

Hierarchy, Markets and Networks

Analysing the ‘self-improving school-led system’ agenda in England and the implications for schools

Toby Greany and Rob Higham

Executive Summary

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Toby Greany and Rob Higham

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Executive summary

This report analyses how schools in England have interpreted and begun to respond to the government's 'self-improving school-led system' (SISS) policy agenda. While largely undefined in official texts, the SISS agenda has become an overarching narrative for schools policy since 2010, encompassing an ensemble of reforms on academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs). The government argues that these reforms will 'dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance' (DfE, 2010: 66) by 'moving control to the frontline' (DfE, 2016b: 8).

While there has been a range of research on specific aspects of these school policy changes, there is as Woods and Simkins (2014) observe a paucity of analysis on how the SISS agenda is influencing change at the local level. This report seeks to address that gap by asking whether or not the models of co-ordination and school support emerging locally since 2010 represent a genuine basis for an equitable and inclusive 'school-led' system. We explore the factors that support and hinder such developments and the implications of this for schools and school leadership.

The research was carried out between 2014 and 2017 and included 47 school case studies across four localities. The localities were selected on the basis that they contained a variety of socio-economic contexts and represented two areas with relatively high densities and two areas with relatively low densities of academies and nationally designated 'system leadership' roles, such as Teaching Schools and National Leaders of Education (NLEs). The research also included a survey of almost 700 school leaders, an analysis of national Ofsted results over a ten-year period and statistical analysis of the impact of MATs on student outcomes.

To inform our analysis we draw on governance theory to analyse the SISS agenda reforms, which we conceive as an attempt to mix and re-balance three overlapping approaches to co-ordinating the school system. These are:

- › *Hierarchy* – the formal authority exercised by the state, including through statutory policies and guidance, national, regional and local bureaucracies (including Regional Schools Commissioners [RSCs] and LAs), and performance management and intervention (including through Ofsted inspections and forced academization);
- › *Markets* – the incentives and (de)regulation aimed at encouraging choice, competition, contestability and commercialization, including through existing parental choice and funding mechanisms that encourage schools to compete for pupils, and through new policies on academization and free schools and encouragement for a marketplace in school improvement services;

- › *Networks* – the (re)creation of interdependencies that support and/or coerce inter-organizational collaboration, partnership and participation (including through the introduction of Teaching School Alliances that are intended to encourage schools to share capacity and expertise).

Informed by these perspectives, we start by exploring the Government's use of the SISS agenda as a policy narrative as well as Hargreaves's (2012) idealized model of a 'self-improving system' founded on 'deep' partnerships, system leadership and a culture of co-creation and local solutions. We review a range of existing evidence on the school system in England since 2010 that highlights, among other things, the diversity of responses to policy change, concerns over capacity and funding, the risks of fragmentation, new inequalities and a 'two-tier' system, and the national pressure for conformity and prescription.

We also locate our research in the context of wider debates on governance and reform in education. Many governments around the world have stepped back or are stepping back from traditional hierarchical control of schools as they look to increase choice, improve quality, enhance equity and encourage innovation. Yet despite this apparent policy orthodoxy (Sahlberg, 2011) governments have also worked to retain authority both by 'steering at a distance' (Hudson, 2007) through meta-governance (Jessop, 2011) and through direct intervention and coercion (Davies, 2013) by remixing combinations of hierarchy, markets and networks to try to achieve their goals. The implication of this for schools and school leaders is a semblance of autonomy and self-governance, but which in practice is frequently experienced as a loss of support coupled with increased pressure to perform against measured targets as student level data is used nationally to hold schools publicly accountable.

In this context we show that while one popular interpretation of the SISS agenda is that it requires inter-school partnerships to 'self-organize' their own 'school-led' improvement, our findings demonstrate that this is a partial account that underplays the parallel influences of decentralization, re-regulation and performance management and choice and competition.

Hierarchy

The government argues the SISS policy agenda is premised on 'high autonomy' and 'high accountability' for schools, with a promise to 'trust' the profession, reduce bureaucracy and 'roll back' the state (DfE, 2010; 2016). We find, however, that any increase in operational autonomy for schools is more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework, which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance *and* to increasingly intervene and coerce when and where it deems necessary.

Our case study schools reported a constant need to focus on national exam results and to prepare for the possibility of an Ofsted inspection. Many argued that this now demands greater consistency and self-policing. In our survey, more than three-quarters (77 per cent) of school leaders agreed with

the statement ‘making sure my school does well in Ofsted inspections is one of my top priorities’. As a result, case study school leaders regularly felt incentivized to prioritize the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of, usually more vulnerable, children. High levels of stress were widely reported to result from these pressures for compliance and standardization, with a clear sense of a *constrained professionalism* among school staff.

We report mixed views on academization: three-fifths (60 per cent) of survey respondents working in academies agreed that academization had had at least some positive benefits, while two-thirds (69 per cent) of respondents working in maintained schools reported there were no benefits to becoming an academy, especially when weighed against the additional responsibilities. The threat of forced academization had created a sense of fear among many of our case study schools that if their performance were to drop they would be ‘taken over’ by a MAT, which would impose standardized systems and a narrow curriculum. Some schools were choosing to form or join ‘local MATs’ to pre-empt external take over.

With academization, powers of school oversight are moving from local to national government. This process has been uneven and often fraught. We identify a series of sharp differences between national and local government over how policy changes should be enacted locally, particularly where LAs have resisted academization. We also highlight differences between different parts of national government around aspects of strategy and attempts to ‘implement’ policy. The picture that emerges is of *chaotic centralization*, characterized by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools.

Faced with significant funding cuts, a common trend was for LAs to become part of a more *commercial middle tier*, for example by establishing trading arms from which schools could purchase non-statutory services. This was not the only trajectory, however, as all four of our LAs sought to sustain oversight of maintained schools and to retain influence – both by working to reshape school clusters to replace traditional improvement services and by developing new governing networks involving ‘system leader’ schools, but not always wider stakeholders, in order to co-ordinate school improvement services and support.

As support from LAs has reduced, however, schools have *had* to become more proactive in identifying and addressing their own improvement priorities. A majority of secondary headteachers welcomed what they saw as greater flexibility in where and how they accessed external support. Primary schools were often less enthusiastic and could experience this as a further unwanted burden. In our survey, ‘local clusters’ of schools were reported as the most common source of external support for schools. This was true for secondary as well as primary schools, although secondaries and especially those with a Requires Improvement (RI) or Inadequate Ofsted grade were also likely to draw on other forms of support, including peer reviews, commercial consultants, NLEs, TSAs, and, to a lesser extent, MATs.

School ‘system leaders’ – including nationally designated NLEs and TSA leaders as well as academy CEOs – were increasingly at the epicentre of this evolving system, particularly in the secondary phase. They often faced, however, conflicting and unreasonable demands from central government while being perceived by their peers to be an increasingly ‘*co-opted elite*’, working as part of the managerial state and accruing a range of personal and organizational benefits as a result. A range of interviewees, including RSCs and from Ofsted, also expressed concerns about the designated ‘system leadership’ model, including because of the importance it places on the Ofsted Outstanding grade and because of the influence it can accord to certain charismatic, authoritarian leaders. The ‘system leaders’ we interviewed all identified benefits from their roles, but also a series of challenges, including significant pressure to make short-term improvement in other schools and the fear that their own school might drop in performance as a result of their external work.

Markets

Building on long-standing quasi-market policies in England, we show how the SISS agenda also contains policies that simultaneously seek to make schools more responsive to parental choice, more diverse and more entrepreneurial.

The majority of headteachers we interviewed perceived that their school faced local pressures to compete for students, staff and/or status, but the extent of competition varied within and between our four localities. One common variation was school phase: in the survey, 91 per cent of secondary school respondents agreed that ‘schools in my locality compete with each other to recruit students’, whereas among primary schools, only 33 per cent agreed and 48 per cent disagreed.

There was broad recognition that schools are organized by choice and competition into *local status hierarchies*. In the survey, 85 per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary school respondents agreed that ‘there is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents’. Importantly, school status was rarely seen to be a simple or ‘real’ reflection of ‘school quality’, with wider factors such as the school’s context, history and student intake all combining to position it relative to others.

The schools we visited were all working more or less overtly to protect their status or to engineer a move up the local hierarchy. Improving a school’s Ofsted grade was the most immediate strategy for improving its reputation and position in the local status hierarchy, but we also observed a range of other practices. These ranged from gradual, authentic work to enhance the quality of learning and engage parents, through to aggressive marketing campaigns and ‘cream skimming’ aimed at recruiting particular types of students.

Our analysis of national Ofsted data for the periods 2005–10 and 2010–15 showed *a relationship between inspection grades and the changing*

socio-economic composition of a school's student body, highlighting the importance of inspection in co-influencing parental choice and in structuring competition. Schools that sustained or improved their judgement to Outstanding in the 2010–15 period saw, on average, a reduction in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), while schools retaining or being downgraded to a Requires Improvement and Inadequate judgement saw, on average, an increase in FSM eligibility.

Linked to these findings, there was a consistent view among many of our interviewees that the SISS agenda is furthering the creation of '*winner and losers*'. While higher-status schools were seen to be benefiting in terms of new opportunities and resources as a result of policy reform, the lower-status schools we visited faced a concentration of challenges often including under-subscription, higher mobility and disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged, migrant and hard to place children. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of respondents agreed that inequalities between schools are becoming wider as a result of current government policy.

We also explore the evolution of the market in school improvement services. As sources of 'free' advice and support (for example from the LA) have reduced, knowledge and expertise around aspects of school improvement have become a more important 'commodity' for schools. High-status schools are well placed to compete with LAs and consultants and companies in this new marketplace, but they are responding in different ways. We outline examples of three Outstanding primary schools in one locality that were, respectively, seeking to *sell*, *protect* and *share* knowledge and expertise. We also show, however, that new local and regional markets in improvement services are particularly incentivizing a focus on the types of knowledge and expertise that can most easily be *codified and commoditized* (as 'best practices') rather than on the joint-practice development and learning processes advocated by Hargreaves (2012) as essential for a SISS.

Networks

Schools in England have collaborated in networks for many years, even while in many cases also competing. Our analysis focuses on inter-organizational partnerships between schools, which we show to have become more extensive and more important to schools since 2010, but we also find that this has created a range of new tensions and inequalities.

The vast majority of schools in our sample reported collaborating with other schools. In the survey, two-thirds (67 per cent) of primary leaders and two-fifths (40 per cent) of secondary leaders stated that their school's strongest partnership was a 'local cluster'. Around one in five secondary schools described their strongest partnership as a TSA (20 per cent) or a MAT (22 per cent) – although we argue below that MATs should not be conceived as partnerships.

The local clusters we visited varied widely in terms of the strength of ties between schools and in the depth and breadth of cluster activity. All four LAs were encouraging their primary schools into 'improvement'-focused

clusters, largely as a way of sustaining some level of monitoring and improvement support in the face of reducing resources and capacity at LA-level. We show, however, that this was often problematic, for example where schools were in competition or where clusters, or schools within them, were unable or unwilling to embrace these new approaches.

Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) were advanced in policy from 2010, with the ‘best schools in the country’ (DfE, 2010: 23) designated nationally and encouraged to lead new alliances. We exemplify three common development trajectories for the TSAs in our localities, while noting that many alliances adopt hybrid approaches. In *hierarchical alliances*, one or more lead school dominated developments and was seen by alliance members to be benefiting disproportionately. In *exclusive alliances*, a subset of higher performing schools had formed the network as a way of securing their own performance, providing relatively limited opportunities or support for schools more widely to engage. In *marketized alliances*, the lead school/s sold services in a transparent but transactional way, with limited commitment to ongoing partnership or reciprocity with ‘client’ schools.

In the face of growing DfE pressures on Teaching Schools to secure short-term improvement through ‘school-to-school support’ and the need to generate income, many Teaching Schools in our sample were forming MATs, as they saw this to offer greater financial security and clearer lines of accountability and authority over other schools.

MATs are commonly referred to as a form of partnership, but we argue that this is inappropriate given a common definition of partnerships as ‘legally autonomous organizations that work together’ (Provan and Kenis, 2008). By contrast, a MAT is a single legal entity in which individual academies may have delegated powers, but these can be removed by the board. We argue MATs are best understood in terms of ‘*mergers and acquisitions*’, with prescribed models of governance and leadership largely derived from the private and, to a lesser extent, voluntary sectors. We show how MATs that had originally pursued flatter more lateral organizational models have been encouraged or required by RSCs to adopt more *corporate, bureaucratic and standardized approaches* over time. This was leading to a further dominance by academy sponsors, including higher-status schools, as well as towards increasing fragmentation as MATs compete against each other for status and schools.

MATs have been encouraged to grow or merge by the DfE, in search of efficiencies and ‘economies of scale’. However, our statistical analysis of MAT impact on pupil attainment and progress (which we publish in a separate, parallel paper¹) shows there is *no positive impact from MAT status* for pupils in either primary or secondary academies when compared to pupils in similar standalone academies. We also reveal *important*

2 Bernardinelli, D., Rutt, S., Greany, T. and Higham, R. (2018) *Multi-academy Trusts: Do they make a difference to pupil outcomes?* This can be downloaded from the publisher’s website at www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks/

differences between MATs of different sizes, suggesting that the economic drive for MAT growth may be in tension with an educational argument for smaller groupings of schools. Pupils in small and mid-sized MATs tend to perform better, on average, than their peers in comparable maintained schools in both phases and, in the primary phase, than comparable standalone academies. Conversely, secondary school pupils in larger MATs (16+ schools) tend to do worse in comparison to both standalone academies and maintained schools.

Conclusion

We conclude that rather than ‘moving control to the frontline’, the SISS agenda has intensified hierarchical governance and the state’s powers of intervention, further constraining the professionalism of school staff and steering the system through a model we term ‘*coercive autonomy*’. Our findings are unambiguous in illustrating the importance of Ofsted and the wider accountability framework in influencing the behaviour of schools, suggesting that hierarchical governance is more influential than market or network co-ordination in England.

But it is also more complex than that, most obviously because hierarchical governance operates in combination with market mechanisms to create such strong incentives for schools. For example, our analysis of Ofsted results and student composition indicates the co-influence of Ofsted in shaping both parental choice and competitive practices by schools.

Furthermore, the hierarchical state is no command and control monolith. Since 2010 the government has closed or amalgamated many ‘quangos’, but we find the state is no less ‘congested’ (Skelcher, 2000). There are now *multiple sub-systems*, with different, partially overlapping organizations in the bureaucratic hierarchy holding diverse views on how the school system should be organized.

This has created new pressures and contradictions for school-level leaders as they try to make sense of and navigate a new emergent landscape. Analysing the ways in which hierarchy, markets and networks intersect to influence decisions and behaviours across different local contexts is thus challenging and depends on a complex array of factors. We show that these include: the history of local relationships between schools and with the local authority, as well as the alliances, consensus and conflicts that have shaped local schooling; the context of individual schools and where and how they are situated socially, economically and geographically; and the agency of local actors, including their capacity to act and how this is informed by their personal and professional values.

We identify two important perspectives on how local systems might be reshaped as a result of these factors. The first sees local agency being fatally diminished in the face of centralization and data surveillance: with a model of ‘unbalanced’ governance and ‘highly centralized system steering’ (Ozga, 2009: 149). The second allows more room for local agency, while acknowledging significant centralization: as power moves

away from traditional local democratic structures, space is created for the local to be remade by private, voluntary and existing public sector actors (Lubienski, 2014).

Our research evidences how these moves are increasingly part of the same set of processes. For higher-status schools and their leaders, in particular nationally designated ‘system leaders’ and those forming MATs, as well as for LAs willing to ‘reform’ themselves, there are new opportunities to influence and reshape local landscapes, albeit while being bound closer to the performance management of central government. The motivations of these local actors are often mixed and can include aims to support more inclusive and equitable local school systems. At the same time, however, school-level actors are being encouraged to enhance their own positions and the positioning of their school(s), both by working entrepreneurially to sell services in new markets in school improvement and by working in new regional and sub-regional governing networks. These governing networks combine the hierarchical authority of RSCs with the professional networks of an increasingly co-opted elite of school leaders.

In these ways the SISS agenda further develops New Labour’s evolution of New Public Management, including by extending the roles and responsibilities of particular school leaders from management to governance and from schools to multi-school groupings. There is no doubt that both networks and new groupings of schools have become more important to schools since 2010, in particular as LA support has been rolled back and as new ‘school-led’ models of improvement have emerged. However, these do not represent an alternative to hierarchy and markets. They are not ‘self-organized’ networks (Rhodes, 1997) and rarely represent the ‘deep partnerships’ promoted by Hargreaves (2012). Rather, they reflect complex local responses to hierarchical and market governance, as schools work together to try to meet accountability requirements and/or to protect their positioning in local status hierarchies.

In this context, while a minority of our respondents were optimistic about the potential for their local school system to become ‘self-improving’, the majority view was that the SISS agenda is creating a system of ‘winners and losers’. Many saw the contemporary policy framework as problematic, not least because of the incentives to act ‘selfishly’ in a highly regulated marketplace. There was also a prevailing view that the system has become increasingly incoherent. As one secondary school leader interviewee put it: “‘System’ implies that there’s a good degree of articulate design. And I think what’s happening nationally is that there are all sorts of systems ... there isn’t really *a system*, and I think there are lots of emergent means of managing the problem that was set up. But nobody knows what works.’

Individual school leaders were generally positive about their own capacity to interpret and manage external change. For instance, 89 per cent of survey respondents agreed that their school had the capacity it needs to sustain its own improvement over the next three years. However, this did not mean that schools supported current government policy: half

(53 per cent) of our survey respondents reported that they did not support the overall trajectory of current policy, while only 20 per cent did. They were also clear about the tensions, paradoxes and ironies that exist (Greany and Earley, 2017). For example, current reforms were seen to be moving the system away from the original promise of increased school autonomy and towards a model of MATs in which school-level autonomy is reduced. Further, as MATs get larger, the number of managerial levels often increases, meaning that the ‘bureaucracy’ of the LA is replaced by another, potentially more complex and less accountable bureaucratic form – which develops hierarchical authority without a local democratic mandate.

Active resistance to this ensemble of policies was largely absent in our case study schools, apart from where a school was resisting forced academization. School leaders usually tried to resolve the dilemmas they faced through ‘*pragmatic compliance*’ or sometimes ‘*passive resistance*’, in which they sought to hold true to a core set of professional values while quietly protecting the school from external change. Such resistance was generally only possible, however, if the school was performing above minimum benchmarks. Furthermore, it often relied to some degree on solidarity between local schools, but if one school started to adopt more self-interested behaviours then others often felt a need to respond or face being disadvantaged in a competitive environment.

We conclude by identifying four themes that emerge from this research that merit further focus and attention among policy makers, researchers and practitioners:

- i) *A new economy of knowledge*: in the context of our findings that highlight the incentives for higher-status schools to codify and sell ‘best practice’ knowledge geared towards the demands of the accountability system, we ask how the system could be reshaped to encourage more inclusive and professional forms of knowledge development and mobilization.
- ii) *Fragmentation*: in the context of our findings on Ofsted and student intakes, we ask how changes to the existing model of hierarchical and market governance, including changes to the ‘middle tier’ above schools, could reduce the trend towards a system of ‘winners and losers’.
- iii) *Equity*: in the context of our findings on the concentration of vulnerable children in deprived schools, we ask how policy on admissions and fair access could be reformed and how services for the most vulnerable children could be reshaped to redress the trend towards further stratification.
- iv) *Legitimacy*: in the context of our findings on an increasing local democratic deficit, we ask how the school system could secure trust among professionals as well as parents and students, and what might be required to create meaningful engagement for these core stakeholders.

