



# School Partnerships and Collaboration: A Review of the Evidence

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Department  
for Education

# **Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence**

**Research report**

**October 2015**

**Dr Paul Armstrong**

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# Executive summary: Key findings from the evidence

## Scope and evidence base

The landscape of inter-school collaboration is complex, encompassing a wide range of different types of collaborative activity both formal and informal (sometimes a combination of both) and involving schools of different phases and types. Moreover, schools collaborate for a multitude of reasons over different timelines and with varying degrees of success in terms of impact and sustainability.

Despite an increase in the level of inter-school collaborative activity since 2000, and particularly over the last 5 years, the knowledge base in this area remains sparse. The vast majority of research and publications comprise of evaluation reports of government initiatives that have focused on or included a significant element of inter-school collaboration.

## Leadership

The leadership models employed within inter-school collaboration can depend on the nature of the collaborative agreement. Formal arrangements such as federations, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and sponsored academy chains can encompass shared leadership such as an executive headteacher operating across two or more schools. Informal collaboratives, however, often employ the traditional model of leadership with each school retaining their own headteacher.

Executive headteachers can be categorised as system leaders, individuals operating across more than one interrelated organisation in order to bring about change and improvement at systemic level. This also includes a growing band of National Leaders of Education (currently more than 1,000); outstanding headteachers that will partner schools facing challenging circumstances in order to facilitate change and improvement.

The evidence on the growth and diversity of system leadership suggests the notion of school leadership is shifting from the traditional concept of institutional leadership, whereby the headteacher is responsible for a single school, to educational leadership, implying a much broader sphere of responsibility encompassing multiple schools and educational well-being across wider geographical boundaries.

## Governance

Much in the same way as leadership, models of shared governance are emerging to accommodate inter-school collaborative arrangements. The more formal of these models include joint governing bodies between groups of schools in addition to their individual bodies (Hill, 2012).

## Impact

The evidence for direct impact of inter-school collaboration on student outcomes is limited. Where this has been explored, the picture is mixed. Some studies report no association between school involvement in inter-school collaborative activity and increases in student attainment (Woods et al., 2006; Sammons et al., 2007) whereas others suggest a possible association (Hutchings et al., 2012). The most notable of these is a large-scale research study with federations, the findings of which suggest students attending certain types of federation outperformed a matched sample of their peers in non-federated schools in terms of their attainment (Chapman and Muijs, 2014).

The evidence for indirect impacts of inter-school collaboration on school improvement is more widespread. Many studies report improvements in areas such as staff professional development and career opportunities (Hill et al., 2012; West, 2010); sharing good practice and innovation (Stoll, 2015; Chapman et al., 2009a); reductions and realignments in headteacher workload (alleviating burnout and facilitating succession) and organisational and financial efficiency as a consequence of inter-school collaboration (Woods et al., 2010; Woods et al., 2013).

Research points to the positive influence of inter-school collaboration on teachers and teaching, with practitioners reporting an increased motivation to engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues, knowledge mobilisation and a general shift towards more learning-oriented and enquiry-based cultures in schools that have been collaborating (Stoll, 2015). There is also evidence of inter-school collaboration facilitating curriculum development and problem-solving (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Inter-school collaboration can also provide opportunities for leadership training and development as schools look to build leadership capacity to address the additional workload that accompanies the partnership work. As such, staff members have increased opportunities to take on leadership responsibilities both within and between schools and work with, and observe, leaders from other institutions (Hill, 2010; Hadfield and Chapman, 2009).

The overall picture indicates that schools are generally very positive about inter-school collaboration and, in the vast majority of cases, can see the benefits of engaging in such activity, (Sandals and Bryant, 2014) suggesting there is an appetite for inter-school collaboration within the system.

## Conditions for effective collaboration

There are a number of commonalities within the literature with regards to the conditions that foster effective inter-school collaboration with strong leadership (Rea et al., 2015); well-defined and robust structures and processes (Chapman et al., 2009a); a history of

collaboration (Hill et al., 2012); clear communication (Lindsay et al., 2007); and a sensitivity to context (Hutchings et al., 2012) amongst the most commonly cited.

## **Challenges to inter-school collaboration**

Amongst the most frequent barriers to the initiation, effectiveness and sustainability of inter-school collaboration cited in the literature are: threats to school autonomy (Chapman et al., 2009a); perceived power imbalances between schools (Lindsay et al., 2007); additional workload associated with the collaborative activity (Aiston, 2002) and difficulties in establishing shared objectives and common goals (Woods et al., 2010). Issues when funding for the collaborative activity ceases are cited (Woods et al., 2006) and there is evidence to suggest that centrally driven initiatives may not necessarily be the most effective way to facilitate sustainable collaboration between schools (Hayes and Lynch, 2013).

## **Gaps in the knowledge**

There is evidence relating to the characteristics of effective inter-school collaboration and, conversely, the main challenges to such activity. However, there is very little knowledge surrounding the change process and the development and maintenance of relationships when schools enter into collaboration. Negotiating change and brokering and nurturing new relationships are important factors in the sustainability of collaborative activity. There is more work to be done to develop the knowledge in this area.

There is a lack of insight into the differential impact of inter-school collaboration and how different types of collaborative arrangements might vary in effectiveness, sustainability and the kinds of impact they make.. There is also very little evidence distinguishing between short and long-term collaboration.

There is a dearth of evidence within the literature relating to the means by which schools are selective about where, when and in what ways to collaborate with other schools. Recent research into the emerging notion of a 'school-led system' has highlighted this (Sandals and Bryant, 2014) but more research is needed to explore the phenomenon in greater depth.

While there is some evidence relating to governance structures and formation of governance in relation to inter-school collaboration, there is a paucity of research looking at how governing bodies are adapting to inter-school collaboration and the process of inter-school governance.

Research into independent-state school partnerships (ISSP) identified some promising outcomes for schools in both sectors such as curriculum development, relationship building, sharing practice and opportunities for pupils to develop social capital.

We know there are other forms of inter-school collaboration and activity across the system such as Teaching School Alliances (TSA) and other networks of schools (e.g. The Liverpool Learning Network) but, to date, there has been very little independent empirical research undertaken to map the exact nature of this activity and its impact and influence on the school system and the students it serves.

Moreover, one of the difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of TSAs against other collaborative networks such as MATs is the level of cross-over between them (e.g. many TSAs are also MATs). There is also considerable variability across TSAs in terms of the characteristics of their collaboration and governance arrangements. Put simply, the multifaceted and fluid nature of inter-school collaboration can be considered a barrier to research as the range and impact of activity it is difficult to capture.

## **Terminology**

There are a range of different terms used to describe inter-school collaborative activity in practice and in the literature. Terms such as 'partnership', 'network', 'cluster', 'family', 'federation', 'engagement' and 'collaboration' are used interchangeably to describe different ways of schools working with one another making an already complex area even more difficult to discern and trying to identify evidence relating to inter-school collaboration challenging. More consistency is required in relation to terminology used to describe inter-school collaboration by practitioners, policy makers and researchers. Indeed, in an effort to move towards this the DfE now use the term hard partnership to describe any inter-school collaboration involving shared governance. They distinguish between two types of hard partnerships: MATs and federations both of which are described and discussed in this review.

## Introduction

The following review has been commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to provide an overview of the current knowledge-base relating to the characteristics of effective inter-school collaboration and other forms of school-to-school partnership in the English school system. Specifically, the review aims to explore the current literature in this area to identify what works, what doesn't, why and in what circumstances thereby providing an understanding of the key features of successful inter-school collaborative arrangements. The evidence gathered for this review is predominantly from the turn of the millennium, a period in which the notion of inter-school collaboration has become a central facet of educational policy and practice in England.

The remainder of this section will cover the following:

- Context
- Aims and focus of the review
- Methods
- Analysis
- Structure of the review

## Context

A key shift within the English school system, particularly since the turn of the millennium, has been an increase in the number of schools working together in both formal and informal arrangements. Throughout this period, successive and cross-party governments have invested heavily in large-scale national initiatives such as Education Action Zones (EAZs), Beacon Schools, Excellence in Cities (EiC), Leadership Incentive Grants (LIG), Network Learning Communities (NLCs) and the City Challenges, significant elements of which have been designed to encourage and foster the development and strengthening of partnerships between schools (Muijs et al., 2011). Further, since their emergence in 2002, federations, agreed collaborative arrangements between two or more schools, have become a common mechanism for inter-school collaboration. Such arrangements can range from joint committees and meetings to shared governing bodies, leadership, staff and resources (NCTL, 2014). In addition, recent government policy has seen the expansion of the academies programme and the simultaneous freeing-up of the school system from local government control, symptomised by the changing and reduced role of the local authority. While those schools that have converted to academy status have more freedom and autonomy over their own operations, many are members of sponsored 'chains' or trusts operating under varying degrees of collaboration. Recent statistics indicate 54% of academy schools in England are currently members of MATs comprising at least two or more schools (DfE, 2015a). Even those schools that are not



part of such arrangements, that have converted to academies in isolation, are encouraged to work with other schools in their locality and, depending on how well they are performing, either to provide support to or be supported by partner schools.

The previous (coalition) government's commitment to inter-school collaboration was made clear in the Education White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), in many ways the blueprint for education policy over the last five years:

Schools working together leads to better results . . . Along with our best schools, we will encourage strong and experienced sponsors to play a leadership role in driving the improvement of the whole school system, including through leading more formal federations and chains.

(DfE, 2010: 60)

The current drive to create a self-improving school system is weighted heavily on the premise that clusters of schools will work with, learn from and support one another to develop localised solutions to the challenges they might face. The aim is context specific strategies for improvement, more willing distribution of professional knowledge and schools sharing resources more efficiently than they might previously have done (Hargreaves, 2010; 2012). In 2014, the DfE surveyed 720 academies to assess how they used their autonomy, including questions relating to their collaboration with other schools (DfE, 2014d). The survey findings indicated that 87 per cent of academies support other schools (72 per cent support schools that they did not support before becoming academies). They also indicated that 96 per cent of academies with 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings support other schools.

The latest facet of this is Teaching Schools, a concept underpinned by the idea that the best schools in the country, those judged to be outstanding by Ofsted, should support other schools. Those schools with a strong record of collaboration and effective leadership and capacity across a number of key areas such as initial teacher training, supporting other schools, succession planning, professional development and research, can apply to become Teaching Schools. As Teaching Schools they can take on a more central role in the training and development of trainee teachers, the professional development of existing teachers and school leaders, leadership identification and school-to-school support (Chapman, 2013). The first Teaching Schools opened in 2011 and it is envisaged that there will be an established network of over 600 across the country by the start of the 2015–16 academic year. Each one is involved in a Teaching School Alliance - a group of schools working collaboratively and supported by one or more teaching schools at the helm (DfE, 2015b). The role of Teaching Schools as a delivery mechanism for broader education policy has also developed since the programme began, and it is now common practice within the DfE to consider Teaching Schools as a delivery mechanism for new policies.

A recent initiative to create a national network of Maths hubs across England provides another example of centrally driven inter-school collaboration. This £11million

government initiative involving 32 hubs across the country will provide strategic local leadership to support tailored maths education support for groups of schools within each hub. The idea is to harness expertise and knowledge in maths across specific areas of the country with a view to spreading good practice more widely (DfE, 2014a). A number of these hub schools are also Teaching Schools creating yet another layer of inter-school collaboration within the system.

Internationally, the move towards inter-school collaboration as a means of improvement has also become more prevalent in recent years with examples of school-to-school partnership activity across a number of countries such as the United States (Mullen and Kochan, 2000; Wohlstetter et al., 2003), Canada (Halbert and Kaser, 2002), Finland (Hargreaves et al., 2008), Scotland (Chapman et al., 2014), Belgium (Day et al., 2008; Feys and Davos, 2014); Spain (Parilla, 1999), India (Day Ashley, 2006), Northern Ireland (Carlisle and Hughes, 2013) and Malta (Cutajar and Bezzina, 2013). OECD commissioned research has also highlighted a range of inter-school collaborative activity across a number of school systems internationally (Pont, Nusche and Hopkins, 2008a; 2008b).

Of course, collaboration, certainly of the more transient nature, is not a particularly recent phenomenon (see Norwich et al., 1994; Lomax and Darley, 1995; O'Neil, 1996; Busher and Hodgkinson, 1996; Ribchester and Edwards, 1998; Williams and Thorpe, 1998). However, over the last decade the emphasis on inter-school collaboration across the English school system has become much more explicit. This is mainly a result of the aforementioned focused programme of educational reform that has provided the key catalyst for the emergence of a spectrum of collaborative models encompassing schools that have voluntarily entered into such arrangements, those who have been incentivised to do so and others (predominantly those deemed to be underachieving) that have been ushered into collaboration by central government. Other factors, usually associated with a need to address challenging circumstances, have also contributed to the growth of inter-school collaboration. For example, many small schools in rural areas have entered into partnerships with one another to bolster sustainability (e.g. via shared services, resourcing and, in the more formalised arrangements, leadership), build capacity (e.g. through joint professional development) and provide mutual support (Muijs et al., 2011). Recent research by Sandals and Bryant (2014) with 10 local school systems highlights the extent to which inter-school collaboration has infiltrated the school system in England:

The role, size and shape of these partnerships differ across the 10 local systems, reflecting the specific local context. They include schools-owned and schools-led not-for-profit companies, local strategic partnerships, teaching school alliances, sponsor-led academy chains, federations, diocesan networks and national education organisations. The locus of strategic decision-making in relation to school improvement services has shifted to these networks of schools.

(Sandals & Bryant, 2014 p. 5)

In short, contemporary inter-school collaboration is a complex arena encompassing a range of structures along a spectrum of formal and informal arrangements, serving a multitude of purposes both within and between different phases and types of school. While much of this collaboration is centrally driven (e.g. MATs, specialist hubs, Teaching School Alliances) there is also a considerable volume of regional and local school partnership activity variously labeled as ‘families’, ‘clusters’ and ‘networks’ of schools<sup>1</sup> and yet more informal arrangements without any label and for which there is little more than anecdotal evidence.

It is important to note that school collaboration with external agencies and partners and any school improvement resulting from such arrangements is beyond the scope of this review. Rather, the purpose of this review is to identify and explore the existing published evidence relating to the characteristics and impact of collaboration between schools.

## **Aims and focus of the review**

The core aim of the review is to provide an overview and synthesis of the characteristics of effective school partnerships and other forms of inter-school collaboration by examining what the existing research literature in this area can tell us about what works, what doesn't, why and in what circumstances thereby providing an understanding of the key features of successful inter-school collaborative arrangements. The review draws predominantly, though not exclusively on knowledge pertaining to the English school system that has been generated over the last 15 years. To address this broad aim, the review was guided by the following questions:

- **Type and structure of inter-school collaboration**
  - Is this formal, informal or a combination of both?
  - How is the leadership of the collaboration structured?
  - How is the governance of the collaboration structured?
- **Impact of inter-school collaboration**
  - What impact has the inter-school collaboration had on student outcomes?
  - What impact has the inter-school collaboration had on teachers and teaching practice?
  - Are there other significant impacts beyond direct school improvement?
- **Inter-school collaboration formation**

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendixes 1 and 2 for a glossary of terms and labels and brief descriptions of government initiatives that have been underpinned by, or contain, a significant aspect of inter-school collaboration

- What were the key drivers for establishing the collaboration?
- What are the key conditions for effective collaboration?
- **Challenges to inter-school collaboration**
  - What were the main challenges to the collaborative activity?
- **Sustainability of collaboration**
  - What factors influence the sustainability of inter-school collaboration?

These key areas and guiding questions became the framework around which the knowledge base on inter-school collaboration was searched and evidence analysed for relevance to the core aims of the review.

## Methods

This section outlines the methods undertaken to source the evidence for the review detailing the means by which the literature was obtained, the search parameters used to select the literature and the criteria on which it was retained or rejected.

Initially, sources were searched for within two of the most comprehensive educational research and social science databases: The Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC) and Scopus. In addition, supplementary searches were conducted in Google Scholar while the reference lists of relevant returns were also checked for any additional literature that may not have been sourced from the database searches. Further details of the search terms used are provided in the search strategy in Appendix 3. The search parameters are outlined below:

- Research undertaken in England since 1999<sup>2</sup>
- Empirical research (published articles, conference papers, books, book chapters and research and government reports)
- Selected commentary and opinion pieces that provided context for the evidence, and
- Selected theoretical papers that provided context for the evidence.

Once identified, the abstracts of all returns were explored for their relevance to the aims of the review, the initial key criteria being a central focus on inter-school collaboration,

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<sup>2</sup> A small number of studies encompassing inter-school collaboration (or elements of) were published before 1999, some of which have been included if they were deemed relevant according to the core aims of the review.

that is collaboration between two or more schools, rather than school partnerships with other agencies. The full sources of accepted literature were then downloaded from the internet and saved electronically. Next these sources were read in full for their relevance to the core aims of the review with key information and findings recorded into an Excel database under headings and sub-headings framed around the guiding research questions (e.g. type, impact, challenges, sustainability of inter-school collaboration). Finally, those sources deemed most pertinent to the review according to the main criteria were identified and marked in the database<sup>3</sup>.

## Analysis

Having undertaken the searches, the overall picture suggests a paucity of independent empirical research literature on inter-school collaboration. The vast majority of the evidence comprises evaluation reports of government initiatives that have focused on or included a significant element of inter-school collaboration. Moreover, initial searches uncovered a significant volume of sources focusing on school collaboration with external partners and agencies rather than other schools which were rejected. This is consistent with what appears to be the only other large-scale systematic review of the evidence on inter-school collaboration undertaken by Atkinson et al. (2007)<sup>4</sup> who drew similar conclusions. Nevertheless, in the eight years since this previous review, though research has not kept pace with policy in this area, there has been an increase in research activity focusing on inter-school collaboration in England.

In order to be included, sources had to contain information that was relevant to the guiding research questions: type and structure of inter-school collaboration; impact of inter-school collaboration; inter-school collaboration formation; challenges of inter-school collaboration; sustainability of inter-school collaboration. In addition to empirical literature, selected theoretical papers and think pieces were included to provide context where relevant. While some of the identified sources did not necessarily address all of these areas, they were still included if they addressed one or more in sufficient detail as to make a meaningful contribution to the aims of the review. Other factors were also taken into consideration such as the quality and generalisability of the research (e.g. size of sample). As a result of the searches, a total 55 sources have been included in this review.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 3 for literature search database template.

<sup>4</sup> This review differed slightly in that it encompassed international research into inter-school collaboration while the focus was to source evidence to inform interconnections between denominational education sectors in Northern Ireland.

## Structure of the review

The findings from the review of the evidence are structured as follows:

- Type and structure of inter-school collaboration
- Impact of inter-school collaboration
- Inter-school collaboration formation
- Challenges of inter-school collaboration, and
- Sustainability of inter-school collaboration.

## Structure of collaboration

### Type and nature of collaboration

The means by which inter-school collaborative activity is structured in terms of the types of schools that are working together is diverse and has changed significantly over the last decade, encompassing a range of different structures and both formal and informal arrangements. This makes attempts to categorise the different organisational forms challenging (Woods et al., 2014). Nevertheless, a number of researchers have endeavoured to map this rapidly changing landscape. In their research exploring the key features and impact of federations, Chapman and Muijs (2014) identified the following six broad types from the 28 federations in their sample:

- **Cross-phase federations:** Federations consisting of two or more schools of different phases (e.g., elementary and high school).
- **Performance federations:** Federations consisting of two or more schools, some of which are high performing and others which are low performing.
- **Size federations:** Federations consisting of two or more very small schools or a very small school and a medium-sized school.
- **Mainstreaming federations:** Federations consisting of one or more special schools and one or more mainstream schools.
- **Faith federations:** Federations consisting of two or more schools of the same denomination.
- **Academy federations:** Federations of two or more academies (similar to charter schools) run by the same sponsor within a federation or chain.

(Chapman and Muijs, 2014, p. 361)

Drawing on comparative analysis with a matched sample of non-federated schools, the findings from this research suggest that academy federations and, particularly, performance federations are those which have the most positive influence on student attainment. These findings are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Within these typologies exists a range of arrangements in relation to how formal or informal the inter-school collaboration is. This is evidenced by Lindsay et al. (2007) who outline a typology to capture the level of formality under which schools are collaborating as federations:

- **Hard Governance Federation:** established under statutory regulations made under Education Act (2002) the federation has a single governing body shared by all schools. Schools share common goals and often management and leadership appointments (e.g. an executive headteacher working across all schools).
- **Soft Governance Federation:** established under statutory regulations made under Education Act (2002) each school retains its own governing body, though the federation has a joint governance/strategic committee with delegated powers. Schools share common goals and maybe some management appointments (e.g. school business manager).
- **Soft Federation:** a non-statutory collaboration that can be established without following regulations whereby each school has its own governing body. The federation has a joint governance/strategic committee without delegated powers. Schools share common goals, joint committees can make recommendations, but individual governing bodies must authorise decisions and plans. There may be common management positions with protocol to underpin the shared posts.
- **Informal/Loose Collaboration:** a non-statutory collaboration that can be established without following regulations whereby each school has its own governing body and the group of schools meet on an ad-hoc basis. Schools share common goals and work together on informal agreements and ad-hoc issues. Unlikely to have shared staff.

(Adapted from Lindsay et al., 2007, p. 60)

Note the terminological distinction between 'federation' and 'collaboration' whereby the former refers to the more formal end of the spectrum and the latter to more informal partnerships. This is consistent with other authors who also distinguish between formal federations and informal 'collaboratives' of schools in much the same way (e.g. Chapman et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2012). In an effort to move towards more consistency with terminology the DfE now refer to any inter-school collaboration involving shared governance as a *hard partnership* of which they distinguish between two types: MATs and federations.

It is important to acknowledge the year in which Lindsay et al. published their typology outlined above as the landscape of inter-school collaboration has changed quite dramatically since 2007. Nevertheless, this early research into federations does provide an important reference point that is useful for tracking the evolution of formally recognised inter-school collaborative activity in the English state system over the last decade. For instance, since this research on federations was undertaken, one area in which the educational landscape has shifted has been the considerable increase in the number of academy schools across the system, particularly over the last five years. The

latest figures indicate that there are over 4,500 academies in England, including more than two thirds of all secondary schools (DfE, 2015c). Furthermore, the number of academies working collaboratively as chains has also increased (Pearson/RSA, 2013). According to Chapman (2013), a number of these chains started out as federations whereby; *‘the term “chain” has tended to replace “federation” in this context’* (p. 3) and, although there remain a significant number of schools operating under the federation model, as highlighted earlier, many have converted to MATs (DfE, 2015a). Indeed, the term ‘federation’ is now more commonly used to describe inter-school collaboration between schools that have not converted to academy status (i.e. that are still maintained by the local authority). Those inter-school collaborations that have converted to academy status would now be considered MATs (Mansell, 2014). Some authors such as Hill et al. (2012) and Woods et al. (2014) have attempted to map this constantly evolving structural complexity.

Hill et al. (2012) distinguish between *sponsored academy chains* whereby two or more schools work together under the responsibility of an overarching sponsor, which might be an individual, a business or a charitable organisation, and *converter chains* which describes groups of schools operating under a formal collaboration but without an overarching sponsor. The authors then differentiate between the following three types of converter chains:

- **Multi-academy trusts (MATs):** A MAT is a single legal entity with responsibility for the multiple academies within it. One board of trustees or directors governs the MAT but there is often delegation to individual academies. For example, the MAT can establish separate governing bodies for individual members schools and delegate a range of powers or an advisory body for each academy with no delegated powers. Whichever option is chosen, ultimate control lies with the MAT. Under this model, the Secretary of State for Education has a master funding agreement with the MAT and separate supplementary agreements with the MAT for each of the member academies. As highlighted above, MATs bare many structural and operational similarities with federations and indeed many converter chains started out as hard governance federations.
- **Umbrella trusts:** Under this model, a faith body or a group of schools sets up an overarching charitable trust which then establishes individual or multi-academy trusts to run the schools coming under the umbrella of the overarching trust. The Secretary of State for Education has individual funding agreements with each academy trust. The members and governors are appointed by the umbrella trust, which can choose to have minority or majority control according to how well a school is performing or in order to maintain a prior relationship (e.g. between a diocesan board and a church school(s)).
- **Collaborative partnerships:** These are more informal and loosely structured than the previous two models. The Secretary of State for Education has individual funding agreements with each academy trust. The headteachers of converting



academies agree to work together in areas where they see some mutual benefit but there is no shared governance and the collaboration is very much a loose one though they may have a written agreement to consolidate their collaborative activity.

(Adapted from Hill et al., 2012, p. 14)

In a more recent attempt to map contemporary structural arrangements regarding inter-school collaboration, Woods et al. (2014) distinguish between the following typologies:

- **National chains:** characterised by non-profit/charitable ownership; management of a number of schools; shared leadership and management structures; a joint mission and possibly pedagogical approach and a central hub providing central support, accountability and direction. They can also operate over large geographical areas between different regions of the country.
- **School-led chains:** sharing many of the features of national chains but they are initiated and led by successful schools rather than non-profit or charitable organisations and often operate on a regional or local basis.
- **Local federations:** developed initially among groups of local authority schools, these are locally constructed groups of schools that choose, or are encouraged, to come together in partnerships. These partnerships are institutionalised through some reconfiguration of the schools' governance arrangements, such as the appointment of an executive headteacher over the federation or the creation of a joint governing body.
- **Collaboratives:** groups of schools that have chosen to cooperate or share resources in areas such as continuing professional development or common services but without modifying their leadership or governance structures (i.e. they remain as separate schools).

(Woods et al., 2014, p. 332)

A further dimension of complexity is Teaching Schools. These are high performing schools, designated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted that are in receipt of central funding to support other schools across a number of key areas such as the organisation and provision of initial teacher training, school-to-school support, professional development, leadership development and succession planning, and research. There are currently more than 600 designated Teaching Schools in England though the size and structural arrangements of the alliances they lead varies considerably from collaborative arrangements with unclear membership boundaries to chains of schools with clearly defined membership structures (Woods et al., 2014). However, to date, no published research attempts to map the terrain of Teaching Schools and their alliances.

## Leadership

For clarity, leadership discussed in this sub-section refers to headteachers and executive headteachers rather than senior leaders and leadership teams. The leadership models

employed within inter-school collaboration can depend in many ways on the nature of the collaborative agreement. For instance, as highlighted in the previous sub-section, the research by Lindsay et al. (2007) underscores shared leadership as a key characteristic of formal hard federations whereby two or more schools share a headteacher, often with the title of executive headteacher. In looser collaboratives the traditional leadership structure of a headteacher leading a single school remains the preferred model. In a similar study, Hopkins and Higham (2007) undertook case study research with 10 federations to explore the prevalent features of high performing lead schools partnering one or more underperforming schools, in order to bring about educational improvement. A strong and resilient leadership team was typical of all 10 federations with two models of senior leadership emerging most prominently. The first model comprised federations made up of one lead school and one partner school which tended to employ an executive headteacher operating across both schools with an associate or deputy headteacher based at each individual school site. This model tended to be employed in smaller federations between a lead school and a partner school where, given the size of the partnership, the executive headteacher was able to retain close involvement in the day-to-day leadership of both schools. The second model, more commonly employed at larger federations with two or more schools, also involved an executive headteacher operating across all the schools in the partnership. However, in this model, the larger number of schools meant each one tended to have an individual head of school with more autonomy than the associate or deputy role found in the first model. This allowed the executive headteacher in this model to play a more overarching, strategic leadership role, with less operational responsibility than the executive headteacher in the first model. In this research, the number of schools in the partnership dictated the model of leadership employed. Chapman and Muijs (2013) discussing their work with executive headteachers of performance federations, describe a fundamental shift in the nature of school leadership from *institutional* (school) to *educational* leadership where school leaders have a '*moral purpose linked to the well-being of the wider community rather than just any individual school*' (p. 216.).

This model of executive headship falls under the broader notion of system leadership, the concept of leaders operating across more than one interrelated organisation in order to bring about change and improvement at a systemic level. This type of leadership has come to be applied to the educational context in England in recent years given the increase in inter-school collaboration and school-agency partnership work whereby the school leaders that operate at the fulcrum of such arrangements are referred to as system leaders (Hopkins, 2009). Compared with the many areas and aspects of educational leadership, the notion of system leadership is underdeveloped and under researched in education, perhaps because of its relatively recent emergence. Hopkins and Higham (2007) undertook the first mapping exercise of system leadership in English

schools establishing a taxonomy of system leadership roles. This included headteachers *leading school improvement partnerships*<sup>5</sup>; headteachers *partnering a school facing challenging circumstances* in order to bring about improvement; headteachers operating as *community leaders* to support wider child welfare and community cohesion with other agencies; and *expert leaders* who operate as change agents to provide knowledge, support and the mobilisation of best practice within a formal school improvement programme. The DfE has labelled the latter individuals as National Leaders of Education (NLE) through their programme of the same name that provides a formal means of harnessing the capacity of these leaders and their staff through a designated application process and programme to improve schools in challenging circumstances. By becoming a NLE, the headteacher's school is then automatically designated as a National Support School (Hill and Matthews, 2008). It is important to highlight that there are many expert leaders with strong leadership teams across the system with a wealth of knowledge and experience who are not designated NLEs but who may be providing school-to-school support in a similar capacity. In addition, the DfE also has comparable programmes for Local Leaders of Education (LLEs), expert headteachers that have a similar remit to NLEs but who work more one-on-one with other headteachers to support school improvement (DfE, 2014b), and Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs), expert senior and middle leaders who also have a school to school support remit in a specific area of specialism such as a particular subject (DfE, 2014c).

NLEs are different from previous models of school-to-school support that relied on advisers or consultants that had left the profession. Rather, they are practising headteachers of high performing schools, those deemed 'outstanding' by Ofsted, that support schools in challenging circumstances by *'importing their systems, skills and expert practitioners to get [these struggling schools] moving in the right direction'* (Hill and Matthews, 2010, p. 15). This programme has grown exponentially since its inception in 2006 and there are currently over 1,000 NLEs across the country with a DfE target of 1,400 by 2016. As such, a considerable number of those individuals leading the highest performing schools in the country are likely to be involved in some kind of school-to-school support and therefore engaged in system leadership, as defined in the taxonomy outlined by Hopkins and Higham (2007). According to Hutchings et al. (2012) in the context of the City Challenges work: *'the system leadership role of NLEs and LLEs is an effective one, and benefits both the schools that they support and their own schools and staff'* (p. 5).

Drawing on a number of case studies of academy chains and trusts, Hill et al. (2010; 2012) draw attention to the growing number of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Director of Education roles that operate in overarching strategic positions and oversee the work of all the schools in the chain in a similar way to a corporate CEO in the

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<sup>5</sup> Executive headteachers of federations would fall under this category.

business sector. The nature and composition of these roles differs between chains according to their size and structure but responsibilities can include leadership recruitment, development and succession planning, monitoring performance through data, accountability reviews, business planning, negotiating chain expansion, coordinating school partnership work outside of the chain and contributing to the local and national education agendas. In addition, many academy chains employ an executive leadership model similar to that described in relation to federations while the larger chains may even have both a CEO or Director of Education in addition to an Executive Leader with individual headteachers taking leadership responsibility for each academy in the chain. Furthermore, these system leadership models are also employed in many MATs though less so in the looser collaboratives (Hill et al., 2012).

## Management

Some studies provide evidence of shared operational functions as a means of inter-school collaboration. For example, Chapman et al. (2009b) highlight a number of case studies of school clusters that are employing shared senior management positions for individuals without qualified teacher status, such as school business managers (SBM). In these instances, groups of schools share the operational and management function to improve efficiency in areas such as purchasing, finance and human resourcing and allow schools to share budgets and pool resources. Research undertaken by Woods et al. (2010) with groups of schools collaborating over shared business management highlights the growth of the SBM and the ways in which schools are utilising the role to share operational and management support and provision. This project sample included 32 projects involving 260 schools of different phases, sizes and social, economic and geographical contexts demonstrating the growth of this type of inter-school collaboration.

## Governance

Much in the same way that models of shared leadership have emerged as key components of inter-school collaboration, models of shared governance are also becoming more commonplace, certainly amongst the more formal collaborative arrangements. The typologies described by Lindsay et al. (2007) from their work with federations outline the different governance structures that schools are employing in line with their collaborative arrangements, findings that are consistent with Chapman et al. (2009a) from their research on federations of schools where shared governance was also a common characteristic of formal inter-school collaboration. That does not present a dichotomous picture of the governance landscape in relation to inter-school collaboration. Indeed, according to Chapman et al. (2010), a common feature of their findings *'was the lack of uniformity. Even within the 'hard' federations there appeared to be different models while in the middle of the continuum there are examples of varying degrees of changes to governance.'* The legalities that require all governance arrangements to be established in alignment with education, charity and company law provide a common foundation for the ways in which school governance is structured. Beyond this, governing

bodies and boards can be flexible to the needs of their school(s) and the communities they serve and also adapt according to the structural arrangements within which they operate as outlined in the previous section (Hill et al., 2012).

## **Impact of inter-school collaboration**

### **Student outcomes**

There have been few studies that have set out to explicitly explore the influence of inter-school collaboration on student outcomes. Rather, much of the published literature on inter-school collaboration tends to be evaluations of government initiatives. Moreover, due to the multi-faceted nature of inter-school collaboration, where student outcomes are discussed they tend to be considered as one element of a multitude of different areas that inter-school collaboration influences and impacts upon. In addition, where student outcomes have been examined, the findings are mixed.

As part of their evaluation of the Diversity Pathfinder Project (DPP), a government funded project established to encourage groups of secondary schools to collaborate, diversify and develop as specialist schools, Woods et al. (2007) assessed the impact of this initiative on the educational experiences and attainment of students. Their findings suggest student experiences in terms of increased curriculum choice and attitudes to collaborative working with students from other schools did not increase or improve over the timeline of their schools involvement with the DPP. As a group, DPP local authorities demonstrated improvement in relation to student attainment over the timeline of the initiative (the equivalent of one grade at GCSE compared to the national average) though this did not include the core subjects of English or Maths. However, when the effects of individual local authorities were measured, this increase was actually attributable to just two local authorities out of the eight in the sample. The authors were also unable to attribute this improvement directly to the DPP because of the nature of the research design.

The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme was established in 2001 by the National College to fund groups of schools to work together to improve the quality of professional learning and build their capacity for improvement. Sammons et al. (2007) analysed national assessment and examination data of primary and secondary schools involved in the NLC programme between 2003-2005 and compared their student results with the national average over the same period. Their findings indicated that NLC school data generally aligned with the broader national trend. However, while they found no evidence that NLC primary schools had improved more rapidly or narrowed the attainment gap in relation to national results during this time, they did find some indication of improvements to English results at KS3 against the national average (though not for science or maths). Furthermore, considering this programme was only initiated in 2001 it might be argued that it was somewhat unrealistic to expect a

noticeable and attributable increase on student attainment within the timescale during which the authors undertook their research.

In the only research to date to explore the relationship between membership of a federation and student outcomes, Chapman and Muijs (2014) present a slightly clearer and more positive picture. They compared groups of size federations, cross-phase federations, academy federations, performance federations, faith federations and mainstreaming federations (264 schools in total) with matched samples of comparator schools. By controlling for student characteristics such as prior attainment, free school meal entitlement, special educational need provision, ethnicity, gender and English as an additional language they were able to isolate the effect of the federation on student attainment. Their findings indicate evidence of a relationship between being in a federation and performance whereby, while federation and comparator schools perform similarly at baseline, having been in a federation is positively related to performance in the years following the federation. Furthermore, they found evidence to suggest that the impact on student outcomes is greater in performance federations. The majority of the federation effect on student outcomes occurred in the performance federations where high performing schools partner those in the bottom-tier. They also found that for those schools that had entered in formal collaborative arrangements (e.g. hard federation with executive headship), the federation effect on student outcomes was greater than those schools that had engaged in more informal collaborative arrangements. Of course, it is important to highlight that that nature of performance federations involves struggling schools being partnered with high performing schools with the primary aim of bringing about improvement. As such, one would perhaps expect these kinds of inter-school collaborations to be more likely to demonstrate tangible improvements.

On a broader scale, the findings from the City Challenges initiative indicate a positive impact on student outcomes for those schools that were involved with the programme. Originally established by the New Labour government in 2003 with a focus on improving schools in London but later expanded to include schools in the Midlands and Manchester, the City Challenges were characterised by a model of inter-school collaboration that partnered struggling schools with those with a record of high performance as a means of school-to-school support. These low performing schools also had access to mentoring and coaching from successful headteachers as part of an individualised and detailed programme of improvement. Following their involvement in this initiative, schools in London improved their examination results significantly more than those in the rest of the country (apart from secondary schools in the highest quintile of attainment) while the fall in the number of schools below the floor target was greater in City Challenge areas than elsewhere and the percentage of primary and secondary pupils reaching the expected level improved more than elsewhere (Hutchings et al., 2012). In addition, over 30 per cent were judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted in their most recent inspection following the initiative, compared with 17.5 per cent in the rest of England (Ofsted, 2010). While care must be taken in attributing the improvements in those schools involved in the City Challenges solely to the initiative, it is widely recognised as

having made a considerable positive contribution to the attainment of students in some of the most challenging regions of the country (Ainscow, 2014). Moreover: *‘the various activities and interventions were characterised by a belief that school-to-school collaboration has a central role to play in school improvement* (Hutchings et al., 2012, p. v).

More indirectly, Woods et al. (2010) report on the positive impact of shared Schools Business Managers (SBMs) across groups of schools that, deployed appropriately, can ease headteacher workload and save up to a third of their time that would otherwise have been spent on tasks not directly related to their main function of teaching and learning. The authors posit that shared SBMs can therefore make a meaningful positive contribution to school improvement by facilitating headteacher workload realignment allowing school leaders to focus more of their attention on the teaching and learning agenda.

## Teachers and teaching practice

In addition to student outcomes, the literature identifies a number of different areas in which inter-school collaboration can make a positive impact. While these tend to be less tangible and more indirect, they influence school improvement and are more prevalent within the literature. For example, Stoll (2015) reports on case study research with Teaching School Alliances (TSA) in which groups of schools entered into collaborative research and development projects funded by the National College as part of an initiative to promote and develop strong pedagogy, professional development and leadership. Findings from this study suggest the inter-school collaborative research and development activity between schools benefitted participating practitioners by enhancing their teaching practice, helping them develop new ways of thinking about their practice, increasing expectations, increasing motivation and a greater openness towards their colleagues. According to the authors, this then leads to; *‘more powerful forms of professional learning, more learning-oriented and enquiry-hungry cultures, and increased leadership capacity. Alliances reap benefits of more trusting relationships and openness to sharing and critiquing practice’* (Styoll, 2015 p. 11).

Similarly, in their research with federations of schools, Chapman et al. (2009a) found that federating provided more opportunities for continued professional development (CPD) between schools with staff recognising that sharing practice amongst colleagues was a more powerful form of professional learning that would have a more direct impact on practice than attending an external course. Following large-scale multiple methods research with networks of schools in Liverpool, Varga-Atkins et al. (2010) found that where practitioners benefitted from professional learning in these networks, the quality of joint professional development was a key factor in the success of networked professional development programmes. Drawing on work with Specialist Schools partnerships and federations of schools, Chapman and Allen (2006) suggest that inter-school collaborative working had led to improvements in school climate and staff development opportunities. Comparable findings in relation to increased opportunities for staff development and



shared professional dialogue are reported by West (2010) drawing on case study research with six groups of schools working in collaboration. Similarly, Day and Hadfield (2004) reporting on research with networks of primary schools working together on collaborative action research projects as a means of school improvement and increasing student attainment.

McMeeking et al. (2002) undertook case study research with Beacon Schools, a government designation awarded to high performing schools who were then funded to work in partnership with low performing schools to share good practice and bring about improvement. Their findings suggest that staff in partner schools report a greater willingness to try new things and develop ideas and displayed an increased confidence to solve problems and self-reflect on their own practice. Support for problem solving and trouble shooting were amongst key impacts of inter-school collaboration reported by Ainscow et al. (2006) in their case study research with networks of schools. They also report positive impacts on curriculum development with schools co-constructing joint courses that they would not have had the resources to develop individually. Turner (2004) conducted case study research with schools involved in the Independent-State School Partnership (ISSP) initiative and funded collaborative projects between schools from the independent and state sector. Findings indicate positive impacts in relation to knowledge mobilisation and opportunities for mutual learning between colleagues from the two school sectors. Smith et al. (2003) report similar findings in their research to determine the extent and nature of collaboration between state and independent schools.

Activity in this area continues to date with an ISSP Forum made up of appointed DfE officials and senior leaders from across the educational arena, drawn to reflect a wide range of viewpoints. They meet termly to; Promote partnership working between the independent and state schools sectors, and the benefits of working together; Advise DfE on policy development including on how partnership working could be used as a mechanism for improving policy delivery. In November 2014, DfE awarded £176,288 to 18 ISSP partnership projects focusing on the primary curriculum, the first DfE funding given to ISSPs since 2008. This project was designed to increase collaboration between independent and state schools to raise standards in key subjects such as modern languages, science and maths. Projects were asked to have a shared commitment to raise the standards of teaching and learning and have a positive and measurable impact on the education of all the children in their schools. The projects are currently on-going and will be evaluated by DfE in due course. In 2015, the ISSP Forum also plan to launch a Schools Together website to promote effective partnership working and share best practice to help encourage more schools to become involved.

## **Leadership**

Hill et al. (2012) highlight the increased opportunities for leadership training and development that inter-school collaboration can provide. In academy chains, this is often



the result of a need to build leadership capacity as a result of the additional workload for senior leadership that accompanies the collaboration.

*School partnerships provide a good context for supporting and developing aspiring and middle leaders. They enable emerging leaders to observe the style of leadership of leaders from institutions other than their own. They often have the opportunity to take on new responsibilities either in another school or across a partnership. There may well be joint leadership training with colleagues from other schools.*

(Hill, 2010, p. 24)

Drawing on extensive research with networks of schools, Hadfield and Chapman (2009) cite similar findings whereby the increased demands of leading a network necessitate a requirement to build leadership capacity and distribute leadership more widely across the school. As such, staff members with little previous leadership experience are handed opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in this area. Comparable findings are reported by Chapman and Allen (2006) and Chapman et al. (2004).

At the system level, recent research by Sandals and Bryant (2014) with 10 local school systems underlines the opportunities for the leadership of school improvement across groups of schools and the sense of optimism surrounding the potential of contemporary inter-school collaborative arrangements:

*School leaders have welcomed the encouragement to lead local school improvement through partnerships such as teaching school alliances, MATs and federations, as well as system-wide strategic partnerships. These schools-led partnerships, some involving schools of all phases, are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping, commissioning, brokering and delivering local school improvement services in these 10 local systems.*

(Sandals and Bryant, 2014, p. 26)

While the authors make clear that not all schools are currently accessing the necessary support they require to improve and build capacity, they point out that nearly two thirds of the school leaders in their research were confident that local partnerships were not only well-embedded but also facilitating improvement at the local level (Sandals and Bryant, 2014).

## **Financial**

As highlighted earlier, Chapman et al. (2009b) provides examples of schools working together to pool their resources and streamline organisational capacity in order to take advantage of economies of scale and facilitate a more efficient operation. In many cases, there is a shared SBM coordinating this collaborative organisational management function. These findings are echoed by Woods et al. (2010) in their evaluation of a large-scale national programme of shared business management provision involving 260

schools, the findings of which indicated considerable monetary savings for those schools that employed a shared SBM. A closer analysis of the financial data from this project indicated that an appropriately qualified and deployed SBM could save a school over £20,000 per year (Oakleigh Consulting, 2010), money that could be spent on school improvement and enhancing the student educational experience.

## Partnership formation

### Drivers for collaboration

According to Ainscow *et al.* (2006) there are three reasons why schools might enter into contemporary inter-school collaborative arrangements: they may do so voluntarily (e.g. through a need to do so such as lack of resources or funding); through incentives (such as those that often accompany central initiatives); or they may be partnered with another school by central government (which tends to be the case with poor performing schools that are partnered with a higher performing school). It may also be the case that schools are driven to collaborate with each other via combination of their own initiative and an incentive (i.e. through volunteering to participate in an inter-school collaboration initiative with funding attached). The published literature on inter-school collaboration would seem to reflect this.

Many studies report on schools entering into collaboration with other schools on a voluntary basis because of an underlying need and mutual benefit to do so. For example, small schools, often in rural and remote locations, may enter into partnerships as a means of sharing resources and taking advantages of economies of scale through shared contracts and resource (see Busher and Hodgkinson, 1996; Williams and Thorpe, 1998; Chapman *et al.*, 2009b; Woods *et al.*, 2010) or opportunities for joint professional and curriculum development (see Turner, 2004; Ainscow *et al.*, 2006). Schools may also start working together to address poor Local Authority provision and an associated paucity of adequate service provision (see O'Neill, 1996; Ainscow *et al.*, 2006; Coldron *et al.*, 2014).

The vast majority of the wide range of centrally driven initiatives involving inter-school collaboration (e.g. Specialist Schools Partnerships, ISSP, DPP, NLCs, SBM Demonstration Projects, City Challenges, TSAs) have funding attached, at least initially, which often provides a key incentive for schools to participate (Aiston, 2002; Smith, 2003; Turner, 2004; Woods, 2006; Earl and Katz, 2007; Woods, 2010; Hutchings *et al.*, 2012; Stoll, 2015). However, such funding is not necessarily the only or most important incentive as often schools will volunteer to become involved in such initiatives because of a need to do so (as highlighted above) as was the case with some of the school clusters that grew out of the SBM Demonstration Project (Woods *et al.*, 2010). In other examples, groups of schools may use the initiative and the attached funding to support and develop collaborative activity that they were already engaged in (Woods *et al.*, 2010; Stoll, 2015).

In other instances schools may enter into partnerships with other schools to address their own poor performance. This has been a particular feature of the NLE concept in which expert leaders partner poor performing schools and import their expertise, knowledge and systems to facilitate improvement (Hill and Mathews, 2010) and also of academy chains that have taken on struggling schools as members to bring about radical improvement and transformation (Hill et al., 2012).

Existing academy chains may also have a desire to expand their model of school improvement to other schools or even bring more schools on board to create a cost-effective financial model that will support the central function of the chain (i.e. strategic and operational management function). Furthermore, some schools may actively seek to join a sponsored chain principally because of the educational and operational support they will receive by becoming a member (Hill et al., 2012).

## Conditions for effective collaboration

There are a number of commonalities within the literature with regards to the conditions that foster effective inter-school collaboration with key themes relating to leadership, structures, processes, relationships, communication and context amongst the most commonly cited.

Reporting on case study research with groups of schools working together in both formal and informal collaborations, Chapman et al. (2009b) identified strong and well-established structures that maintained beyond the turnover of key personnel; outward looking and forward thinking leadership with an openness to collaboration as a means of improvement; and trust, communication and critical friendship as key characteristics of the most effective collaborations in their sample. Similarly, Rea et al., (2015) drawing on research with TSAs, cite strong and committed leadership across all partner schools; empowerment of middle leaders (i.e. distributing leadership that builds capacity to cope with additional workload); clear planning and strategising of priorities; development of trust; critical friendship; and peer-to-peer support as central facets of inter-school collaborative activity. While Ainscow (2014) also cites the crucial role played by senior leadership in the success of inter-school collaborative activity, he draws attention to the importance of all staff members engaging in the partnership work: *'whilst the commitment of heads and other senior staff is essential, best practice seems to involve forms of collaboration that exist at many levels'* (Ainscow, 2014, p. 32).

Reviewing the impact of NLCs on groups of schools facing challenging circumstances, Chapman et al. (2004) underscore a number of key conditions within the network that facilitate effective partnership work including: a strong and clear focus on teaching and learning; distributed leadership that builds capacity across the network with meaningful tasks and responsibility; and a shared commitment to professional development at all levels. The importance of a facilitator, an individual with a specific remit to coordinate and

foster the collaborative activity, is cited by Chapman and Allen (2006) as a key factor in the success of inter-school partnership.

In their evaluation of the DP projects, Woods et al. (2006) underscore group cohesion (i.e. trust and an absence of conflict); in-school capacity and flexibility (that can sustain turnover of key personnel); strategic vision (the articulation of a shared journey with aspirations beyond short-term partnership work); and engagement of interests (i.e. recognition and attention to the individual interests of partner schools) as conditions for effective collaboration. Drawing on 49 interviews with headteachers, school leaders and other senior educational stakeholders, Coleman (2012) also identifies trust as a key feature of school-to-school partnership whereby the headteachers in his sample with the strongest levels of collaborative working also had the highest perceived levels of trustworthiness. Howland (2014), following a three-year case study project with a group of 10 schools undergoing the process of federating, cites the importance of a strong and shared vision to the early success of the collaboration.

Leadership and collegiality are identified by Lindsay et al. (2007) as important factors for the success of federations with Federation Directors, headteachers and Chairs of Governors all singled out as key personnel. They characterise the leadership of the successful federations in their sample as that which builds upon previous collaborations and relationships (i.e. shared history of partnership); having clear aims for entering into a federation; building collegiality, trust and communication; and adapting their leadership style according to the federation context. Rea et al. (2015) highlight the need for leaders to outline clear strategic priorities that frame the collaborative activity and to differentiate their skills and be malleable in their approach in order to adapt to the often diverse and conflicting priorities of system leadership.

Similarly, context was an important feature of the City Challenges (Ainscow, 2014) whereby an understanding of and sensitivity to the local conditions that characterise individual schools and their surrounding communities was central to an initiative in which schools had individualised programmes of support that were tailored to their specific needs; *'there was no single view of what schools needed to do to improve; all the interventions involved local solutions with key stakeholders (including headteachers and LAs) centrally involved in the decisions'* (Hutchings et al., 2012, p. v). This ownership or internal control is also cited by Woods et al. (2006) as a central characteristic of the DP projects in which *'the ability to create and shape the priorities and processes of projects - was in the hands of local actors such as headteachers* (p. 4). They also highlight the importance of both strategic and operational leadership.

The literature also underscores the commitment and support of the governors, parents, the local community (Turner, 2004) and the local authority (Ribchester and Edwards, 1998; Woods et al., 2006) to the success of inter-school collaboration. Particular emphasis is given to the role of the Local Authority as a facilitator and broker of inter-school collaboration, given their natural oversight of the regional school system (Ainscow, 2014; HoC, 2015). Indeed, Chapman et al. (2009b) suggested that the Local

Authority should play a more significant role in publicising and sharing data and local knowledge of problems and opportunities to foster and encourage inter-school collaboration.

Reporting on an initiative with four networks of secondary schools that used inter-school collaboration as a vehicle for improvement, Ainscow and Howes (2007) outline five necessary conditions that enable effective inter-school collaboration:

- The development of relationships amongst schools serving different regions;
- Incentives that encourage key stakeholders to explore the possibility that it will be in their interests to collaborate;
- Headteachers and senior leaders who are willing and skilled enough to drive collaboration forward, take collective responsibility and deal with the accompanying uncertainties and turbulence;
- The establishment of common improvement agendas that are seen to be relevant to a wide range of stakeholders; and
- Coherent external support from credible consultants/advisers (e.g. from the local authority or elsewhere) who have the confidence to learn alongside their school-based partners, exploring and developing new roles and relationships where necessary.

(Adapted from Ainscow and Howes, 2007)

A history of partnership is also a commonly cited facilitator to the success of inter-school collaboration. If there is an existing culture of shared working amongst schools then they are more likely to have built a positive relationship and a level of trust that will serve as strong foundations to any future collaboration, either formal or informal (Howland, 2014; Hill et al., 2012; Lawrence, 2007; Lindsay, 2007; Arnold, 2006). However, a previous history of partnership is not always necessary. Reporting on the City Challenges initiative, Ainscow (2014) draws attention to the 'Families of Schools' approach that grouped schools based on similar prior attainment and socio-economic background of their students. By grouping schools together that served comparable populations from different neighbourhoods this approach facilitated collaboration and proved very successful as schools were not in direct competition with one another.

## **Challenges of inter-school collaboration**

Amongst the most frequent barriers to the initiation, effectiveness and sustainability of inter-school collaboration cited in the literature are threats to school autonomy (and perceived power imbalances), resource and workload, difficulties in establishing shared objectives and common goals, time and funding.

For example, according to Chapman et al., (2009a) tensions can arise between schools entering into collaborative activity in order to protect or enhance their power or influence

and acquire resources. This can lead to weak collaborations and create conflict between stakeholders. The authors found this to be more prevalent in informal collaborations, such as soft federations, suggesting that formal collaborative arrangements may be more robust. Lindsay et al. (2007) also report tensions arising from imbalances of power within the stronger-weaker school model.

Time, resource and the pressure to commit to the collaborative activity are also barriers, as identified by Aiston et al. (2002) in their work with networks of Specialist Schools in which participants raised concerns over the network activity detracting from individual school priorities. Indeed, establishing a common agenda amongst groups of schools with different priorities was another barrier to collaboration. Moreover, participating schools also found it challenging to form partnerships with nearby schools that were not part of the initiative due to localised competition for students and were therefore more likely to enter into collaboration with schools that were further afield geographically or feeder primary schools as neither were viewed as natural competitors. On a broader scale, Keddie (2015) highlights: *'the difficulties of creating socially responsive and responsible collaboratives in the current 'heterarchical' and market-oriented policy environment'*, sentiments echoed by Townsend (2013).

Hill et al. (2012) highlight a number of challenges to inter-collaboration within the context of academies and academy chains, although such issues are likely to be applicable to any type of school-to-school partnership activity. In particular, they raise caution against the pace of expansion and the need to manage the risks associated with this. These risks include: the geographical spread of member schools; striking a balance between phases of member schools; reviewing governance arrangements to adapt to an increase in membership; ensuring leadership development and capacity at every level to accommodate growing membership; ensuring an adequate breadth and depth of improvement expertise to support new membership; and maintaining strong quality assurance procedures to ensure standards do not slip at existing member schools at the expense of supporting the improvement of new members. Conversely, the authors also highlight challenges faced by more informal collaborative partnerships between convertor academies (i.e. those that are not officially categorised as 'chains'). These include the danger that they do not have the leadership and expertise to tackle deeply embedded school improvement issues, such as a failing member school, and may also lack the resources to commit to partnership activity which influences the commitment to, and depth and impact of, their joint work.

From their research with evaluating models of inter-school business management, Woods et al. (2013) report a lack of shared objectives and common understanding of the purpose and nature of the collaborative arrangement from the outset to be a significant barrier to the success of the school partnership. This was a key contributor to the failure of a number of projects in this initiative.

Funding is often a central facet of the inter-school collaborative activity. In particular, centrally driven funding whereby initiatives tend, at least initially, to have financial incentives to support inter-school collaborative activity can encourage collaboration. However, when the funding ceases this can compromise the collaboration and lead to concerns over future activity (Turner, 2004; Lindsay et al., 2007; Woods et al., 2006; Woods et al., 2010; Woods et al., 2013; Stoll, 2015).

Woods et al. (2006) also underscore the lack of attention paid to how students are influenced by inter-school collaboration noting that there is a need to find; *'effective ways of improving the student experience through school collaborative schemes as well as establishing how these schemes are actually being experienced by students'* (Woods et al 2006,p. 7). In addition, they suggest that schools might be more willing to collaborate if they were incentivised through central accountability structures, such as Ofsted, that currently focus on individual rather than collective school performance. The latter issue is one that is also raised by Hadfield and Chapman (2009) following extensive research and work with networks of schools.

## Sustainability

Sustainability is often cited as a major concern for inter-school collaboration. As highlighted in the previous section, given the propensity for such activity to be initiative driven and the tendency for those initiatives to be underpinned by funding incentives, there is often a danger that the collaborative activity ceases when the initial funding and/or initiative ends (Turner, 2004; Lindsay et al., 2007; Woods et al., 2006; Woods et al., 2010; Stoll, 2015). While the funding is important for schools to initiate collaborative activity, the challenge is to establish sustainable relationships and systems that will endure over the long term, beyond government initiatives and policy drives that started the collaboration. The means by which funds are allocated and targeted is also important according to Woods et al. (2006) who suggest that *'cost-effective, sustainable collaboration requires a focusing or targeting of funds on a limited number of schools rather than dispersing a given amount of resource over a large number of schools. If funds are concentrated in this way, greater possibilities are created for what we have called 'leverage and synergy', the capacity to sustain, enhance and make best use of funding'* (p. 7).

Haynes and Lynch (2013) draw on data gathered during a three-year study of partnerships of schools and colleges delivering the 14-19 Diplomas in England. From interviews with 136 consortia leads and 30 case studies of Diploma consortia, their findings suggest that partnerships established in response to government directives and initiatives were less effective both strategically and operationally, than those formed as a constructive response to local needs and that had therefore evolved over a longer period of time. Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2007) found that those schools that had entered into a collaboration with a common purpose were more likely to succeed and sustain than those that had been forced to collaborate. This suggests that attempts to facilitate inter-school



collaboration via centrally driven initiatives may not necessarily be the most effective way to facilitate sustainability.

Reflecting on the City Challenges programme, Hutchings et al. (2012) draw attention to the length of time it takes to establish, foster and maintain collaborative school improvement suggesting that the three-year period of the initiative was not long enough to bring about sustainable change. Research on federations also indicates that structured and sustainable collaboration takes time whereby successful hard federations have often reached this stage in phases starting with softer collaborative partnerships before moving into more formal arrangements, potentially recruiting additional member schools along the way (Lindsay et al., 2007; Chapman et al., 2009a).

According to Woods et al. (2006) sustainability should be regarded as a key indication of the success of inter-school collaboration. Their findings suggest this requires a number of conditions such as: a clear strategy for the collaboration; a strong organisational structure including sufficient staff to support the activity; and both flexibility and reflexivity to adapt to shifting circumstances and new developments. This is consistent with findings from Chapman et al. (2009b) who suggest; *'collaboration underpinned by clearly defined purposes and formal supporting structures is most likely to be sustainable and to have a positive impact on student outcomes'* (p. 4).

In an attempt to secure post-initiative sustainability, Ainscow (2014) cites the example of the Greater Manchester facet of the City Challenges and the creation of a School Improvement Partnership Board which was established to facilitate sustainability and continue to coordinate inter-school collaborative activity following the cessation of the initiative.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that long-term sustainability need not necessarily be the aim of inter-school collaboration. In some cases it may be desirable for schools to collaborate on a short-term basis to tackle a particular area of improvement. Once addressed, there may be no further need to collaborate in this area. Indeed, certain aspects of the TSA model promote such collaboration through the deployment of SLEs, the commissioning and brokerage of system leader support, and more general forms of school-to-school support. This can be and often is short-term in nature with schools accessing support as and when it is required (Sandals and Bryant, 2014). There is less published evidence on such short-term collaborative arrangements however it is worth highlighting that while long-term sustainability tends to be associated with stronger partnerships there is no reason why short-term collaboration cannot be effective and purposeful.



## Concluding points

This review has pointed to a paucity of independent empirical evidence relating to inter-school collaboration, across a number of areas including:

- the differential impact of inter-school collaboration and how different types of collaborative arrangements might vary in effectiveness;
- the means by which schools select where, when and in what ways to collaborate with other schools;
- the development and maintenance of relationships when schools enter into collaboration;
- the means by which governing bodies are adapting to inter-school collaboration and inter-school governance;
- the timeframe for school improvement as a result of inter-school collaboration; and
- the differences between long and short-term partnerships.

The review has highlighted that the vast majority of the evidence in this area emanates from evaluations of central government initiatives that promote inter-school collaboration and partnerships. While there is a growing number of peer reviewed empirical journal articles that focus on inter-school collaboration, the data used to inform these publications also tends to have been sourced from central government initiatives and the authors' involvement in these. This is not necessarily a negative thing but it does draw attention to a considerable absence in the literature of independent empirical research into inter-school collaboration.

Furthermore, the review has drawn attention to the multi-faceted nature of inter-school collaboration across the English school system encompassing a wide range of different types of collaborative activity, both formal and informal in nature and involving schools of different phases and types. Moreover, schools collaborate for a multitude of reasons, over different timelines, with contrasting levels of intensity and varying degrees of success in terms of impact and sustainability. The level of inter-school collaboration also appears to be increasing with the growth and expansion of MATs and TSAs adding to the complexity of this landscape.

The evidence points to a number of positive consequences of inter-school collaboration in relation to impacts upon students, teachers, school improvement and organisational efficiency. There are a number of common challenges associated with inter-school collaboration including those relating to school autonomy, trust, increased workload, capacity and funding.

The review has also highlighted a number of gaps in the knowledge base in relation to inter-school collaboration. Most notably there is a need for a coherent and comprehensive mapping of the system in relation to the volume, diversity and key characteristics of inter-school collaboration. The impact of inter-school collaboration on the attainment and broader educational experience of students is an area that could benefit from further exploration.

# Appendixes

## Appendix 1: Glossary of selected government initiatives promoting inter-school collaboration

### Initiatives

#### **Independent-State School Partnerships (ISSP) (1997-Present)**

Established in 1997, the Independent-State Schools Partnership scheme (ISSP) was set up to encourage collaborative working between independent and maintained schools, to widen educational opportunities and share best practice and expertise. The DfE continues to fund projects as part of this scheme.

#### **Beacon Schools (1998-2005)**

Established in 1988, the Beacon Schools programme identified high performing schools across England and was designed to build partnerships between these schools and represent examples of successful practice, with a view to sharing and spreading that effective practice to other schools to raise standards in pupil attainment. The programme was phased out and ceased by August 2005.

#### **Specialist Schools (1997-2010)**

While its roots can be traced back to City Technology Colleges in the early 1990s, this programme began in earnest in 1997 under New Labour who encouraged state secondary schools to become specialists and local centres of excellence in their chosen area of the curriculum. These schools benefitted from public funding under the "Specialist Schools Programme" and from private sector sponsorship. Funding for the programme ceased in 2010.

#### **Networked Learning Communities (NLC) (2002-2006)**

Established in 2002 by the National College, the Networked Communities programme ran until 2006. This initiative aimed to support networked learning in schools which encompassed individuals coming together from different environments to engage in development activity informed by the existing knowledge base, their own experience and the co-construction of new knowledge.

#### **City Challenges (2008-2011)**

Launched in April 2008 by the then Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to building on the success of the London Challenge 2003-2011, the City Challenge was designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and address issues of disadvantage and underachievement' in three regions of England: the Midlands, Greater Manchester and London. Amongst the many facets of this large-scale programme was a belief the educational problems facing urban areas should be

addressed at area level, with local Authorities and schools working together to achieve this.

### **Teaching Schools (2011-present)**

Established by the DfE in 2011 whereby the best schools in the country, those judged to be outstanding by Ofsted, with a strong record of collaboration and effective leadership and capacity across a number of key areas such as initial teacher training, supporting other schools, succession planning, professional development and research, can apply to become Teaching Schools. Teaching Schools take on a more central role in the training and development of trainee teachers, the professional development of existing teachers and school leaders, leadership identification and school-to-school support. Each Teaching School Alliance (TSA) is lead by a designated Teaching School which collaborates and provides support to other schools in the areas outlined above.

## Appendix 2: Glossary of terms

### Academy

Academy schools are state schools in England which are independent of direct control by the local authority and are run and governed by an Academy Trust which is directly funded by central government via the DfE.

### Academy Trust

Academies are run and governed by an Academy Trust. An Academy Trust is a charitable company limited by guarantee and is, once its first Academy is open, an exempt charity. In all cases this is the body the department contracts with, funds, and holds to account. There are two types of academy trust: multi-academy trusts (MATs) and single-academy trusts (SATs) (see below).

### Chain

Historically there has been no universally agreed definition of an academy chain – and in fact the terms Sponsor/Chain/MAT have been used interchangeably. Past analyses of chains have also set differing minimum numbers of academies in their definitions.

The DfE recognises a formal chain as a MAT of 2 or more schools, or a sponsor with 2 or more academies (as of October 2014).

However, others (e.g. Hill et al 2012) have described a chain as comprising 3 or more academies.

### Federation

A formal governance structure whereby two or more maintained schools share a single governing body. To establish a federation, schools are required to follow a statutory process which is outlined in the School Governance Federation Regulations (HM Government, 2012). These regulations also describe what the membership of the governing body must comprise.

### Hard Partnership

Any inter-school collaboration involving shared governance of which the DfE distinguish between two types: MATs and federations

## Trust

A trust is a state-funded school (or group of schools) that receives support from a charitable trust of partners working in collaboration for the school(s). Trust schools employ their own staff and manage their own land and assets.

## Multi-academy trust (MAT)

MATs run more than one academy. The MAT is also a charitable company with a single set of articles and therefore is a single legal entity accountable for a number of academies; its board of trustees is accountable for all the academies in the trust. The trust enters into a Master FA (MFA) with the Secretary of State, and into Supplemental Funding Agreements (SFA) for each academy it operates. The accountability always remains with the trust and any delegation of functions to individual schools or groups of schools through Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) by the MAT does not change the line of accountability between the SoS and the MAT trustees.

## Single Academy Trust (SAT)

A SAT runs one academy and is governed by a single set of articles and a funding agreement between the Academy Trust and the Secretary of State. Its board of trustees are accountable for that one academy only.

## Sponsors

An approved sponsor is a body/organisation that has been approved by the DfE to establish a trust to take on underperforming schools. There is wide variation in types of sponsors who can form a majority influence over SATs or MATs to run academies. The DfE state publicly on their gov.uk website that the following bodies or people can sponsor an academy:

- a) high-performing schools
- b) further education colleges
- c) sixth-form colleges
- d) universities
- e) businesses and entrepreneurs
- f) educational foundations
- g) charities and philanthropists
- h) faith communities.

At the beginning of the academy programme sponsors tended to primarily be philanthropic or business sponsors, but more recently high performing schools are increasingly forming sponsored academy trusts themselves to support other schools. Converter academies make up over half of the total approved sponsors: 369 out of 669 sponsors are converter academies (unpublished DfE analysis, 2015).

## Appendix 3: Search Strategy

Initially, sources were searched for within two of the most comprehensive educational research and social science databases:

- **Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC):** the largest online digital library of education research and information database in the world. ERIC is sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences of the United States Department of Education and contains over 1.5 million bibliographic records (citations, abstracts, and other pertinent data) of journal articles and other education-related materials including research documents, technical reports, program descriptions and evaluations and curricula material.
- **Scopus:** the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature in the world in: scientific journals, books and conference proceedings. It contains over 55 million records of the world's research output in the fields of science, technology, medicine, social sciences, and arts and humanities.

Supplementary searches were also conducted in Google Scholar and via relevant websites (e.g. Department for Education, National College for Teaching and Leadership). Furthermore, the reference lists of relevant returns were also checked for any additional literature that may not have been sourced from the initial database searches. In addition to searching the databases using the keywords outlined in methods section (e.g. inter-school collaboration, partnership, cluster, network etc.), searches were also conducted on initiatives that were known to be underpinned by or comprise a significant element of inter-school collaboration (e.g. Networked Learning Communities, City Challenges, Teaching Schools). The keywords used in the searches are outlined below:

1. School WITH partnership OR collaboration OR cluster OR network OR federation OR chain OR trust
2. Inter school collaboration
3. Inter school partnership
4. Academy chain
5. City Challenge OR City Challenges
6. Diversity Pathfinders Project
7. Independent-State School Partnerships
8. Networked Learning Communities
9. Multi Academy Trust
10. Teaching School OR Teaching School Alliance

## Appendix 4: Literature summary template

<b>SOURCE DESCRIPTORS</b>	
Publication/Journal name	
Title	
Date	
Volume	
Issues	
Author(s)	
Primary research method(s)	
Type of publication (empirical, theoretical, commentary/thinkpiece)	
<b>SOURCE REVIEW</b>	
Aims/objectives	
Sample description	
Key findings	
Nature of collaboration (formal/informal)	
Type of collaboration	
Leadership and governance structure	
Direct impact on student outcomes/school improvement	
Indirect impact on student outcomes/school improvement	
Drivers to collaboration	
Conditions that facilitate collaboration	
Barriers to collaboration	
Issues relating to sustainability	
Other relevant information	
Retained for review? (Y/N)	



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

[TeachersAnalysisUnit.Mailbox@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:TeachersAnalysisUnit.Mailbox@education.gsi.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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