there significant advantages in a middle tier ensuring the supply of school places, tackling underperformance and ensuring high standards and supporting vulnerable learners?

This chapter addresses the discussion about whether there are advantages in having a middle tier that is responsible for the the areas of ensuring a supply of school places, tackling underperformance and promoting high standards. It looks at what the international evidence suggests about the discussion on this specific issue, highlighted in recent work by the ISOS Partnership (Parish *et al.*, 2012) for a Ministerial Advisory Group on the Role of Local Authorities. It considers the changing context in which LAs work and examines the extent to which these functions are common to the middle tier in the successful education systems that have been identified.

The literature noted that traditional school support structures have sought to combine the management of the schools system, notably the duty of ensuring the supply of school places, with the school improvement role (Pritchard, 2012; Parish *et al.*, 2012). This has been linked to responsibility for supporting vulnerable learners. This was the approach which emerged in the UK as LAs became increasingly involved in the standards agenda, which many saw as an intrinsic part of their role alongside managing the school system.

This has changed significantly in England where, as has been noted in previous chapters, the traditional role of the LA is changing as other players are emerging with the possibility of undertaking the role of the middle tier. LAs retain important roles as champions of families and parents and play an important part in the education landscape, especially where they have an 'agreed space' in the system, working with schools, promoting partnerships and ensuring the 'moral purpose' of the system. However, Parish *et al.* noted that the exact role of LAs has still not been clarified. There is a lack of clarity about specific issues such as when 'decommissioning' rather than commissioning school places and how LAs should react when schools circumstances change (for example, if a school loses its Teaching School status). Moreover, the growth of academies, operating independently of LAs, has led to a new dynamic both in the relationship between authorities and schools and in those that exist between schools. This means that LAs need to involve a very broad range

of partners in discussions about the structure of the school system, something which again requires the development of relationships between those involved.

At the same time, LAs are required to adapt to a new landscape in which they are one of many potential middle tiers (academy chains, federations, national organisations, etc.) with which schools may choose to engage. This is at a time in which there is uncertainty about the extent to which LAs will be able to sustain a significant school support infrastructure as resources are increasingly invested directly in schools (including academies). This raises clear questions about LAs' roles, specifically the extent to which they will be responsible for school standards at a time when they are playing a diminishing role in the middle tier.

The international evidence does not offer a clear and unambiguous steer on the specific issue of the extent to which there are advantages for the middle tier to be responsible for the three functions noted above. Sahlberg (2011) notes the importance of municipalities as a vehicle for change in the Finnish education system, where they play a key role in curriculum design and related changes. However, the focus of the work which is described involves an engagement with a much broader range of stakeholders in schools' networks. As Sahlberg (2011) observes: 'Schools were encouraged to collaborate with other schools and also to network with parents, businesses, and nongovernmental organisations' as part of a national collaborative effort (p. 36). Pont *et al.* (2008) examine the role of municipalities in promoting and enhancing school-to-school working and distributed leadership. Likewise, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) refer to the role of municipalities. Yet these are alongside other structures supporting school-based approaches and the key messages in the research are the relationships and behaviours that underpin effective practice. Moreover, the literature emphasises the point that success will not be obtained through a reliance on hierarchic, bureaucratic structures.

What LAs do offer is the stability of a durable, recognised entity that has the potential to maintain an overview of local needs and provision. At the same time, they offer a means of focusing on the broad moral purpose of the education system by maintaining a strategic overview in a way which may not be possible for other forms of middle tier.

5 Conclusion

There is no uniform method of enabling school-driven system leadership. The approaches which have been examined as part of this rapid review used a range of structures, including LAs or municipalities, school networks and federations, and national organisations, to fulfil a role between schools and central government.

In each case, the structures used in successful systems share a number of characteristics and behaviours which transcend the differences in how they are managed or the roles they have played in the past. These are consistent with a schools-led model of support in which systems, leaders and the workforce contribute to a self-improving culture.

Successful systems have adapted to a fluid system in which school improvement activity is focused on the work taking place in schools, and where the middle tier successfully harnesses the capacity and professional expertise on the ground for the benefit of the education system as a whole. This requires a school-led model of school-to-school support which is characterised by a number of key features, in particular:

- there is a clear and shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities confronting schools, based on thorough monitoring and a rich evidence base
- there is strong leadership that respects practitioners' professionalism and motivates their enthusiasm, that is provided by school leaders and the middle tier
- schools take responsibility for the education system as a whole and do not confine their attention to their own specific institution
- all staff contribute to the process of school improvement through distributed leadership.

The role of the middle tier in implementing this model of schools-led, school-to-school support is to nurture and facilitate such work through a range of functions, ranging from practical work (maintaining a knowledge of the education system, and using data to support work on the ground), to an enabling role in which it engages with what practitioners are developing and helps them to maximise the capacity of that work to benefit the system as a whole. This requires the middle tier to adopt specific practices and behaviours that are designed to maximise the impact of the work on the ground. These include:

- brokering school-to-school collaboration, facilitating initial discussions and working with schools to help them as they respond to challenges or seek to develop new approaches
- nurturing a sense of collaboration and responsibility for the system as a whole through effective system leadership
- helping to embed and sustain the work in individual schools and across school-to-school networks
- disseminating effective practice
- being open to innovation and new ways of working.

This is in a context in which the legitimacy of the middle tier in a schools-led system is not derived from its status but from its contribution to the work of maximising the potential of the education system to drive a self-improving culture.

The evidence suggests that middle tiers which exhibit these characteristics are a feature of high-performing education systems across the world. They fulfil a role that is distinct from that of national or regional governments and that of individual schools. LAs or municipalities perform the role of the middle tier in many countries. In others, including increasingly in England, there is evidence that other entities constitute the middle tier. Each model can be effective where their work is underpinned by the behaviours and attitudes outlined above. The literature suggests that the most compelling case for ensuring that the middle tier role is undertake by LAs or municipalities is related to the degree of permanence which they offer in a system in which they contribute to schools' work alongside dynamic networks which may be more fluid and transient in nature.

Appendix 1: The evidence base

This appendix provides a brief description of the items of literature included in the main body of the review, together with the review team's rating of the quality and relevance of each item. Descriptions of the ratings are below the table.

Item of literature	Brief description	Quality	Relevance
Kaufman *et al.* (2012)	Research into the role districts can play in helping schools build the capacity to engage in inquiry-based reform. Drawing on case studies across three districts, the report identifies eight key practices for effective school-to-district collaboration.	High	Medium
Chapman *et al.* (2009)	DCSF and NCSL research involving 19 LAs, involved in the LEArning Project, over two years (2004 to 2006). It explores networking and collaboration and the capacity of the LA to broker and facilitate school-based networks within complex multiple agendas.	High	High/medium
Armstrong, D., Bunting, V. and Larsen, J. (2009)	Longitudinal research of the academies initiatives during 2003 to 2008. Research aimed to assess the programme contribution to raising standards but there was insufficient evidence about the academy model for school improvement. The research highlights the distinguishing features of academies which helps school improvement.	High	Medium
Pritchard (2012)	Research paper exploring the role of LAs in schools and the characteristics of effective LA school improvement services. Explores academies and free schools, as well as those in challenging circumstances.	High	High/medium
Bassett *et al.* (2012)	Research explores the impact of giving autonomy to schools suggesting that it can favourably impact on school performance. Authors argue that collaboration, accountability and completion help drive system-wide improvement. Discusses teaching schools and collaboration hubs.	High/medium	Medium
Chapman *et al.* (2011)	Building on an earlier study (2009), this research looks at the impact of school federations on pupil outcomes. Authors argue that there is some evidence to suggest some federation types outperform counterparts (enablers are leadership and collaboration).	High	High/medium
Pont *et al.* (2008)	Looks at school leadership in England, Belgium, Australia, Austria and Finland focusing on national, regional and local policies, system leadership and collaborative working, and accountability.	High/medium	High

Item of literature	Brief description	Quality	Relevance
Harris (2010)	Article discusses educational transformation in Wales exploring the tri-level reform which has guided system-level change. Professional learning communities have been deployed to support change. Article discusses some of the challenges of country-wide reform and concludes that leadership capacity is needed to be sustained and embedded at all levels.	High/medium	Medium
Parish *et al.* (2012)	Research explores how local authorities are evolving and adapting their role to meet the needs of a more autonomous education system. The research focuses on three core LA responsibilities in education: 1. Ensuring a sufficient supply of school places 2. Tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards 3. Supporting vulnerable children.	High/medium	High
Hill (2012)	The paper explores the role of the middle tier, describing the current and historical context; what are the actual and potential role/s of the middle tier; and how does it work in other countries. The author proposes options for the future.	High	High
Hill *et al.* (2012)	The report explores how academy chains are improving pupil outcomes and school performance. It also discusses some of the challenges they face and implications for the middle tier.	High	High/medium
Sahlberg (2011)	Identifies characteristics of the high-performing Finnish education system. These include delegation to schools, teacher research-informed professionalism, networking and self-regulation.	High	High
Hargreaves and Shirley (2009)	The Fourth Way chapter (4) is based on an 'assessment of high-performing system and promising practices from around the world'.	High	High
Mourshed *et al.* (2010)	Identified high-performing countries and what makes good countries become great. It identifies what interventions are in place, when, how they interact with one another within a system's broader context to achieve better outcomes.	High	High
Muir (2012)	Examines the argumengs in favour and against theinvolvememt of the private sector in the weducation system in England and argues for a role for the Third Sector.	High	Medium

Descriptions of quality ratings

High: large-scale quantitative study; or in-depth case studies that cover a range of institutions and a wide range of stakeholders, where views are triangulated; or a meta-analysis or systematic review.

Medium: quantitative or qualitative studies with smaller sample sizes, or covering only a small number of institutions. Qualitative studies that do not cover a full range of stakeholders. Non-systematic reviews.

Low: based on observation or opinion, or on one school case study, or the views of one person, for example.

Descriptions of relevance ratings

High: very relevant to all or most questions.
Medium: at least moderately relevant to most questions.
Low: at least slightly relevant to some questions.

Appendix 2: Review parameters, search strategy and review process

This appendix provides information on the:

- review parameters
- precise search strategies used to identify the literature that the review team considered for inclusion in the review
- review process that the team used to select the literature included in the review.

Review parameters

This section sets out the review parameters, which served as a guide for which literature the review team sought to include and exclude within the review.

Purpose of the review

1. To consider what collaborative support mechanisms or initiatives (school-to-school, peer-to-peer and other) have high-performing countries used to improve their performance?

2. To examine what are the barriers to and enablers of effective school-to-school support?

3. To explore whether there are significant advantages in a middle tier covering all three of the roles of ensuring supply of school places, tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards and supporting vulnerable children?

Search strategy

The parameters of this review were a maximum of 15 full English language texts from the UK and abroad published between 2008 and 2012. Staff in NFER's Centre for Information and Reviews worked with staff in the Centre for Tailored Projects and Consultancy to agree and apply the search strategy, a screening strategy, and an appraisal and synthesis strategy.

Purpose and background

The primary purpose of this rapid evidence assessment is to investigate how schools are accessing services and support for school improvement, and what forms these are taking; and the role that the emerging middle tiers/mediating layers are playing or could play in this.

Search parameters

- Literature from within the UK and internationally (The search will focus on the following specific countries/jurisdictions: Alberta, Ontario, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Saxony, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Poland, Long Beach and Boston)

- Literature published from 2008 onwards

- Literature published in the English language.

Inclusion criteria

- Conforms to search parameters
- Pertinence / relevance (to review questions)
- Quality of evidence.

Searches conducted

- Research databases: AEI (Australian Education Index), BEI (British Education Index), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Idox Information Service and Social Policy and Practice.
- Relevant websites including: ADCS, DfE, Local Government Association, Local Schools Network and NCSL.

Keywords:

School systems

Education systems

System leadership

School leadership

Leadership effectiveness

Leadership skills

Leadership strategies

School restructuring

Educational change

Change agents

Change strategies

Change management

School effectiveness

School improvement

Improvement programmes

Educational improvement

Instructional performance

School performance

Performance factors

School support

School to school support

Peer to peer support

Local education authorities

Local authorities

Middle tier

Academies

All searches were limited to publication years 2008–2012, in English language only. The search focused on the following specific countries/jurisdictions: Alberta, Ontario, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Saxony, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Poland, Long Beach and Boston.

A brief description of each of the databases searched, together with the keywords used, is outlined below. The search strategy for each database reflects the differences in database structure and vocabulary. Smaller sets of keywords were used in the more specialist databases. Throughout, the abbreviation 'ft' denotes that a free-text search term was used, the symbol * denotes truncation of terms.

British Education Index (BEI)

(searched via Dialog 15/08/12)

BEI provides information on research, policy and practice in education and training in the UK. Sources include over 300 journals, mostly published in the UK, plus other material including reports, series and conference papers.

#1   School systems

#2   Education systems

#3   System leadership (ft)

#4   School leadership (ft)

#5   Leadership effectiveness (ft)

#6   Leadership skills (ft)

#7   Leadership strategies (ft)

#8   School restructuring (ft)

#9   Educational change

#10   Change agent* (ft)

#11   Change strategies

#12   Change management (ft)

#13   School support

#14   School to school support (ft)

#15   Peer to peer support (ft)

#16   Local education authorities

#17   Local authorit* (ft)

#18   Middle tier (ft)

#19   Mediating layer (ft)

#20   Academ* (ft)

#21   #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or ##11 or #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20

#22   School effectiveness

#23   School improvement (ft)

#24   Improvement programmes

#25   Educational improvement

#26   Instructional performance (ft)

#27   School performance (ft)

#28   Performance factors (ft)

#29   #22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or #27 or #28

#30   #21 and #29

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)

(searched via Dialog 16/08/12)

The ERIC database is sponsored by the US Department of Education to provide extensive access to education-related literature. Coverage includes research documents, journal articles, technical reports, program descriptions and evaluations and curricula material.

#1   School districts

#2   Education systems

#3   System leadership (ft)

#4   School leadership (ft)

#5   Leadership effectiveness (ft)

#6   Leadership skills (ft)

#7   Leadership strategies (ft)

#8   School restructuring (ft)

#9   Educational change

#10   Change agent* (ft)

#11   Change strategies

#12   Change management (ft)

#13   School support

#14   School to school support (ft)

#15   Peer to peer support (ft)

#16   Local education authorities

#17   Local authorit* (ft)

#18   Middle tier (ft)

#19   Mediating layer (ft)

#20   Academ*(ft)

#21   #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20

#22   School effectiveness

#23   School improvement (ft)

#24   Improvement programmes

#25   Educational improvement

#26   Instructional performance (ft)

#27   School performance (ft)

#28   Performance factors (ft)

#29   #22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or #27 or #28

#30   #21 and #29

Idox Information Service

(searched 17/08/12)

The IDOX Information Service covers all aspects of local government. Key areas of focus include public sector management, economic development, planning, housing, social services, regeneration, education and environmental services.

#1   Middle tier

#2   Mediating layer

#3   Local authorities

#4   Local education authorities

#5   School to school support

#6   Peer to peer support

#7   School improvement

#8   System leadership

Social Policy and Practice

(searched via OvidSP 16/08/12)

Social Policy and Practice is a bibliographic database with abstracts covering evidence-based social policy, public health, social services, and mental and community health. Content is from the UK with some material from the USA and Europe.

#1   Middle tier

#2   Mediating layer

#3   Local authorities

#4   Local education authorities

#5   School to school support

#6   Peer to peer support

#7   School improvement

#8   System leadership

Websites

The following websites were searched between 16/08/2012 and 17/08/2012. The search strategy for each website varied but typically involved browsing publications, policy and research sections.

Organisation	URL
Association of Directors of Children's Services	http://www.adcs.org.uk/
Department for Education	http://www.education.gov.uk/
Local Government Association	http://www.local.gov.uk/

Review process

We used a four-stage process to filter the search results, so that only the most relevant and best-quality studies available were included within the review. The four stages were i) screening; ii) coding; iii) appraising; and iv) synthesising. These are explained below.

i)   Screening the literature
The review team first screened the identified literature based on a thorough analysis of the abstracts, seeking to exclude all items that did not meet the agreed inclusion criteria.

ii)   Coding the literature
Once the screening process was complete, we developed a coding frame to help us to further assess the literature in order to identify items that provide the best available evidence to meet the requirements of the review. Based on their abstracts, we extracted information on the relevance of the studies to the review topic, the research methods used, the sample size (where relevant) and the country of origin. On the basis of the coding, the review team selected 18 of the most relevant and best-quality items to appraise and synthesise.

iii)   Appraising the literature

We then appraised the full text of each selected item, using a template (see below) to extract the key research questions(s) and findings from each study, as well as assessing the quality, relevance and weight of evidence of each item. At this stage we excluded three studies and included one other, bringing the total number of items included to sixteen.

Appraisal Template

iv)   Synthesising the literature

Having appraised the key literature items, the review team synthesised the findings. This involved analysing the reviewed evidence to draw out emerging themes, patterns and key messages. For the synthesis, we adopted a best evidence approach to determining the weight given to each piece of literature (the most weight has been given to the best evidence available on each theme).

Research summary/overview	
About the source	
Description of Project/Programme/ Activity/Intervention	
Type of literature (e.g. research report; journal article; literature review; meta analysis; opinion piece)	
Country/area involved	
Study population	
Research design/method	
Peer reviewed (yes/no)	
Relevance to review	
Findings relating to Principle 1:	
Findings relating to Principle 2:	
Findings relating to Principle 3:	
Findings relating to Principle 4:	
Findings relating to Principle 5:	
Findings relating to other facets of classroom leadership	
Authors' conclusions and recommendations	
Reviewer's comments (relevance and quality of study)	R: High/Medium/Low Q: High/Medium/Low
Useful to teachers (yes/no)	

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