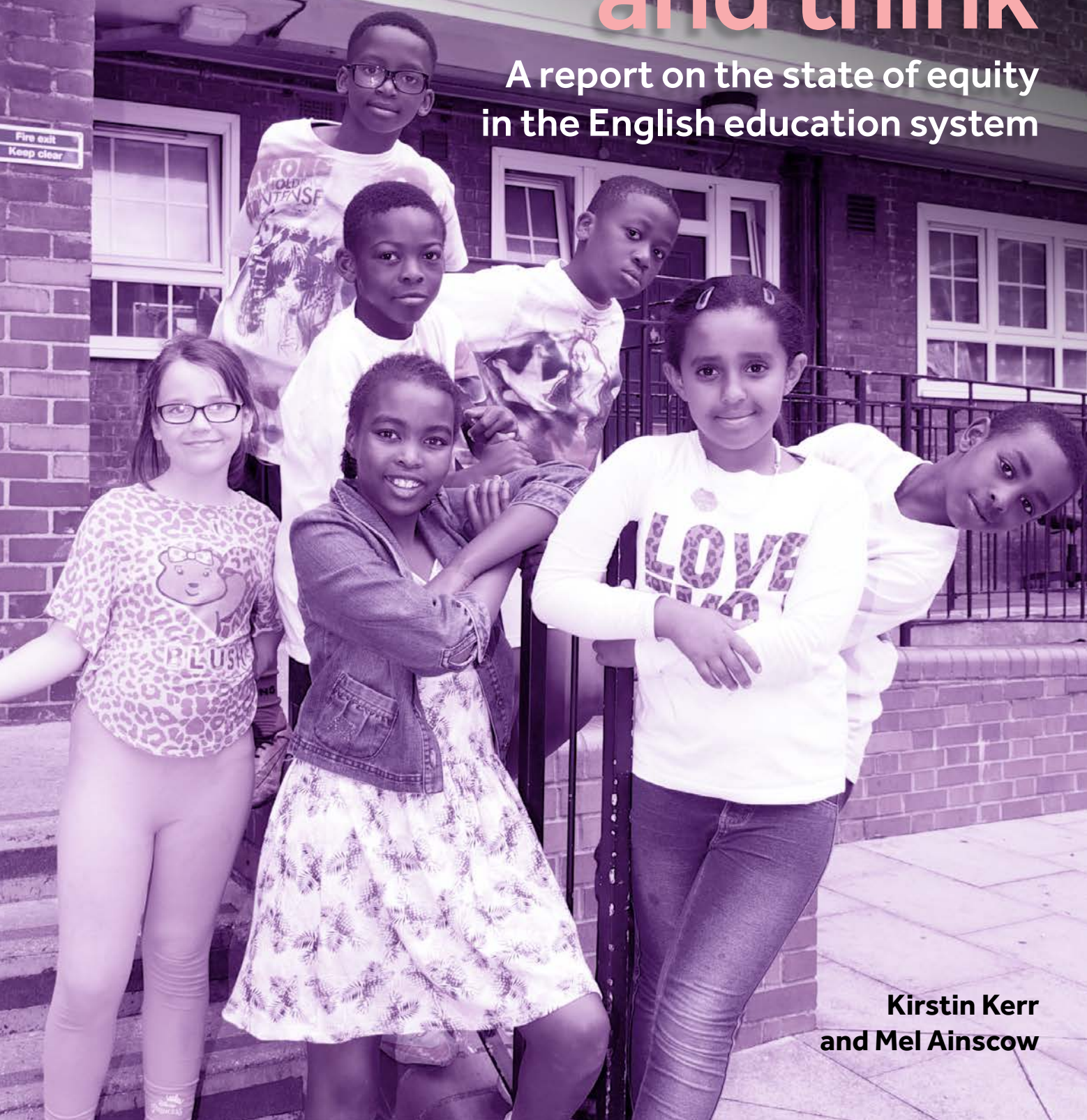


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# Equity in Education: Time to stop and think

A report on the state of equity  
in the English education system



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and Mel Ainscow**

# A note to readers

This report is being published in conjunction with the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2017. It is the latest in a series of reports on the state of equity in the English education system established by the Centre for Equity in Education at The University of Manchester. The Centre ran independently from 2006-2016 and its programmes of work are now part of the wider Disadvantage and Poverty Research Group at The University of Manchester.

Readers who want to explore the issues raised in this report further, or to learn more about the authors' work, are welcome to get in touch by emailing: [kirstin.kerr@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:kirstin.kerr@manchester.ac.uk)

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# Executive summary

**1.** This report brings up to date the Centre for Equity in Education's work over ten years in monitoring efforts to create a more equitable education system. In partnership with local practitioners, policy makers and communities, it has sought to understand how inequities arise in some of England's most disadvantaged places – in former mill and mining towns, poor inner-city suburbs, and social housing estates – and what can be done to address these, locally and nationally.

**2.** This latest report argues that, even after a decade of fast paced reform, as a whole **the most vulnerable children and young people, concentrated in the country's poorest areas, are still doing least well**, and to its detriment, the system remains fixated with short-term gains on a narrow range of measured attainments. The challenges faced have also intensified. More children are living in relative poverty and in families which are 'just about managing'. The system is experiencing funding crises, cuts to services, scandals in the academies programme, and growing fragmentation.

**3. Government will not find 'solutions' to these challenges from elsewhere; there are no quick fixes to import.** Rather, it must look to the experience, knowledge and wisdom held within the system. The system allows considerable opportunity for change – both for better and for worse. Using examples from the places where the Centre works, the report shows how local practitioners and policy makers are making sense of a highly uncertain education landscape, and – in their local contexts at least – finding ways to use current policies, and the spaces these create, to move in more equitable directions.

**4.** While these examples are inevitably fragile and limited, they nonetheless show that:

- despite the risks involved, academies can be a cohesive force, uniting local schools and bringing new resources and expertise to disadvantaged neighbourhoods
- local authorities can redefine their roles and relationships with schools to enable more effective supports to be developed
- third sector organisations can bring expertise and resources to the system to support workforce development and connect schools and communities.

Clearly, such examples may be more the exception than the rule. But importantly, they are the case in at least some places, and possibly more than are widely known.

**5. There is considerable potential *within the system* to move in more equitable directions.** Leadership for this can come from many sources and some combination of school-, LA-, and third sector-led developments may be of particular value. This leadership must act to co-ordinate and (re)connect the system, embodying a sense of collective responsibility for improving the outcomes of all children. It must also recognise the importance of place and encourage local 'joining up'. This should not be at the expense of the wider affiliations that enrich schools, but in addition to them. Future reforms have to understand that it matters that schools and services, and the children and families they serve, are located in particular places, with their own distinctive challenges and possibilities, some of which may call for locally-tailored responses.

**6.** Government must help unlock the system's potential. It has to develop 'intelligent' policy which can learn from and nurture innovative developments and leadership at all levels of the system. It has to understand how it can foster the conditions which encourage policy to be interpreted, on the ground, in ways which promote greater equity – rather than being manipulated for institutional advantage.

7. The report's broad recommendations are, therefore, as follows:

- Further radical restructuring, or the expansion of selective and competitive school arrangements, are not required. Rather, **government must shift its attention to creating and protecting spaces for local policy development**, founded on a broader view of the purposes of education. This will require greater stability, both in terms of the wider policy environment and funding levels. Above all, it will mean trusting the leadership of parts of the system to others – be they schools, local authorities, or third sector organisations – and holding them to account on the basis of genuine dialogue.
  - Key to this, government needs to recognise that **the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation**. Rather, they have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts, and the challenges, priorities and possibilities these present. This does not make holding schools and local authorities to account any less important, but it requires forms of accountability which can accommodate local contexts and priorities.
  - **There is a need for new forms of co-ordination to offset the dangers of school isolation**. With this in mind, local authorities could be given the role of monitoring and challenging schools, including academies, whilst school leaders could share responsibility for the overall management of improvement. In this way, local authority staff can position themselves as protectors of a more collegiate approach, and as co-ordinators and providers of quality assurance in a growing market place – but not as the custodians of day-to-day activities. In this context, the recently established regional schools commissioners can valuably facilitate collaboration between local authorities and help to create feedback loops between local and national contexts.
  - Teachers – especially those in senior positions – have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children locally, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to cooperate with other schools and wider partners. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, or even that schools must always lead, but it does imply thinking more broadly about the purposes of education and **developing partnerships between and beyond schools, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts**.
  - There is also a role for third sector organisations. Their distinctive expertise can enrich the education system and help to move it in more equitable directions – but they must not be seen simply as a replacement for previous services. To enable this, transparent mechanisms must be created through which they can work in partnership with schools, local authorities and other organisations to improve outcomes around matters of joint concern.
8. In order to act on these recommendations in the short-to-medium term, **there needs to be a hiatus in the government's current reform programme**. This will allow existing local developments to become better embedded and enable new developments to emerge. At the same time, it will give government time to learn deeply from what is happening within the system. Research should be commissioned to support and learn from these developments. This will enable a genuine, deep exploration of emerging innovative practices, rather than one which is unhelpfully restricted by the requirements of particular policies and a narrow definition of 'what works'. This, in turn, can directly inform 'intelligent' future policy.

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1** For the last 10 years, the Centre for Equity in Education has been tracking the state of equity in the English education system, working closely in partnership with practitioners, local policy makers and third sector organisations, who are committed to creating a more equitable future. With a focus on state schooling, we have been committed to looking beneath headline figures to ask why, as a whole, the most vulnerable children and young people are doing least well, even after a decade of fast-paced reform – and what can be done to intervene in these seemingly intractable inequities.
- 1.2** It remains the case that, as a group, the most advantaged learners in the English education system are still systematically the highest attaining, and the most disadvantaged the lowest, with a sliding scale between these extremes. This link between education and disadvantage also relates strongly to where children and young people live, and opportunities in these contexts. In local areas with poor educational outcomes there are often corresponding levels of ill health, unemployment, poor housing, and a whole host of other factors that limit life chances.
- 1.3** With a particular focus on poor inner-city neighbourhoods, former mining and mill towns, and isolated social housing estates, we have sought to understand what is actually happening in these places to lead to poor outcomes. At the same time, we have reported on a wealth of ‘promising practices’ emerging on the ground, exploring how, in partnership with the communities they serve and with each other, schools, local authorities and wider organisations are seeking to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. We have noted how those with a vision for a more equitable education system have found ways to do things differently – through their interpretation and use of policy initiatives and by occupying the spaces which, deliberately or unintentionally, policy has created.
- 1.4** In this latest report, we argue that, with the education landscape becoming increasingly uncertain, these opportunities to ‘do things differently’ are more important than ever. The challenges facing the system are intensifying. Many schools are now struggling to make ends meet and, even as demand grows, the wider services they use to support vulnerable learners are being reduced. A whole host of potentially competing arrangements are being brought into play – not least, multi-academy trusts (MATs), teaching school alliances (TSAs), regional commissioners, opportunity areas and research schools – but with little sense of how all these might play out. All this is taking place in a system already characterised by huge tensions and contradictions. For instance, there are reports of the academies and free schools programme exacerbating social segregation by effectively selecting ‘easy-to-teach’ students into favourably funded schools – and yet, academies and free schools are also leading some of the most innovative developments we know of and, in these cases, are wholly committed to serving their local communities.
- 1.5** It appears to us that the system now holds within it the keys to creating a more equitable future, but also to its own destruction – the great risk being that it will splinter irrevocably and at highest cost to the most disadvantaged. Nonetheless, even in these uncertain times, the local practitioners and policy makers we work with are exploring how they might start to (re)shape the system in their local contexts – not simply to protect the most disadvantaged, but to improve their outcomes. They also know there is no turning back; whatever they do next, it has to work within the current policy environment.
- 1.6** Our experience has always been that no matter how challenging the education landscape appears, promising practices will continue to emerge locally and the best of these will find a way to endure and develop. The current situation is no exception; indeed, the incentives and spaces to ‘do things differently’ appear greater than before, as are the scope and ambition of many of the locally-led initiatives we work with. What has been lacking, however, is ‘intelligent’ policy which can identify, learn from, and build on these.

**1.7** As in our previous reports, therefore, we foreground the voices of those working to improve children's outcomes in some of the country's most disadvantaged places – teachers and head teachers, local authority officers in children's services and public health, frontline staff in housing associations and in the voluntary and community sector. Our purpose is to shine a light on their on-going efforts to move the system in more equitable directions. In doing so, we find that equity as a goal is compromised in an education system where schools:

- do not work to support their neighbours
- do not work to support children in their family and community contexts
- have exclusive affiliations – be it to a sponsor, trust, or diocese – which prevent them engaging with other schools and wider partners.

More equitable alternatives are, however, possible, where:

- schools have multiple affiliations and diverse partnerships – within and stretching beyond their local area or authority
- leadership is concerned with the common goal of securing better outcomes for children and young people, and their families, schools and communities, and can come from many sources – schools and MATs, local authorities, private businesses, and the third sector
- systems and structures are created which allow schools, LAs, and their wider partners to take collective responsibility for improving outcomes and to be held collectively to account.

**1.8** In presenting these arguments, the report is organised as follows:

- **Section 2** offers a commentary on the current state of the English education system. Reflecting learning from the Centre's work over the last decade, it outlines five fundamental challenges which efforts to create a more equitable system must tackle.
- **Section 3** presents examples of emerging promising practices which are beginning to respond to these challenges. These suggest that in an increasingly diverse education system, the co-ordination and leadership needed to move the system in more equitable directions requires some combination of:
  - o *school-led approaches*, which include many types of more-or-less formal local alliances
  - o *LA-led approaches*, which are effectively working to change local systems by creating new kinds of partnership arrangements which work at many different levels
  - o *other possibilities, such as third sector involvement*. For instance, charities or voluntary and community organisations can bring specialist expertise to schools, or act as 'anchor points' to connect children's home, school and neighbourhood experiences, when the link between these is broken.
- **Section 4** identifies the principles for reform which these examples point towards and how these might shape future efforts to create a more equitable education system.

**1.9** In many respects, then, the report's message is simple.

**National policy has become so caught up in the on-going search for 'solutions' that it has forgotten to look to the experience, wisdom and knowledge held within the system itself.** As our examples show, in some places, local practitioners and policy makers are not only making sense of an uncertain education landscape but – in their local contexts at least – are finding ways to do things differently. Their efforts must be supported and there is much to be learnt from these.

# 2. Fundamental challenges

**2.1** In the 10 years since we started reporting, the education policy landscape has changed dramatically. However, at heart, the core challenges faced by the local professionals we work with have changed little. They are still struggling to square demands for increasing 'excellence', understood in terms of narrow academic attainment, with the realities of children's lives outside school – all while having to protect themselves from a punitive accountability regime and the vagaries of market place competition. The danger, especially at a time of rapid reform, is that these fundamental challenges go unquestioned. The pressure to make policy work on the ground – and especially if there is little sense of how it should work – can detract from asking central questions about what education reforms actually need to achieve in order to create a more equitable system.

**2.2** In response, here we restate five fundamental challenges to moving the system in more equitable directions, explored throughout the Centre's previous publications. These are:

- What should the English school system be trying to achieve?
- How should accountability work?
- How can the system be held together?
- How can learners' wider needs be met?
- How can research and evaluation help?

Anyone who is serious about creating a more equitable education system has to engage with these challenges. They warrant serious public debate, and if actively engaged with, have the power to interrupt the system's current direction of travel.



## Challenge 1: What should the English education system be trying to achieve?

Rightly, there continues to be a huge concern to 'narrow the gap' between the most and least advantaged learners, while improving outcomes for all. But in doing so, **the system has become fixated on a narrow range of measured attainments, confusing these with the purposes of education.**

There are good reasons to ask why the system should continue to invest so heavily in valuing what it currently measures. For instance, as our previous reports have shown:

- there is no clear rationale for prizing GCSE passes at levels 9-5 (or previously A\*-C). Many learners who fail to achieve these will never overcome the barriers it creates. Others will be unable to convert their exam passes into enhanced life chances.
- the qualifications on offer can often have little connection to learners' lives, their wider well-being and valuable adult destinations. Many young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, may come to see formal education as irrelevant to their future plans. Employers too are increasingly questioning the value of current qualifications in the workplace and whether these can create a skilled workforce.
- vocational courses have been compromised by efforts to ensure parity of esteem with narrowly-defined academic attainments.

All this suggests that a more equitable education system cannot only be concerned with a narrowly-defined set of standards. A broader vision of the purposes of education is needed to supplement this and to guide the system's development.

## Challenge 2: How should accountability work?

Rightly, schools should be held to account for the quality of the education they provide. Problems in ensuring greater equity arise, however, when the accountability system:

- equates quality directly with achieving a narrow range of measured attainments
- works only from the top-down, so that local providers are held to account against nationally-defined targets which take little account of local circumstances
- sets separate targets for every issue – be it exclusions, childhood obesity, or attainment in maths – encouraging rafts of short-term single-issue interventions
- uses the blanket imposition of punitive sanctions on all schools which fail to 'measure up'.

Our previous reports have shown how:

- schools at risk of low attainment can feel pressured to adopt an increasingly narrow curriculum and teach-to-the-test to raise attainment. More 'successful' schools may also feel pressured to do so to maintain their place in a competitive system.
- top-down targets often fail to reflect local conditions and priorities
- the potential for long-term and complex responses to inequity are undermined by the need to achieve short-term gains on particular measures
- some head teachers become expert at protecting their schools at the expense of others. Other schools, inevitably, become trapped at the bottom of local hierarchies, serving intensely disadvantaged populations and facing almost insurmountable odds.

All this suggests that – however broad a vision of education is promoted – if a narrowly-focused, top-down, punitive accountability system remains in place it will work to shape the education system in its own image. We are in no way suggesting that schools and services should not be held to account, but **different forms of accountability are needed.**

### Challenge 3: How can the system be held together?

Rightly, governments have tried to create spaces for innovation and to bring new expertise and investment into the school system. But they have acted on the false assumption that the only way to achieve this is to remove schools from 'the dead hand' of local authority control, and instead to have a myriad of self-interested schools, managed from the centre by directive and high stakes accountability.

This reliance on centralisation on the one hand, and the promotion of an education market-place with competitive, autonomous providers on the other, has created considerable tensions which are yet to be resolved. Our research has found, for instance:

- it can be difficult to achieve a coherent overview of the system at any level, since no one organisation has a full picture
- it is not entirely clear how the charities which run academy chains are held to account, for what and by whom. For instance, reports exposing questionable financial practices suggest 'rogue players' have been allowed to enter the system. There are also growing concerns regarding the high salaries paid to executives within these organisations.
- it can be difficult to intervene in the system to ensure greater co-ordination, especially when schools lie outside of LA control. Regional commissioners are creating a new layer of management between central government and schools, but, given the size of their regions, are not close enough to the ground to fully understand the system's local dynamics and provision. LAs, while closer to the ground, lack the power to counter the worse vagaries of market-place competition and to hold new players within the system to account.
- schools can find themselves isolated. Those which are vulnerable to low attainment are in danger of being shunted around academy trusts and even 'orphaned'. Others can find themselves trapped outside local arrangements, for instance, if they are the only local school not to join a particular academy trust – and joining might not be an option. We also know of cases where schools which have become isolated have 'dropped off the radar', so that if they start to struggle, this is not known more widely until Ofsted calls and support comes too late.

- there are few clear pathways to move knowledge and learning around – whether between schools, or between national, regional and local contexts. Schools have Ofsted in common, but its central role is to hold them individually to account, not to connect them.

All of this suggests that **a more equitable system must also be a more connected system**. Schools need to work together, both within and beyond their local areas, and knowledge and learning need to be easily shared around the system.



## Challenge 4: How can learners' wider needs be met?

Rightly, governments have, at times, sought to recognise that what happens beyond the school gates, in children's individual, family and community contexts, is even more powerful in shaping their educational outcomes than what happens in school. But schools in the kinds of places in which the Centre works can often find themselves trying to co-ordinate responses to complex needs – housing crises, the immediate material impacts of poverty, poor mental and physical health, and a host of other issues – which are well beyond their knowledge, remit or resources.



How to enable services to work beyond their established silos and share responsibility for meeting complex needs has always been a challenge. This is truer now than ever, as:

- the number of children living in relative poverty or in families which are just about managing is increasing
- LA services to support vulnerable children and families are being reduced. Those that remain are increasingly hard to access as thresholds are rising.
- LAs' capacities to provide services shrink, a whole host of suppliers of services are entering the frame, which will inevitably be of variable quality and motives
- children's and other services are further opened to the market, they will become increasingly difficult to co-ordinate, quality-assure and regulate – and it is not clear who would take this on. Silo working may well be reinforced, with new suppliers working within strictly defined boundaries and/or to narrow outcome targets.
- many schools feel forced to 'step into the breach', but without the funding, capacity or expertise to manage the supply of early help services. For instance, we know of schools which have appointed a newly qualified education psychologist or speech and language therapist on the basis of cost, only to find they lack the experience to be effective. We know of others where, in the absence of any other trusted supports, head teachers have even accompanied vulnerable parents to medical appointments.
- in an increasingly fragmented school system, it can be harder to share the burden all this creates across schools.

In this situation, vulnerable children and families are in danger of falling through the cracks. **A more equitable system has to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers to learning which lie beyond the school gates and what needs to be done to overcome these.** It has to ensure there is high quality co-ordinated provision in place to help tackle these barriers, and which schools can access. It has to do so in a context of reduced funding, without increasing the burden on schools.

## Challenge 5: How can research and evaluation help?

Rightly, there has been concern at all levels of the system to use research and evaluation to find out 'what works' to improve outcomes, and schools should have access to effective interventions. However, the search for 'what works' has – in line with the system's emphasis on a narrow range of measured attainments – been so narrowly interpreted, and this interpretation has been so indiscriminately applied, as to be damaging.

A particular challenge is how, in policy circles – and now increasingly so in schools' thinking – experimental evaluation designs, including randomised control trials (RCTs), have become the gold standard for determining 'what works'. At their simplest, these use matched 'treatment' and 'control' groups, and compare outcomes between these pre- and post-intervention to determine how much an intervention improves outcomes. This can work well for interventions with a simple causal model and where there is good reason to believe that any improvements can be directly attributed to the intervention – for instance, because it is tightly defined, with easily measured outcomes, specified target groups, and implemented in controlled contexts. Such evaluations are, however, ill-suited to more complex interventions which seek to address 'wicked problems'. These may, for instance, anticipate complex, evolving and iterative causal pathways, and involve multiple partners, working together to improve multiple, interrelated outcomes, in open and changing environments, over extended time scales.

All this has created a situation which:

- favours simple, short-term, single-issue interventions and encourages a narrowly classroom-focused approach – even though barriers to learning originating beyond the school gates are known to be even more influential in shaping outcomes
- there is an expectation that simple solutions can be imported into schools. This has the added consequence of deskilling teachers who are expected simply to implement interventions according to a manual, without drawing on their own expertise and experience.
- funding is being channelled into evaluations which use experimental designs whether these are suitable or not. Considerable sums are being spent evaluating interventions which appear not to 'work', though it is rarely clear why – whether because of weaknesses in intervention design, implementation, evaluation design, other contextual factors, or some combination of these.
- even if an intervention is found to 'work', there is often no guarantee that it will continue to work once scaled-up and left to schools in differing settings to implement in less than ideal conditions, without support.

This is not to argue against the value of experimental designs and RCTs per se; when applied appropriately, they undoubtedly have a role to play in supporting schools to improve outcomes. However, **the pervasive and narrowly-formulated understanding of 'what works' is now limiting the system's capacity for equitable development.** A more equitable system needs to be supported by a variety of different forms of research and evaluation, appropriate to meeting different needs.





**2.3** To be clear, having outlined these five major challenges, we are not questioning the aims from which they arise – gaps should be narrowed, schools should be held to account, spaces for innovation and investment should be created, interventions which can improve outcomes should be identified. But we are questioning the narrow understanding of the purposes of education which underpins them all. To truly meet the challenges set out here would require systemic reform: a system based on a broader vision of education would need to be mirrored by broader accountability arrangements. These, in turn, would need to create incentives for the system to join up – to support all schools’ practices, and connect schools to other services and organisations – while still ensuring the quality of provision. The system’s thinking and practice would have to shift, and research and evaluation would be needed to support this and to draw lessons from what occurs.

**2.4** Rebuilding the system from a clean slate is, however, clearly not an option; any change needs to take place within the confines of ‘normal’ politics. But change is, we suggest, possible. As we explore in the following section, there are examples – however, fragile, partial and limited they may be – of local practitioners and policy makers actively engaging with at least some of the challenges set out here. Their actions point to possibilities for the system’s future development.



# 3. Promising developments

**3.1** Here we present some of the promising developments emerging in the places where we work. We are not claiming these to be 'solutions', or to comprehensively address the challenges set out in Section 2, but they do provide a clear signal to policy makers about how the system could be moved in more equitable directions.

**3.2** Inevitably, these examples are fragile, limited by the circumstances in which they work, and have much still to do to realise their potential. They have also been developed in particular places with distinctive histories and relationships, meaning that they cannot simply be 'dropped' as a 'fix' into other places. In these respects, they are far from offering the kinds of magic bullets for which policy seems to be searching. But this makes them no less important. They reflect possibilities on the ground as we have found them, even within the most difficult of contexts. Moreover, they reveal that change need not always be led from the top down. **Leadership can come from all levels of the system – and valuably, at times, from outside it.**

**3.3** In line with these claims, here we explore developments whose leadership comes from three different sources:

- school-led developments, which include many types of more-or-less formal local alliances
- LA-led developments, which are creating new kinds of partnership arrangements, working at many different levels
- other possibilities, such as approaches led by third sector organisations.

To illustrate the diversity found within each of these, we present a range of vignettes, each signposting a valuable, and importantly, realisable direction for the system's development.

## School-led developments

Where we have found schools leading promising developments, often they have built on the foundations laid by previous collaborative arrangements, such as Education Action Zones, or extended school clusters. Others, however, have had to start effectively from scratch, investing firstly in building new relationships so that they can create foundations for change. The examples we include here involve:

- a research-based teaching school alliance, using research and evaluation to support equitable developments
- an area-based school improvement partnership, which is taking over LA school improvement services
- an academy with a broad vision of education working to improving outcomes for children, families and communities at neighbourhood-level.

Together, these examples suggest that where such supportive arrangements already exist within the system – whether formally or informally – these must be strengthened, nurtured and built upon. Where they do not, projects which commit schools to working together on an issue of common concern may provide an initial catalyst.

## Example 1: A research-based teaching school alliance

### Rationale

A teaching school alliance of around forty primary schools in one local authority is working in partnership with a local university education department to bring teachers and researchers together. The schools are following a model of collaborative research, drawing on teachers' professional knowledge, and wider research knowledge, to explore new ways of supporting disadvantaged learners. With the university's support, the schools are using the tools of research to examine, develop and share their practices and act as critical friends to one another. Overall, the aim of these processes is to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of all children, and particularly those experiencing barriers to learning.

### The research process

Each school determines its own focus for research, starting by identifying issues that are causing concern or are puzzling in some way – for instance, how best to utilise pupil premium funding and ways of supporting the integration of newly arrived pupils. They then follow a structured one-year research programme where the teachers and university researchers collect and share evidence, both about the school's practices, so that they can develop a rich, deep understanding of what is happening to learners in school, and from the wider research-evidence base. This evidence base is then used to stimulate critical thinking and professional learning about current practices, and to identify strategies for responding to the research findings.

The impact of these processes can be strengthened by engaging a wide range of staff – for instance, those who do not have leadership roles but are open to sharing and reflecting and can motivate other staff – and by networking between schools. There are regular cross-school meetings during the year, facilitated by university researchers, which create opportunities for the school research teams to share and critique their ideas, experiences, and insights into doing research. The university researchers also offer 'research clinics' where school research teams can seek additional advice and

support with carrying out their research, and with their plans for acting on the research findings, so that they can develop and sustain their research activities. Finally, there is an annual conference which involves the school research teams presenting and discussing the findings of their research and the developments and impacts these have led to. Senior leaders from the schools are invited to this event, as well as other interested school staff and schools' external partners and wider stakeholders. Some schools have then continued to work with the university over several years, with the process of research and development becoming integral to their thinking.

### This example highlights the following possibilities:

- Schools – individually and collectively – can be actively involved in research and evaluation which is tailored to the challenges they identify in their particular school and community contexts. In this collaborative process, research and evaluation stop being something separate to schools – used to create knowledge which schools then struggle to access, or to tell schools 'what works'. They become processes which work for and with schools.
- Rather than importing a 'quick fix', collaborative research processes can create powerful 'interruptions' in schools' existing practices, supporting teachers to reframe perceived problems in ways which can draw their attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to learning.
- Partnerships between schools, and between schools and universities, can extend the range of expertise that can contribute to this form of professional learning. This collaborative process recognises that teachers' professional knowledge, and their knowledge of their school context, is as important as researchers' knowledge of the wider research-evidence base. Bringing these together can help to create powerful interventions in a particular context, and from which other schools can learn.

## Example 2:

### An area-based partnership developed by schools

#### Rationale

This example involves a local area-based partnership of fifteen schools in the same LA: 12 primary, including six faith schools; two secondary – a faith school, and one which is part of MAT operating across several LAs; and one special school serving a population across the LA. The partnership has existed in various forms for twenty years and has always had school improvement at its heart.

Recently, the LA has repositioned itself as a commissioning body and has reduced its role as a direct provider of school improvement services. This shift, along with national policy ideas around a self-improving school system, has led the partnership to decide to take on the LA's mantle as the key provider of school improvement opportunities – for the partnership, and for wider schools which buy-in to the services on offer.

#### The partnership's offer

The partnership has set out the aims of its offer to schools as:

- securing high quality teaching, effective use of resources and the highest standards of learning and achievement for all learners in the area
- improving opportunities for all learners and their right to have a world class curriculum
- providing evaluation and challenge based on trust and reciprocity
- contributing to the professional development of all staff and disseminating good practice across the partnership of schools.

To realise these aims, the partnership has developed a complex and continually evolving model for school improvement, including an extensive range of commissioned services and training. For example, the partnership schools are all currently working towards a reading quality mark. Created locally, in partnership with the National Literacy Trust, this has a particular focus on promoting reading for enjoyment and is supported by colleagues from the school library service.

Decisions about the partnership's overall programme are made collectively, with the heads of the fifteen schools meeting monthly to plan activities. To help strengthen this process, the partnership has recently created 'tripods' of primary schools, in four geographical areas. Representatives of the two secondary schools also attend some of the tripod discussions. The purpose is to enable smaller group discussions around key school improvement themes that can then be fed back to the larger partnership group. Initial meetings have been around moderation and curriculum innovation. The partnership also organizes annual conferences for its schools and head teachers, and has an area schools' council with pupils from the partnership schools. This is linked to a separate initiative which is seeking to mobilise the wider community to improve opportunities for children and young people locally.

The schools make an annual financial contribution to support the partnership and further funding is provided by the LA. This funds the employment of a full-time co-ordinator, a former head teacher who has an office in one of the partnership's primary schools, and who manages the full programme of activity.

#### This example highlights the following possibilities:

- Effective forms of collaboration can be achieved, even in contexts where schools are members of other groupings, such as academy trusts and faith-based associations. Importantly, in this example, the partnership is led by schools, for schools, and they have been able collectively to fund a co-ordinating post, creating the capacity to manage the partnership offer on a day-to-day basis, without detracting from the partner schools' core business.
- Schools and LAs can develop new relationships which empower schools to commission services and training and access wider expertise. In this example, the LA is co-funding the partnership in its commissioning role. This means that as well as the partnership schools being accountable to one another, the partnership as a whole is accountable to the LA. This creates an important mechanism for external scrutiny.

## Example 3:

# An academy working to improving outcomes for children, families and communities, at neighbourhood-level

### Rationale

This 11-16 academy was set up to serve one of the most disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods in England. From the outset, the academy's sponsor, a large employer in the city, wanted the academy to help to create a vibrant and sustainable neighbourhood, explicitly committing it to challenging the many inter-related economic, social and physical issues which characterise the neighbourhood. This mission has explicitly shaped the academy's own offer, leading it to invest equal importance in 'teaching and learning' and 'social investment'. It has also committed the academy to working in partnership with the neighbourhood's primary schools, and other local services and organisations, to develop a neighbourhood-wide offer.

### The academy's offer

The academy's offer, and the systems and structures in place to support these, are complex and evolving. To give a flavour of these, some of the key features are set out here:

**Teaching and learning:** While the academy is under considerable pressure to achieve rapid gains in attainment, it has continued to develop a broad curriculum offer. For instance, this has included a shift at Key Stage 3 to creating a more integrated and holistic curriculum, with five inter-linked disciplinary areas: English and Maths, Health and Well-being, Science and Technology, Global Understanding, and Creative Arts. It has worked with its sponsor to develop an understanding of work-readiness and to create opportunities for learners to develop the 'soft skills' valued by employers, such as team working, problem solving, effective communication and creative thinking skills. Part of the academy's careers programme explores the city's economic growth areas and how learners can access careers in these. Apprenticeship opportunities with local and national employers are also part of its offer.

**Social investment:** This encompasses the academy's pastoral and community offers. As part of its pastoral offer, the academy offers a range of fully-funded or subsidised extra-curricular learning opportunities; deals with the acute symptoms of disadvantage – from buying uniforms, to hosting a food bank which transferred from a local community setting; and has developed a 'pastoral tracking system' which tracks every student's attainment, attendance and behaviour alongside their exposure to known 'risk factors' associated with underachievement, so that as soon as a student 'dips' or risks are flagged, appropriate supports can be put in place. The academy's wider community offer includes a range of learning, leisure and holiday opportunities for local residents of all ages. It also has a 'community college' which connects adults to local employment opportunities and supports them to gain the qualifications needed to access these, for instance in health and social care, or food hygiene.

**Partnership working:** To support all of this, the academy has developed a whole host of partnerships with local businesses, voluntary and community organisations, service providers, and local primary schools. Many see the academy's social investment team as a common space where they can share local intelligence and concerns, and identify possibilities to work together. To harness the potential of this loose arrangement and ensure that the neighbourhood's resources are not 'captured' by the academy, it has supported the creation of a registered charitable company. The academy's core partners are trustees, and the charity operates independently of the academy, for the benefit of the whole area.

**Creating a neighbourhood offer:** Inspired by the kinds of holistic 'cradle-to-career' strategies found in inner-cities in the USA, the academy has recently started to work more closely with its neighbouring primary schools to begin to develop a 'family zone' strategy for the area, supported by the charitable company. The zone's mission is to enable all children and families in the neighbourhood to:

- be asset rich and resilient to the effects of area and personal disadvantage
- make good or better academic progress at each key stage
- be physically, socially, and emotionally safe and healthy
- be able to secure the employment opportunities of their choice
- be able to contribute to the community
- have positive perceptions of their neighbourhood.

The zone is establishing three interrelated programmes of activity to act on these:

- building assets within the home, family and friends
- schools working together to create a seamless education 'pipeline'. As a first step, the academy's tracking system is being rolled out across the zone's schools.
- engaging the whole community in activities to promote careers, culture and health.

Although early days, the zone's schools have already started to develop a model of joint fundraising and investment to support some zone projects, including the creation of a multi-site forest school campus.

**Professional development:** The academy has become an accredited initial teacher training provider so that it can train teachers with the skills needed to support such a flexible, outward-looking approach. It also holds a weekly Continuing Professional Development programme for staff, often led by staff themselves, to pass on their expertise to others within and across curriculum areas.

**This example highlights the following possibilities:**

- A sponsor with a broad vision of education can create the catalyst, not only for an academy to 'do things differently', but to begin to create a coherent neighbourhood offer – for children, families, wider residents, and schools. It is also important that the academy's governing body is committed to supporting its senior leadership team to realise this vision.
- Rather than trying to fit new partnership arrangements into existing school structures which are not fit for purpose, partnerships need to be supported by structures which can help them to achieve their goals – in this instance, through the creation of a registered charitable company.





## LA-led developments

Where we have found LAs leading promising developments, they have tended to have two common aims. First, they are trying to hold the system together, both by enabling the development of the kinds of local networks that characterise our school-led examples and allow schools to lead, and by creating new partnership arrangements for their own work with schools. Second, they are trying to find ways to maintain the range and quality of services traditionally supplied by LAs. Our examples are of LAs:

- creating school clusters to develop locally-tailored 'narrowing the gap' strategies
- supporting the development of a county-wide learning partnership to ensure that 'no school is left behind'
- developing a new hub-based model for school-partnership working and early help and improvement services.

Together, these examples suggest that LAs, with both their authority-wide overview and their knowledge of very local situations, are uniquely placed to:

- build capacity within the system and do so in ways which help to hold the system together, making sure no school is isolated or orphaned
- co-ordinate and quality assure many of the wider services and sponsors schools might access, and ensure these are responsive to children, families, communities and schools.

## Example 4: Narrowing the gap in a county authority

### Rationale

This LA has had a strong and well-respected school improvement service for many years, but, like many LAs, it has come under pressure from reduced budgets. It has had to find new ways to offer support, and – with a focus on towns and other local areas where there are high levels of disadvantage, and where raising attainment is a priority – it has developed a model to support schools to work in partnership to ‘narrow the gap’. In each town, this has involved the LA using its influence to bring together senior school leaders, district council officers, and wider partners, to form a steering group which aims to develop and lead a bespoke, town-wide, ‘narrowing the gap’ strategy.

### The process

In each town, the steering group is supported for one year by the LA, with an LA school improvement officer chairing the group, and providing funds for a part-time co-ordinator and some limited seed-corn funding. During this year, and with a particular focus on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, the steering group starts by analysing local issues – exploring locally-grounded challenges and possibilities, the processes at work which shape particular outcomes, and what might be done to intervene in these. They then identify some strategic priorities, committing their own staff to joining working groups to act on these and to feedback to the steering group on developments.

In different towns, there have been more and less favourable starting points. In one, for instance, the LA has facilitated the bringing together of two well-established but historically distinct families of schools, both of which sought to attract learners from across the town. In another, working relations between the town’s schools were not well-established, and the kinds of local structures – like families of schools, or extended service clusters – which might have acted as foundations for developing these, were not in place. This made the LA’s role all the more important in enabling the schools to work together to develop joint understandings of local challenges, and in helping them to develop a structure for using their resources collectively, to improve outcomes town-wide.

In different towns, strategies have started to emerge which have been sustained beyond the LA’s initial involvement, and which have expanded their remits over time. For instance, in one town:

- a town-wide SENCO, funded by the schools, has created a programme of town-wide specialist provision and related training for school staff. This includes a strategy for meeting the needs of learners with autistic spectrum disorders, developed in consultation with parents.
- working groups for town-wide curricula development, synthesising cross-school, cross-phase expertise, have been established. This arrangement is especially strong in relation to teaching and learning in science, and aims to ensure town-wide consistency and excellence.
- a cross-phase working group has enabled staff to achieve a better understanding of learners’ outcomes at Key Stage 2, and to support transition to Key Stage 3
- most recently, a working party has been formed to develop in-school strategies around ‘readiness for learning’ and social, emotional mental health and well-being, in partnership with health professionals.

In this town, as their closing the gap strategy has developed, the schools – which include a mix of LA-maintained schools and academies – have also been considering whether they should move to formalise current arrangements, and so help to ensure their sustainability, by creating a distinctive governance structure with its own internal accountability processes.

### This example highlights the following possibilities:

- In places where intra-school relations are not well established, LAs – especially when their officers are well-respected and credible to schools – can use their local knowledge and influence to bring schools together to work on improving outcomes by developing a deep understanding of their shared local contexts, creating tailored responses, and unlocking the resources held locally to support these. LAs may need to lead initially, but they can support schools to step into this role, and to share responsibility and accountability.

## Example 5:

### A local authority facilitating a county-wide learning partnership

#### Rationale

This LA, in a relatively large rural county, is reported to have 'at least one of everything'. It has maintained schools, selective grammar schools, academies and free schools, special schools, faith schools and children's centres. Worried about the risks associated with this diversity, and concerned about what are seen as low standards in its schools, the LA has established a county-wide learning partnership. Guided by the motto 'no school left behind', it aims to provide all schools in the county, whatever their governance arrangements, with a sector-led professional learning partnership, rooted in peer-learning and development, which can support school improvement.

#### The offer

The learning partnership offers peer review training and networks, and quality assurance and continuing professional development opportunities. It is directed by a partnership board which takes ownership of the overall strategic vision for education in the county. The board includes elected head teacher representatives from primary, secondary and special schools, a chair of governors' representative, and representatives from the County Council, the Department for Education, and the Church of England Diocese of Education. It convenes six times a year to discuss issues, challenges and opportunities facing schools in the county.

The board believes that all children and schools in the county are its collective responsibility and wants every child and school to be known, valued and supported to achieve. To help achieve this, the board has set up a task group of head teachers from across the county which has worked extensively on designing a system for sector led self-improvement, drawing on other national examples and consultative workshops with head teachers and governors. As a result, all schools in the county are expected to:

- support sector led self-improvement and participate in peer review
- focus on improving standards
- work collaboratively to share expertise so that all children thrive
- commit to ensuring no school fails.

The benefits of schools working together to lead school improvement are well-established. In this case, it has led to a broad range of bespoke professional development opportunities, access to specialist expertise, and innovative school improvement. This is reported to have led to improved outcomes in teaching and learning, progress and attainment, and inspection.

#### This example highlights the following possibilities:

- In many areas of the country no one organisation has the overall picture that would enable them to orchestrate more collaborative ways of working, stepping in when things go wrong. This example suggests that, even in diverse contexts, local authorities are still uniquely placed to fill this gap – able to maintain an overview of education provision, and to provide the co-ordination needed, at the scale needed, to stop schools becoming isolated and dropping off radar.

## Example 6:

### A new hub-based model for early help and improvement services

#### Rationale

In recent years, this small unitary authority has found itself facing a combination of significant challenges. Funding cuts have considerably reduced its capacity to provide services, and when schools have bought in external services, these have sometimes been found to be of poor quality. In addition, while academisation has worked well for some schools, the risks inherent in this have also been seen in some parts of the LA, where this has undermined previous partnership arrangements and left some schools isolated. In response, the LA has started to redefine its role, acting to help schools who want to academise to identify suitable sponsors; support schools to work together in area-based hubs; and to reconfigure its services to better reflect hubs' needs.

#### The offer

**Managing academisation:** Drawing on its knowledge of its own schools, and the challenges and possibilities in different parts of the authority, the LA sees itself as well placed to manage academisation to achieve positive outcomes. To this end, it is actively working to identify and negotiate with sponsors who:

- have some understanding of, and commitment to, engaging in schools' local contexts
- are supportive of schools working together on an area-basis to address barriers to learning
- will maintain supportive relationships with the LA to ensure that schools are connected to wider service and policy developments.

**Supporting hub-based working:** The LA has grouped its schools into area-based hubs, based on a combination of location and the LA's knowledge of pre-existing working relationships, with LA officers working to support the hubs. The hubs are intended to serve as a connective point for schools, services and wider stakeholders, and as a platform for collective strategy and action. To facilitate this, each hub appoints a co-ordinator – often a senior figure from a local school with

pastoral responsibilities – and the LA has developed a detailed analysis of outcomes for each hub's local area. Hub members have then started to pool their intelligence about what is happening locally to lead to particular outcomes, and about what might therefore need to happen in response, and to act on this.

**Traded services:** The LA is developing plans to reconfigure its children's services. Its intention is two-fold. First, it wants to develop its services to reflect actual needs within the LA's local hub-areas – and in doing so, to change the nature of its accountability systems so that its services are more accountable to those they are designed to benefit. To this end, it is working to pilot community-based accountability processes. Second, it plans to operate these services through some form of spin-off company or Arms-Length Management Organisation, which hubs collectively, and schools individually, can buy into. The LA anticipates that such an arrangement could enable it to: maintain and increase its current capacity to support schools and community development; quality assure the services on offer, so that schools are not vulnerable to investing in poor quality external support; and enable swift access to services.

#### This example highlights the following possibilities:

In addition to playing the kinds of co-ordinating roles we have seen in the two previous examples, this particular example suggests that:

- LAs' 'local knowledge' means that they are well-placed to act as brokers to support good outcomes for schools which are seeking to academise
- LAs can still play an important (if perhaps reduced) role in providing services to schools. There are opportunities to reconfigure how they do so, and to ensure that what they provide is not only of high quality, but well matched to the supports children, families and schools actually need.





## Third sector-led developments

Where we have found third sector-led developments, these have typically been led by charities with expertise in a particular aspect of children's development and well-being and who recognise the importance of a place-based approach to improving outcomes. Here we present two examples which give some indication of the variety of developments in the field:

- a national charity that has developed an initiative working with clusters of schools to improve children's speech, language and communication skills
- a housing association which is developing a strategy to bridge between children's home and school lives, providing them with support in both contexts.

In both instances, these organisations hold knowledge and expertise that perhaps no other single organisation holds – in the first, around speech language and communication skills, and in the second, a deep knowledge of children's lives in their family and community contexts. The possibilities of connecting such expertise to schools – even if only on a localised basis – are considerable.



## Example 7: Developing children's Speech Language and Communication (SLC) skills in disadvantaged areas

### Rationale

This initiative was developed by a national charity to improve children's SLC skills in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where these are often considerably behind age-related expectations on school entry. It does so by supporting school workforce development in the primary phase, so that staff in participating schools develop the knowledge to support children's achievement of age-appropriate SLC skills and can sustain targeted and universal SLC strategies.

### The process

- The initiative targets clusters of five or six primary schools in the same area. Sometimes these clusters already actively exist, and sometimes the charity has had to use its resources and the schools' shared concerns as a basis to bring them together.
- The initiative runs for two years in each cluster, after which the schools are expected to be able to sustain whole-school SLC practices.
- During this time, each school in the cluster nominates a 'communication lead' who drives the initiative in their school with the charity's support. The charity also appoints a speech and language therapist (SaLT), to work across the cluster, spending a day a week in each school to support the communication lead and work with staff, as well as providing termly whole school training. This arrangement means that the SaLTs can move knowledge and good practice between the cluster schools.
- The charity has also created a common menu of evidence-based universal and targeted interventions which schools can implement to promote SLC skills, and the SaLT supports schools to do so with fidelity. In addition, it runs regular cluster-level cross-school meetings for communication leads so that they can share learning and receive additional expert support, and also meetings with head teachers, to review progress and strategic priorities and plan for sustainability.

- While the initiative is broadly similar in all clusters in terms of its components and provision, there are variations in the way in which it is operationalised, depending on contextual factors. For instance, workforce development activities may be organised differently, dependent on the size of school. Schools are also supported to make informed choices about which interventions will best address their circumstances, and the extent to which different interventions can be integrated into and add value to their existing practice. There is also some variation as to how far SaLTs support schools to engage with wider issues, for instance, they sometimes also support schools to work with parents, health visitors, and feeder nurseries. This operational flexibility, and the intensive and bespoke support offered for school workforce development, have enabled the initiative to be embedded equally well across a wide variety of schools. This would not have been possible without a nationally-recognised SLC charity using its expertise and position to develop the initiative and facilitate it in practice.

### This example highlights the following possibilities:

- Third sector organisations can be uniquely placed to act as 'boundary spanners' connecting schools and wider services and expertise. In this example, the charity's expertise in the health and education sectors, and in child development, has enabled it to play this role. It recruits appropriately qualified SaLTs, and in some cases has been able to negotiate a full- or part-time secondment from the local NHS Trust so that SaLTs can continue to access clinical training while working in schools. The charity's own professional experts provide the SaLTs with mentoring and training throughout the initiative, helping to ensure they can bridge between their professional experiences in clinical settings, where they work with children with medical needs, to working in educational settings with children with developmental delays. In turn, this helps to ensure that schools receive effective high quality support from a health-professional who is able to support school workforce development.

## Example 8:

### Improving outcomes on a social housing estate

#### Rationale

The impetus behind this initiative has come from a housing association, which is the social landlord for a small inner-city estate. In recent years, the borough in which the estate lies has seen much gentrification, benefitting from economic growth, particularly in the creative industries. The estate, however, is largely isolated from this; it has a poor reputation, remains characterised by poor outcomes, and residents often lack the necessary skills and income to access the area's new opportunities. Around 50 per cent of residents are first generation migrant families who can easily find themselves socially isolated and who have little knowledge of how to access services.

One of the initiative's central goals is to achieve long-term reductions in child poverty on the estate. In line with this, the housing association has already brought a range of LA and voluntary and community services together with its own supports to work on increasing:

- the number of residents of all ages in employment, education and training
- help available to parents through informal support networks, training courses, and by strengthening intra-family relations
- early intervention and prevention with the estate's youngest children aged 0-5.

It has, however, faced particular challenges in trying to connect to children's school experiences. There are no schools on the estate, the local school system is highly competitive, and schools have tended to focus intensively, and in isolation, on their internal improvement at the expense of partnership activity. Children from the estate also attend a range of local schools, so they are only ever a small proportion of a school's pupil population and can easily become 'hidden' within this. Schools may not recognise them as facing potential barriers to learning which relate to the estate's context, or appreciate that their parents might have little knowledge of the school system or of schools' expectations about how parents should support their children's learning. The housing association has therefore set out to create a formal mechanism for engaging with local schools, and linking them to services on the estate and in the LA, which could help to address these issues.

#### The mechanism

The housing association has identified one local primary school which has about 20 children from the estate in its annual intake. It has used the shared goal of promoting school readiness as the basis for developing a three-way partnership between the primary school, the housing association, and the local Children's Centre, and has secured funding to employ a part-time teacher to work on a 'ready for school' project. This project is designed to provide children and parents with support before they start at the primary school (once they know they have a place), and in the first year at school. It aims to:

- help children from the estate make a successful transition to the primary school, and support their learning and well-being during the reception year
- support parents to better support their children's learning
- reduce wider barriers to family well-being and ensure families can access and take up services
- strengthen school/home/community links.

Pre-school, the teacher's role is to work with the families to identify what is needed to support each child's learning and prepare them for transition – linking them to Children's Centre activities and developing one-to-one and group learning sessions as needed. One of the housing association's parent advisors will work alongside the teacher to help link parents to services on the estate, which range from support with financial management and accessing employment, to informal networking and parent support. The Children's Centre will also support access to universal and targeted services as needed, using a 'family CAF' (common assessment framework) to identify families' early help needs. Once the children start school, the teacher's role will be to work closely with the primary school's reception staff to help children settle in school and support their learning, and to provide an active link between school, home and the wider community.

There is now a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in place between the project partners, creating a public commitment to working in this way. They are also working on a data sharing agreement to support the project, which is being brokered by the LA at a strategic policy level.

**This example highlights the following possibilities:**

- In places where the school system is fragmented, and the link between schools, families and communities is broken, organisations from outside the school system might be best placed to bridge these gaps. In this example, it is a housing association with strong family and community ties which has created the catalyst, securing the school's support by: (i) publicly proving its commitment to supporting children's transition and learning – through an MOU and by committing its own resources and securing additional funding; and (ii) having the ability to engage families – which the school finds challenging – as well as to bring the appropriate partners together around this agenda.



**3.4** The examples we have provided show how, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the challenges facing the system and the tensions to which these give rise, there are schools, LAs, and third sector organisations acting in new and productive ways. In each case, they offer leadership which, albeit on very different scales, is co-ordinating and (re)connecting the education system, embodying a sense of collective responsibility for improving the outcomes of all children. They have all found their own ways to 'do things differently' – changing roles and relationships; extending the system's access to expertise; spanning boundaries; and creating systems and structures which support rather than thwart their ambitions.

**3.5** Of course, each example also has its limitations, difficulties and risks. Even where new relationships are formalised – for instance with a memorandum of understanding – much still depends on maintaining goodwill, sufficient stability and resourcing, and favourable inspection outcomes, among many other factors. Nonetheless, these examples still provide a tantalising glimpse – however partial – of what an education system could look like in which:

- schools act on a broader vision of education
- schools are connected locally to each other and to a wider system of supports
- new players in the system are adding value and bringing additional expertise
- research and evaluation are integral to supporting schools' practices.

Considered collectively, they point to the possibility of creating an education system where:

- ***schools actively engage in research and service provision.*** They need not lead on these (though some may wish to), but schools do need to be seen as active partners, with unique insights and knowledge, which can inform research and service provision.
- ***schools actively (re)engage with their local contexts.*** This needs to be seen as essential to developing more equitable practice, rather than as an exercise in 'excusing' poor outcomes.
- ***schools work together in the collective interests of the areas they serve.*** The dangers of isolation, and the limits of what schools can achieve alone, need to be recognised explicitly and countered.
- ***schools broaden their concerns from a narrow focus on academic standards, to improving the lives of children, families and communities.*** 'Boundary crossing' expertise – from other services, businesses, and the third sector – needs to be seen as integral to supporting this.
- ***LAs work with and for schools.*** Rather than 'doing to' schools, LAs need to take a co-ordinating and facilitative role, helping to create and sustain the conditions to bring schools together, including academies. This requires co-ordination not just within the LA, but beyond it, for instance, with LAs also working closely with regional commissioners.

In the report's final section, we consider the wider implications of pursuing these possibilities for key stakeholders at all levels of the system.



# 4. Implications for the system's development

- 4.1** If the examples in this report are indicative of wider developments nationally, it seems that – in some places at least – something of a quiet revolution is taking place. Those involved are, in their particular contexts, finding ways to make sense of a highly uncertain education landscape, and to use current policies, and the spaces these create, to move in more equitable directions. Their actions are indicative of what can happen when what schools do is aligned within a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players – families and communities, businesses, universities and public services, and third sector organisations. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, or that schools must always lead, but it does imply thinking more broadly about the purposes of education; developing partnerships between and beyond schools, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts; and it does require alternative forms of accountability which can facilitate these ways of working.
- 4.2** It would, of course, be naïve to ignore the political complexities involved in all of this. In the current policy context there is, in particular, a need for sensitivity with regard to the shift in influence taking place, from LAs, towards Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and/or multi-academy trusts (MATs). In some places, this transition appears to be reasonably smooth – and as the examples in Section 3 suggest, some LAs are taking a leading role, seeing a space in which to actively redefine their relationship with schools in order to better support them. Other places are, however, seeing escalating power struggles around decision making, with competition for student numbers and access to wider funding increasingly becoming the battleground in which these play out. This is not only the case between schools, but also between LAs, MATs and other service providers, as children's services are opened up to the market place. The prospect of continuing competition of these kinds is likely to undermine the sustainability of efforts to promote collaboration. Indeed, part of the fragility of some of the report's promising examples is their current reliance on fixed-term funding.
- 4.3** Bearing these complexities in mind, we conclude with a particular focus on supporting the system's development over the next few years. In doing so, we offer some broad principles to guide the system's equitable development, followed by more specific recommendations for national policy, LAs, schools, and third sector organisations.

## Broad principles for reform

Over the course of our previous reports<sup>1</sup>, we have developed and elaborated a series of broad principles to guide future reforms. Rather than present these again in full, here we restate three broad principles for equitable reform which underpin our recommendations:

- 1. Government must support a mature debate about the broader aims and purposes of education and its underpinning values.** An education system is needed which is excellent and equitable, and can meet the needs of the economy while supporting social mobility. It must create learning opportunities that can positively link what children and young people, and their families and communities, bring to the system, what they want to gain from it, and their opportunities to pursue improved life chances. Clarity about what such a system would look like cannot be achieved without mature public debate. For the system to be coherent in its intent and operation, government has to be able articulate a set of common purposes and values which can unite the system as a whole – creating a basis for collaborative practice within and between different levels of the system, and for drawing together internal and external expertise.
- 2. The education system must act on a much more detailed and in-depth analysis of the social contexts in which education takes place, both locally and nationally.** It must acknowledge that the sources of deep-seated educational inequities often lie beyond schools in the communities they serve and relate to a whole host of complex personal and area factors. It therefore has to probe beneath the surface of headline performance indicators to understand how national and local dynamics shape particular outcomes, the underlying factors at work which policy can influence, and how schools, services and wider stakeholders can work together to make a sustained impact on these. In doing so, education reforms must become part of a coherent strategy to address wider social and economic concerns, uniting a range of agencies and services.

- 3. Accountability systems must be developed to support a broader range of aims and purposes.** The implication of taking a broader view of education's aims and purposes, and of acknowledging the importance of context, is that accountability mechanisms have to become more explicitly multi-dimensional. They have to allow for a dialogue between all levels of the system and the interests of widely varying stakeholders. This means that the current market-based model of education must change so that policy shifts its gaze from narrow measures of attainment and individual schools and their leaders as the most important players in the system, to consider what can be achieved collectively, over time, to break patterns of inequity, and to give communities an active voice in shaping local education provision.



<sup>1</sup> Readers are referred to our earlier reports, listed in Appendix 1, where we have previously elaborated broad principles for the equitable reform of the English education system and how these can be operationalized.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

As with the broad principles for reform, many of our recommendations from previous reports still stand, and we again refer readers to these. Our focus here, given the very real danger that the English education system will splinter irrevocably, is on what needs to happen to counter this in the short- to medium-term. Our recommendations are by no means exhaustive, but reflect the central implications arising from the report's promising examples.

### At the national policy level

National policy makers must make use of the power of local collaboration and co-ordination. Key to this, they need to recognise that **the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation**, but have to be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts and the challenges, priorities and possibilities these present. This means that they must 'loosen the reins' and trust schools and LAs to take actions to improve children's outcomes, with central government's role being to create and protect spaces for local policy development and action. This does not make holding schools and LAs to account any less important, but accountability has to reflect local aims. To act on this:

**There needs to be a hiatus in the government's on-going reform programme.** This will serve three core purposes.

- i. ***It will provide some much needed stability in the system.*** This will allow existing local developments to become better embedded and enable new developments to emerge. In recent years, the system's rapidly shifting systems and structures, while creating spaces for innovation in some places, has undoubtedly acted as a barrier in others. Local policy makers and practitioners need time to make sense of the system's current arrangements and the implications for their local situation.
- ii. ***It will give government time to learn deeply from what is happening within the system.*** Rather than blaming schools and LAs for not acting as Whitehall intends, central government must recognise and value the insights of local policy makers and practitioners. To do this, it must create strong feedback loops which allow local knowledge to be fed back into policy and which allow national policy makers to consult with local actors. There are many ways in which this could be supported, for instance:
  - o LAs' existing monitoring roles could be expanded to encompass a wider range of intelligence and regional commissioners could support and connect with them in doing so.
  - o Ofsted's functions could be broadened to support wider intelligence gathering at school level, engaging in a developmental dialogue with schools, rather than focusing on narrow forms of compliance and accountability.
  - o Research could be commissioned to support current developments and enable a genuine, deep exploration of emerging innovative practices, rather than being unhelpfully restricted by the requirements of particular policies and a narrow definition of 'what works'.
- iii. ***It will give government time to identify possibilities for cross-departmental working.*** There is, for instance, considerable potential for joint strategy with the Department of Health and Public Health England around the healthy child programme and school readiness in particular. Identifying and acting on such synergies will be essential if education reforms are to become part of a coherent strategy to address wider social and economic concerns.

**During this period, there are a number of steps government could take to adjust its current stance to support equitable developments within the system.**

For instance, government should:

- **Do more to hold academy sponsors to account, and require sponsors to enable academies to participate in local collaborative structures.** Academy sponsors have a contract with the Department for Education and it must use this as a lever to bring rogue players into line.
- **Through central co-ordination, and co-ordination at regional levels, help to ensure that locally-led initiatives are not torn apart by multiple, competing policy requirements.** For instance, the academy featured in Example 3 is currently under pressure to make rapid gains in attainment (and while attainment on entry for some of its younger cohorts is falling); to expand its initial teacher training provision and view this as a separate enterprise, disconnected from the academy's core business; and to expand as a MAT or join an existing larger MAT. Any or all of these external pressures could easily undermine the coherence of its underpinning vision and strategy and could be offset by greater co-ordination at regional and national levels.
- **Give schools and LAs greater permissions to do things differently.** For instance, a very simple step would be to trust schools to spend Pupil Premium on meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils, rather than encouraging investment in short-term interventions. This does not mean spending without accountability; schools could be required to present a clear case to support their spending choices and to be held to account on this basis. Similarly, the development of research schools could involve schools in collaborative research projects of the kinds seen in Example 1. These are simple shifts, but they would mean investing less political capital in a narrow view of 'what works' and placing greater trust in schools and LAs to do 'what is right' in their particular contexts.



- **Guarantee funding levels.** An equitable education system has to have sufficient, guaranteed levels of core funding from central government. Government also has to be prepared to make additional investments in places where the infrastructure for 'doing things differently' has to be developed and sustained. Even though each of the examples in Section 3 is finding ways to use existing (and shrinking) resources to greater effect, they cannot maintain – let alone develop or expand – their activities without adequate financial support. While many schools and their partners are becoming more entrepreneurial, government cannot rely on this to fund provision or to enable an equitable distribution of resources.
- **Ensure that it revisits learning from the past.** In its on-going search for new 'solutions' government has a tendency to forget what has gone before and to learn from this. For instance, Opportunity Areas have much of value to learn from earlier area-based initiatives, not least City Challenge, and this knowledge could be used explicitly to develop stronger, more effective approaches, with less risk of repeating past mistakes.



### At the local authority level

LAs have to create some form of local co-ordination to offset the dangers of school isolation. They could be given the roles of local intelligence gathering, and monitoring and challenging schools, including academies, whilst school leaders could share responsibility for the overall management of improvement. **LA staff should position themselves as protectors of a more collegiate approach and as providers of quality assurance in a growing market place** – but not as the custodians of day-to-day activities. In this way they can act as the conscience of the system – making sure that all children and young people are getting a fair deal within an increasingly diverse system of education. With growing concerns in many parts of the country about a lack of school places, the need for such an approach is now a matter of urgency. To act on this, LAs must:

- **Let go of their historic roles where these are unsustainable.** Within an increasingly open market place, LAs are struggling to compete in their traditional roles. They are, however, perhaps uniquely placed to reposition themselves – individually or on a regional basis – as intelligence gatherers, co-ordinators, facilitators, commissioners and brokers, and must move to occupy this space.
- **Build relationships on this new basis.** LAs which are starting to redefine their roles need to have a transparent and public dialogue about this with schools and other partners, not least academy trusts, so that they can work out new relationships together. The LA has to have the credibility and support needed to drive local developments in the first instance. But it also then has to step back into a supportive role and trust schools and partners to lead, and to be responsive to them.
- **Know the schools in the authority.** In all of the LA-led examples in Section 3, knowledge about schools in the authority has been central to the LAs' actions. In developing school clusters and hubs, for instance, they have been able to take existing relationships (positive and negative) into account and be responsive to these. Where LAs have lost touch with schools, they must re-establish their relationships and they must forge relationships with any new schools.
- **Work with and for schools.** LAs must actively seek to understand what supports need to be in place to help schools to improve outcomes, and then enable schools to take a leading role in developing these, and/or to redevelop their LA service offers and commissioning roles accordingly. This does not mean simply responding to schools' demands, but working with schools to support them in analysing what is happening to produce poor outcomes, both in school and in their local contexts, and what responses might prove most effective.
- **Create and protect spaces for innovation.** LAs can, as our examples show, provide support and 'permission' to innovate, bringing schools and wider partners together, and facilitating boundary-crossing activity across LA services. LAs can also, through their wider relationships, act as a 'buffer' to protect these arrangements. For instance, by acting as the intermediary between schools, sponsors and regional commissioners, they can help to ensure supportive outcomes from academisation processes.
- **Work with regional schools commissioners.** Regional commissioners are, for instance, beginning to facilitate collaboration between LAs in ways which encourage cross-border co-operation.

### At the school level

Teachers – especially those in senior positions – have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to cooperate with other schools and wider partners. To act on this, schools must:

- **Work together locally.** Where supportive arrangements – like families of schools – already exist within the system, these need to be strengthened, nurtured and built upon. Where this is not the case, schools must be willing to actively engage with efforts to develop such arrangements – whether driven by schools, LAs, or third sector organisations in the first instance. This, of course, does not preclude schools from having a whole host of other partnerships beyond their neighbouring schools, such as being part of an academy trust or teaching school alliance, and from being enriched by these. Nonetheless, it remains the case that to address place-based inequities, it is important that schools serving the same families and communities work together. In doing so, they must be willing to pool knowledge and resources for their collective benefits.
- **Think more broadly about what they want to achieve for their children, families and communities.** Of course, attainment is important, but schools also need to think beyond this – and as the report's examples suggest, even a small shift in focus, from reading and writing to speech and language, has considerable power to open up new possibilities for action. Schools must be clear about what they want to achieve and why, and be able to link the priorities they identify, and the actions they then take, to their analysis of the challenges they face. They must, moreover, be willing to be held to account on this basis. This would, for instance, be important in supporting the broader use of Pupil Premium funds.
- **Be open to, and actively seek, partnerships with organisations which can support them in this.** Schools need to be willing to engage in 'boundary crossing' activity, bringing together expertise from health and education, or health and housing, for example. In turn, this may mean schools making a greater investment in workforce development, and less in short-term interventions, so that they can make sustainable improvements in broader outcomes. Being willing to adapt their internal school structures and staffing requirements, and to support collective investment in co-ordinating roles (as in Example 2 for instance), appears particularly important. However, this does not mean that schools must always lead developments. Just as national government and LAs need to 'let go' in ways which can support innovation, at times this will be equally true for schools, and it may be that they look to LAs to take a co-ordinating and quality assurance role in developing partnership working.

## For the third sector

**Third sector organisations have expertise which they can bring to enriching the education system.** For this to be accessible, they must create mechanisms through which they can work in partnership with schools, LAs, and other organisations, to improve outcomes around matters of joint concern. They must not, however, be seen as replacement services – unless, of course, commissioned to provide these. The sector's instability, often linked to the continual need to attract funds, and its patchy and often poorly co-ordinated nature, will also have to be managed to bring sustainable benefits to the education system. To act on this:

- **Organisations must be able to clearly define their offer, the expertise that underpins this, and to make themselves accountable on this basis.** While our examples have pointed to the huge potential of working with 'expert' organisations, we also know of cases where the offer to schools has been unclear; organisations have tried to lead developments by 'command and control'; and schools have felt that their goodwill and resources have been exploited for the external organisation's gain. Similarly, we know of third sector organisations who have committed considerable resources to schools which, for whatever reason, have not been able to engage with these. Clarity from the outset about what is involved in working together, and the negotiation of roles and relationships, is essential to offset such dangers.
- **Organisations must be willing for their activities to be scrutinised.** Engagement in robust research and evaluation activities will be particularly important, as schools will rightly want to know what benefits they may expect from working together. This means that organisations have to be willing to engage in research and evaluation and to learn from this.
- **The sector needs mechanisms for local co-ordination and quality assurance.** The third sector is huge and hugely varied – and in some places, and around some issues, also hugely congested. For instance, the housing association in Example 8 is just one of several hundred registered charities operating in that particular borough. Even in rather less 'busy' places, schools and LAs can very easily become overwhelmed by approaches from separate organisations and may simply feel it safest and easiest not to engage at all. Some form of co-ordinating mechanism is needed to manage this situation. Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) are positioned to act as co-ordinating bodies for the voluntary sector locally, and some are already actively fulfilling this role, supported by LAs. However, practice is patchy and there is much still to do to develop their capacity nation-wide. CVSs need to be properly funded and supported so that they can play their existing co-ordinating role well. In some places, LAs and third sector organisations may also need to commit to developing working relationships which can support greater co-ordination, even if these have historically been difficult. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations could also play a facilitative role to help encourage greater consistency nationally.
- **The sector needs to commit to sharing knowledge and resources.** Many third sector organisations work intensively on a very local scale, meaning the expertise their engagement brings to the education system, and the developments which arise, are often not widely shared. Organisations must be willing to engage in dissemination activities – whether they do so independently, or by contributing to existing forums, or by commissioning or taking part in research and evaluation which is more widely reported.



## Some final thoughts

**4.4** In drawing the report to a close, if we have one message above all others, it is that – however complex and uncertain the educational landscape – **there is considerable potential *within* the English education system to move in more equitable directions.** Realising this does not require further radical restructuring, or the expansion of selective and competitive school arrangements, which seem set only to fragment the system further. Rather, it requires government to take the time to develop 'intelligent' policy which learns from what is happening on the ground, and to create and protect spaces for local policy development.

**4.5** Key to this, government has to understand how it can foster the conditions which encourage policy to be interpreted, on the ground, in ways which promote greater equity – rather than being manipulated for institutional advantage. This will almost certainly require that less political capital is invested in narrow performance measures, and that the system moves away from its currently contradictory mix of centralised 'control and command' and schools acting as autonomous institutions, to become more genuinely collaborative. The starting point, however, has to be for government to listen actively to the knowledge, experience and wisdom held within the system itself. It is, therefore, time to stop and think.



# Appendix 1.

## Some key publications from the Centre for Equity in Education

### Reports on the state of equity in the English Education system

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and Kerr, K. (2015) *Learning from what works. Proposals for the reform of the English education system from the Centre for Equity in Education*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., Jones, L. and Kerr, K. (2010) *Equity in Education: Creating a fairer education system. A manifesto for the reform of education in England from the Centre for Equity in Education*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., Kerr, K., and Miles, S. (2008) *Equity in Education: Responding to context*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Ainscow, M., Crow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., Kerr, K., Lennie, C., Miles, S, and Skyrme, J. (2007) *Equity in Education: New Directions*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., and Kerr, K. (2006) *Equity in Education: Mapping the territory*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester

### Other key reports

- Dyson, A., Gallannaugh, F. and Kerr, K. (2016) *An actions and outcomes framework for children's zones*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Dyson, A. and Kerr, K. (2013) *Developing Children's Zones for England: What's the evidence?* London: Save the Children
- Dyson, A., Gallannaugh, F. and Kerr, K. (2012) *Mapping the field of school-community relations*. The Connected Communities Programme. AHRC
- Dyson, A., Kerr, K., Raffo, C., and Wigelsworth, M. (2012) *Developing children's zones for England*. London: Save the Children
- Dyson, A. and Kerr, K. (2011) *Taking Action Locally: Schools developing innovative area initiatives*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester
- Kerr, K. and West, M. (2011) *BERA Insight. Social Inequality: Can schools narrow the gap?* Macclesfield: BERA

### Key books

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S. and West, M. (2012) *Developing equitable education systems*. London: Routledge
- Kerr, K., Dyson, A. and Raffo, C. (2014) *Education, disadvantage and place. Making the local matter*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Salokangas, M. and Ainscow, M. (2017) *Inside the autonomous school: making sense of a global educational trend*. London: Routledge

Kerr, K., and Ainscow, M. (2017) *Equity in Education: Time to stop and think. A report on the state of equity in the English education system*. Manchester: The University of Manchester.  
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