

ICSEI Congress 2009

Securing Quality and Equality through Collegiate Working

Northamptonshire Local Authority – UK

‘These days leadership in public services is not confined within an organisation, but extends across a web of interests held together through a network of relationships’

Chesterman and Horne - 2006

The educational system in England has evolved over recent years from one where schools were autonomous institutions focusing on their own internal improvement to the current model where there is an expectation that schools will increasingly take responsibility for improving outcomes for the local community of children, young people and their families beyond the school. This has implications for both leadership and service delivery and calls for new models of accountability for school communities.

A great deal has been written about Professional Learning Communities ¹ and their effectiveness in securing improvement. The nature of these varies according to local and national drivers. Within the English school system there have been centrally directed incentivised programmes set up to develop collaborative working across schools (Excellence in Cities, 14-19 Collaboratives, and Primary Networked Learning Communities). More recently the financial incentives have been allocated to individual schools leaving them with the choice as to what work they will undertake with others.

The requirement for children’s services across a number of disciplines (education, health, social care, justice etc) to work co-operatively to deliver improved outcomes has also supported new models of collaborative working. More recently the private sector has emerged as a key partner to support school improvement and effectiveness at individual school and local authority level.

This paper will share the work of an Area Improvement Partnership (AIP) in a large shire authority in England. The AIP has a membership that includes schools, early years settings, children’s services and the private sector. Schools and the Local Authority (LA) set up the AIP to respond to a number of challenges they jointly faced including the aftermath of a school system re-organisation, changing demographics of the school population, a high number of schools causing concern and increasing numbers of schools that were judged to be failing by external inspections.

Northamptonshire is located in the East Midlands Region of England, one of 9 such regions nationally. There are 310 schools in the County encompassing the 3-19 age range. Northampton town has 71 schools.

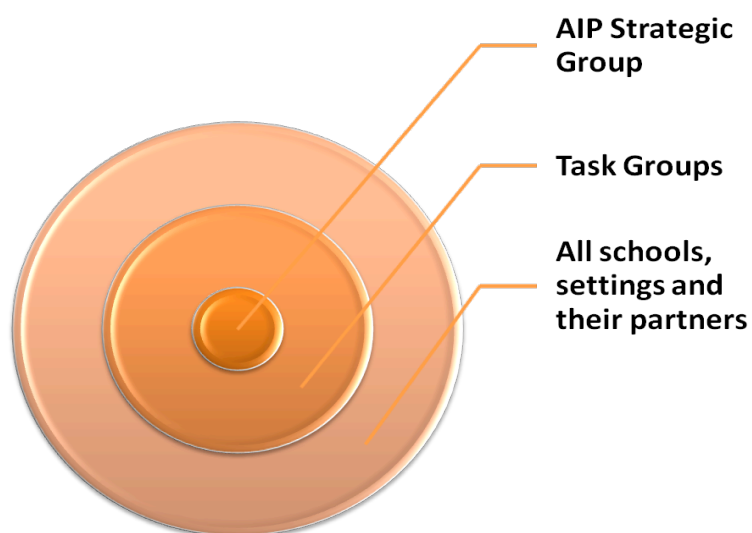
In September 2004, the then DFES approved of reorganising the education in the Town from a 3 Tier System (i.e. First Schools (2-8 years age range), Middle Schools (9-14

¹ Sustainable Leadership, Hargreaves A, (2005)
Professional Learning Communities, Stoll L and Seashore Louis K, (2007)
Leadership and Sustainability, Fullan M, (2005)

years) and Upper Schools (15-19 years) to a 2 Tier System (Primary, 2-11 years and Secondary, 12-19 years). Many teachers and support staff were redeployed into schools with an age range which they had not previously taught. A key driver for reorganisation was the uneven distribution of school places and a system where pupils were not making the expected progress across schools. This was one of Europe's largest PFI builds encompassing new buildings or refurbishments across 49 schools.

During the reorganisation period the Northampton Town Learning Partnership (NTLP) was formed to help manage the process. This included the re-deployment and re-training of staff. It was a partnership between all schools to ensure the transition from one system to another was as smooth as possible. The NTLP then evolved into the Area Improvement Partnership (AIP) following a period of time where schools were struggling to support their own improvement journey and a high number of schools were judged to be in need of improvement by OFSTED. It was clear that schools needed to work more closely together, pool resources and commission external support in order to ensure that schools were able to secure high quality provision that was consistently available to all children and young people across the town.

The partnership has the following structure:



There is a comprehensive group of members;

- All Northampton schools and settings
- The Northampton Area Improvement Manager, Area Manager and other relevant members of the area team including social care, health and inclusion services
- HE and FE institutions
- Governors, including parent governors
- Representative children and young people
- Local businesses
- Northampton sports clubs and organisations
- Appropriate members of Northampton community and voluntary sector
- LA cultural services

There is an expectation that all members of the AIP will fully engage in activities commissioned by the Strategic Group and ensure that these have the best possible impact on learners. They are also encouraged to share best practice from these and other activities to benefit other learners within Northampton Town.

Decision making is driven through the Strategic Group taking consideration of the views of stakeholders through the task groups and nursery, primary and secondary school headteacher groups. The Strategic Group is the impartial broker and commissioner of services on behalf of the Northampton Town AIP. They must do this taking into account the needs of individual and groups of schools and communities and ensure that the delivery of such services will have best possible impact. The Strategic Group also monitors and evaluates the impact of commissioned services to ensure they meet the needs of the AIP and represent value for money.

The agreed purpose of the AIP is;

- To provide a world class school system across the town that will ensure all of our children and young people have the skills, knowledge, experience and qualifications to live a fulfilled and prosperous life.
- To provide a local and national lead in school improvement work
- To work together as a learning community to improve educational provision for children and young people.
- To integrate children's services at a local level so that barriers to progress for children, young people and their families are reduced or eliminated and all ECM outcomes improved.

This is communicated through the agreed joint message: "Sharing responsibility for learning in Northampton".

It is widely recognised that collaborative working requires a high degree of trust and close working². The AIP has developed a style of working that is based on shared endeavour and a clear sense of moral purpose which is about ensuring equity of provision for all children and young people across the town. The purpose of the AIP reveals a high level of aspiration from key stakeholders. It is clear to staff, parents and governors that there is a high level of commitment by school leaders to partnership working within the AIP at both a personal and professional level. The AIP is supported by an external consultant who provides support, advice and challenge to the partnership, ensuring there is a clear focus on building capacity and improving outcomes for pupils in schools. This has contributed to the overall success of the partnership.

The AIP is at an early stage of development and as such is still building relationships across the strategic group, working groups and schools. There is a complex set of relationships within the AIP with schools, the LA and EdisonLearning. Time was spent with the support of an external consultant developing the shared vision and values that underpin this, sharing this across partners and identifying key milestones that would ensure the work of the AIP was having a positive impact on the lives of the children and

² Trust in Collaborative Working: The importance of trust for leaders of school based partnerships, NCSL 2008

How Networked Learning Communities Work, Earl, L., Katz, S et al, 2006

young people of Northampton. The size of the partnership is challenging in terms of engaging all schools and sharing the learning that has come about as a result of collegiate working. The previous NTLP provided a positive foundation for partnership working and has supported the development of the AIP. Schools are used to working together. There is a clear sense of purpose in the work of the AIP that has come about through a recognition that a high number of schools are struggling to manage within the current context. Schools are building their capacity with the support of other schools and a shared understanding of what makes a good school is emerging.

The work of the AIP reflects the complexity of the English system whereby key services and sectors work together to address a set of common priorities and challenges and schools work with each other as a matter of course. At a macro level the engagement of a range of children's services should address barriers to improvement for children and young people and supports the vision of education for *all*. At a school level delivering high quality provision that meets the needs of all pupils is becoming more complex with increasing levels of social and demographic diversity in the community and a wide number of partners that are sharing the task of improving outcomes for children and young people.

Whilst there is a key focus on building capacity for all schools, there is recognition that some schools have a higher level of need than others. Schools in the partnership have therefore pooled financial resources to support intensive programmes of support to the most vulnerable schools. The work of the AIP has been enhanced by the involvement of the private sector to build capacity and sustain improvement.

To this end the AIP with the support of the LA commissioned the private company, EdisonLearning to work as a strategic educational partner. The partnership between the LA and AIP focuses on collectively accelerating the progress of schools towards a key set of outcomes in line with the LA vision for the shire and in the local school context.

EdisonLearning was chosen because of its research based holistic approach to education change management, commitment to partnership over a long period of time and proven track record both nationally and internationally.

The approach is designed to ensure new practices are embedded and outcomes sustainable. This is done in part by recognising and exploiting the interdependencies, which exist between five strands of school development that make up the EdisonLearning Design:

- Enhancing Leadership Capacity
- Maximising the Learning Environment
- Teaching for Learning
- Assessment for Learning
- Student and Family Support Services.

Work with both secondary and primary schools is focused on the specific priority outcomes, which collectively help turn the vision of schools and the partnership into reality. The partnership is able to draw upon outstanding practice both nationally and

internationally, not only in terms of system leadership and classroom practice, but also in terms of parental involvement, work with families, communities and involvement of other agencies to ensure a universal entitlement for all children.

The EdisonLearning three year holistic improvement programme is delivered to schools through regular Network Workshops that bring together leaders in the schools and are focused on leadership and management responsibilities and tools that build robust plans and key processes and prepare the ground for the school based Development Days that are interspersed between. The Network Workshops provide the vehicle for schools to undertake collaborative activities with a focus on raising attainment and sustaining improvement overtime.

The individual school based Development Days have been designed to have three distinct core elements:

- *Quality Learning Coaching*- Development activities with teachers including observation of learning in the classroom as part of a planned coaching programme
- *Whole Staff Development* - Training sessions that are designed to develop classroom practice based on the school's key priorities
- *Leadership Follow Through* – undertaken with the Headteacher and appropriate senior members of staff to build on the content covered in the previous Network Workshops to support implementation of key actions.

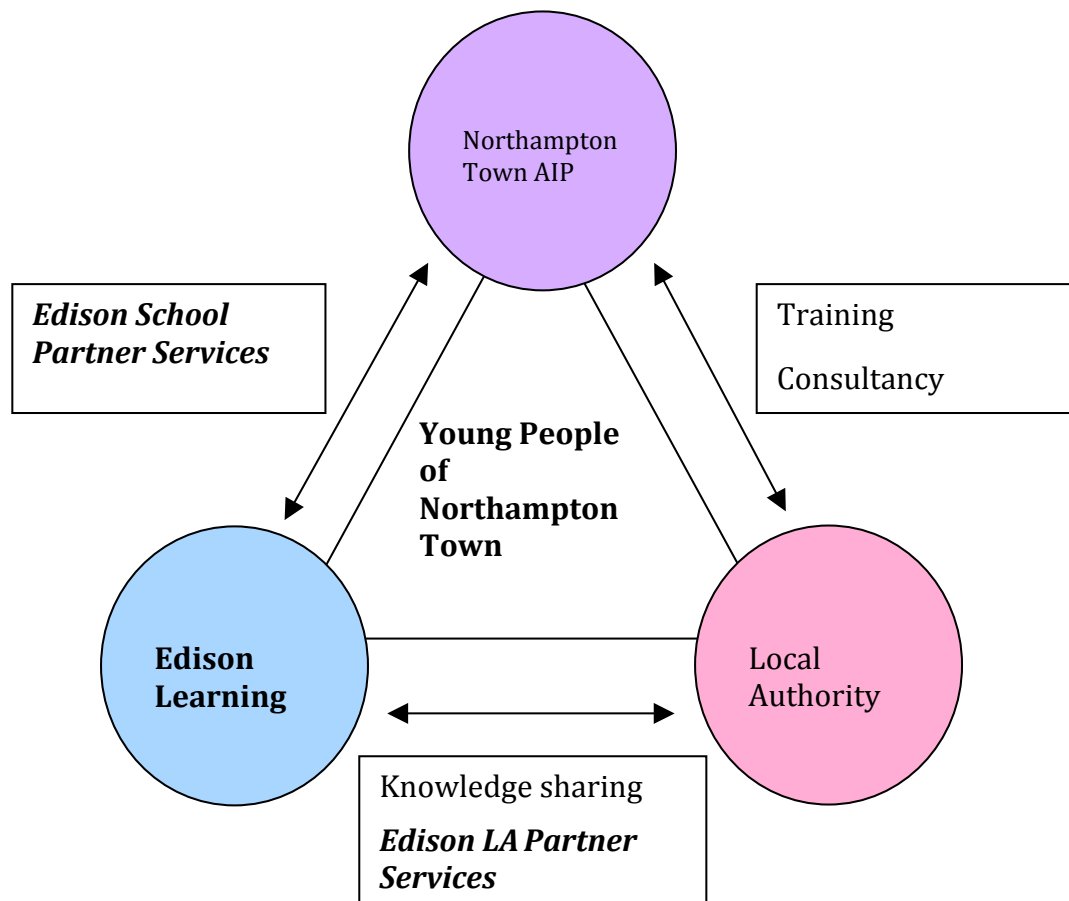
Additionally and in response to the Northampton context all schools have been introduced to Achievement Teams, a form of Quality Circle for teachers that uses pupil assessment data as a springboard for discussions about improving classroom practices, particularly for vulnerable students and those not making progress. These have become established in all schools are seen as a key driver for change.

An essential element of the work undertaken by the EdisonLearning Achievement Advisers and the LA team members is to ensure that there is a cohesive approach to school improvement activities experienced by the schools. To this end regular meetings take place to share knowledge, disseminate good practice and assess impact of the work.

A reporting and accountability programme for the partnership has been set up which includes the four key aspects of implementation and impact; improvement in the quality of teaching across schools; collation of student and school outcomes and school feedback on the services provided.

The AIP is developing as an effective commissioning body to identify the needs of individual schools and introduce them to appropriate programmes of effective school support for which they take a shared accountability.

Critical to the success of this triangular relationship is also the ongoing sharing of knowledge and practice between Edison, the LA and schools, as well as the appropriate provision of development services and activities designed to build capacity at the LA level and so create high quality provision for greater numbers of children and young people across Northamptonshire.



Communication across the partnership and ownership of its work is of vital importance. The Strategic Group has all key stakeholders represented and provides a clear direction of travel for the AIP. However much of the work of the partnership takes place through the working groups that have been set up – these are progressing three key issues; improving the quality of teaching and learning, leadership of learning and extended services. A website has been set up and newsletters to keep the broader community engaged in this work. A whole town training day has been planned for the 1500 teachers and support staff with a focus on learning and teaching; sharing good practice and improve cohesion and progress across the 3-19+ age range.

The work of the AIP has not been without its challenges. The setting up of a new organisation across a wide number of institutions and stakeholders has been a complex and demanding task. It was important to ensure the correct protocols and communication systems were fully effective without this being a distraction from the urgent needs of the young people, staff and schools. This has meant that communications systems have not always been as tight as they could be. There is also an additional challenge in public and private sector bodies working together in a way that delivers for young people without compromising the integrity and beliefs of the organisations concerned. The AIP is working on ensuring there is a contribution to and clear buy in to the vision and values of the partnership by as many stakeholders as possible.

This paper explores the broader role of the school in addressing the needs of the community and the complexity of partnership working to secure improvement. It demonstrates that groups of schools with a strong moral purpose and drive can share accountability for improving both quality and equality. As educational reform in England continues to have a focus on improving outcomes for children and young people across a broad set of indicators relating to both wellbeing and educational achievement, there is widespread recognition that sustainable improvement will not be achieved at individual school or service level. The Area Improvement Partnership is one of a number of new models of collegiate working that is emerging which breaks down geographical, sector and professional boundaries.

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