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Building Bridges:

A study of independent-state school partnerships

The Independent-State Schools Partnership Scheme has been in operation since 1998. What are the factors that have led to successful school partnerships?

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SUMMARY PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

The Independent-State Schools Partnership Scheme

The Independent-State Schools Partnership scheme (ISSP) has been in operation since 1998, with over 600 schools being supported. The seventh round of the scheme has £1.6 million being allocated by the DfES to support successful bids.

This research set out to establish answers to the questions:

- What are the key elements that contribute to ensure successful independent-state schools partnerships?

- How did the school leaders involved manage the successful partnership?

- What did the leaders see as the benefits of working together?

- Did working together make a difference to the schools and the way that they operated?

- What elements of the partnership were sustainable in the longer term?

Nine schools were visited, representing a wide geographical spread, from North Tyneside to the City of Nottingham. The schools represented both the primary and secondary phase, as well as mainstream and special schools.

Two sectors

Initially there were some barriers to overcome. Heads felt that there were some misconceptions, mainly based upon limited knowledge of each other:

"I knew very little about independent education or independent schools. You hear many stories of elitism and so on but we went into the school and saw children very similar to our own and they were hard working but they had the same problems as our own. They had the whole range of academic ability and it was clear they could benefit from the expertise of my staff and we could benefit from the expertise of their staff. We could work for the benefit of each other's children."

Those involved in the partnerships came to recognise that the differences between the schools were not so great as to prevent good partnerships from being developed, with initial misconceptions often being quickly dispelled.

Leading the partnership

Heads interviewed had differing views on the need for a single person to take charge of the partnership. They all agreed that, once the project was established, it was essential for the head to allow others to take it forward:

"In a sense what you do is you are a beacon, responsible for the pioneering element, what you do is you set up people who then can take it on and drive it through. In a sense all I did was light the blue touch paper and then I retired….and the fireworks were dramatic. I was a catalyst but the results were inspirational because of the work of the teachers involved."

An equal partnership

In the majority of cases heads felt that the desire had been to build an equal partnership but they were unsure whether this had been the result, partly because they could not evaluate the impact in their partner school. In order to ensure that the partnership met the declared objectives, and was of mutual benefit, it was suggested that monitoring should take place regularly throughout the year. For one independent head, this was a key issue as;

"It is absolutely vital that partnership is not seen to be crumbs from the rich man's table."

None of those interviewed felt that this had been the case – they had seen benefits to both schools and the partnership had been a two-way process.

Mutual gains

It was evident in the replies that the heads saw the partnership between the sectors as being mutually beneficial in a wider context:

"The more we share, the more we listen to each other, the better….Sharing resources, knowledge, information, celebrating achievements – this is what partnerships do well. The good thing about partnerships is that they work at different levels – in the staff room, at curriculum level, within CPD, cross phase and also within the bigger picture."

This bigger picture was alluded to by virtually all of the respondents;

"It is communication. In many cases imagined barriers, psychological barriers have now been breached and now people are now looking in a holistic sense to saying how can we actually do our job best in terms of empowering and enfranchising our children, regardless of sector. They are saying why don't we share things for the mutual gain of our children?"

Some heads saw the partnership as an opportunity for their pupils to work alongside pupils form a different sector – the social implications of the activity were referred to on a number of occasions.

"Our pupils were a little bit in awe at first….because the pupils from (our partner school) speak with such assurance but they realised that their maths was every bit as good, sometimes better than their students."

In this case the partner school had reached very similar conclusions:

"I could see huge benefits for the students…I imagine that our students are probably familiar with students from a similar background, everything from the fabric of a comprehensive school to the real mix of students there, I could see that as a positive eye opener…it was also very good for the students to see that that many of the students there were better than themselves."

Many of those interviewed felt that the greater understanding had resulted in partnerships which had produced benefits in equal measure for both the public and the private partner;

"The project may help to dispel some mistaken beliefs about independent schools. It may dispel the notion that they are a 'Lady Bountiful' sort of thing entering into partnerships with state schools. We do not see ourselves as being involved in teaching our state partner how to do things. This was entirely the opposite – we really admire what (our partners) have been achieving."

In all of the partnerships covered by this research the schools were definite in their view that the activity had produced mutual benefits to both partners.

Lessons learned

What lessons had been learned as the partnership developed? Many felt that they now appreciated the need to plan well in advance of such activity. Critically, there was a need to ensure collective agreement among the staff well in advance of the partnership;

"In hindsight we should perhaps have had more planning and involved more people so that there is more ownership in both schools. It tended in this case to be more at senior management level…staff needed to fully understand each other's schools."

Even when the partnership had been driven by a lead person, it was still important for staff to be fully involved;

"People need to feel part of it….it mustn't be driven by one person, it has to be joint even though there does need to be a lead. I host the first meeting and then pull back….You cannot have one school just pushing and pushing otherwise there is no partnership."

A number of heads recognised the need to identify the objectives at the outset and to keep these in mind during the period of activity. Despite these observations, those interviewed felt that the partnerships had proceeded effectively and had achieved fruitful outcomes.

Creating successful partnerships

When asked to list the factors which had led to a successful partnership, there was unanimity in stressing the need for a clear commitment from the head and the management team of the school. The project had to be regarded as a priority;

"It must have the heads' backing….From a management point of view you need to make it a priority and build in the support necessary."

The head must ensure that this commitment and support is met with an equally positive approach from the staff. Many heads stressed the need to ensure that the project was fully supported within the staff team. And heads stressed that it was important for the staff not to see this as simply extra work – they had to be convinced that it was for the benefit of the school.

The need to ensure that both schools were supportive of the principles of partnership was stressed in many of the responses.

"Respect for your differences and a celebration of all the things you have in common. The ethos of both schools was that we are both about achieving. A common set of values is important."

Most importantly, and stressed by virtually all of those interviewed, was commitment to the project and a desire to see it through to its conclusion.

"Commitment to the very essence of partnership….Belief in why you are doing it, the enthusiasm to sustain it…..talking all the time to those involved…taking the time to show that you are appreciating what staff are doing."

Conclusions

All of those interviewed expressed a great deal of support for the principle of cross sector partnership activity. The ISSP scheme had achieved a great deal and interviewees were of the opinion that it had helped to break down barriers. From this research, it would be reasonable to make the conclusions below.

- Successful partnerships require the full support and commitment of the head.

- It may be helpful to have a lead person overseeing the partnership activity.

- Staff need to be convinced of the benefits and be involved in the planning stage.

- It is important to set the parameters at an early stage and to plan the activity effectively.

- Staff need to be kept fully informed as the partnership develops.

- The principles of partnership need to be clearly understood by both partners.

- Having a common set of values is more important than having a similar background.

- Partnerships can be longer term, although this may involve introducing new partners or redefining the activity.

- Schools are approaching partnerships with a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment.

- Partnerships are successful when they are seen to be mutually beneficial.

- Partnerships can lead to culture change.

- Successful partnerships often involve schools that are very different in nature.

- It is helpful for the LEA to be supportive.

Examples of partnership activities undertaken by schools

- Two schools had worked at primary level on a partnership involving English, geography and science using ICT links with some video conferencing. A follow up year developed the partnership, involving four schools in a performing arts venture. A joint performance with the town hall being hired for a massed choir event in front of parents from the four schools.

- ICT training had been the focus of a partnership between a large independent school and a special school.

- A secondary partnership, with a focus of modern foreign languages, resulted in two schools working together to design materials for Year 9 students. This additionally involved working with the Open University to allow students to take a module from an OU undergraduate course.

- A secondary music and expressive arts partnership involving three schools in a strings academy and a jazz improvisation workshop had culminated in a performance to parents and invited guests.

- Another secondary partnership focused on maths, with students working on an open ended mathematical investigation.

- Two schools had worked together on a GCSE composition project, involving choirs and musicians from both schools. A saxophone group had been established and there had been an additional focus on popular music and ethnic music.

Research associate reports available in summer 2004

Children's Voices: Pupil leadership in primary schools,
Kaye Johnson, Principal, Woodville Primary School,
Adelaide, South Australia

**From Lost Learning Opportunities to Drivers of
Attainment,** Peter Rubery, Headteacher Fallibroome
High School

**Teacher Leaders and Reflective Practitioners:
Building the capacity of a school to improve by
promoting research and reflection,** Despina Pavlou,
Headteacher, The Lord Grey School, Milton Keynes

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The research summarised here is part of NCSL's Research Associates Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, engage in enquiry and impact on practice. The programme includes:

- Study visits

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We welcome enquiries about the Research Associates Programme. For details, please contact martin.coles@ncsl.org.uk

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