

The power and potential of peer review

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The role of rigorous and impactful peer review
in a self-improving system

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What is the Schools Partnership Programme?

There has never been a more important or demanding time to be leading and working in schools. Securing continuous improvement, developing great leaders and teachers, and giving children and young people the very best start in life is our task. That is why Education Development Trust has worked with over 800 schools to develop the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP).

SPP is Education Development Trust's school improvement model founded on professional peer review. Established in 2014, it provides schools with the essential tools and support to allow them to drive improvements in their performance. It is the only peer review model that is informed by research evidence and benefits from Education Development Trust's global network of partners, making it a distinctive and effective peer review model.

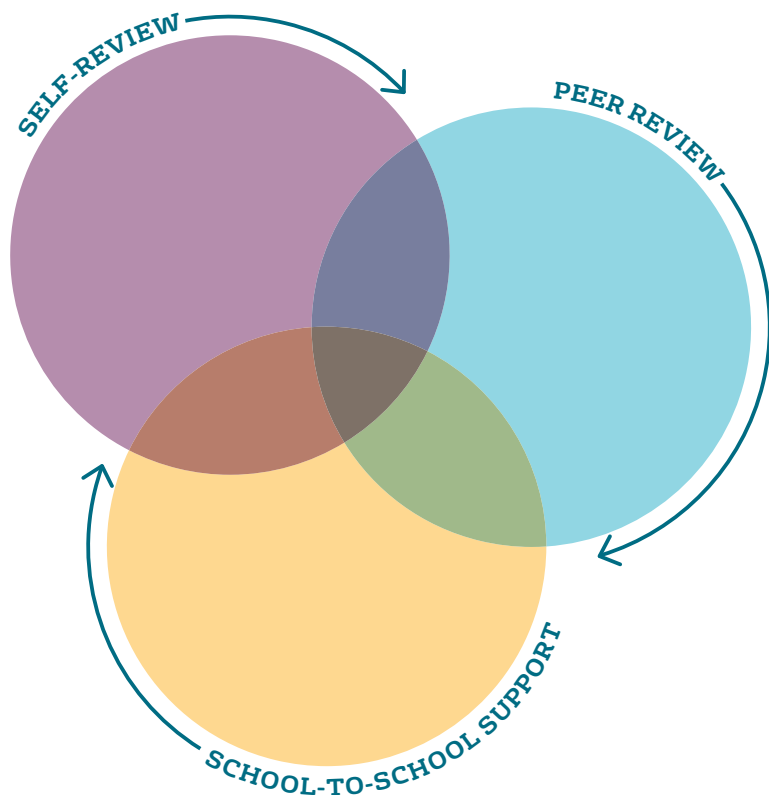
Our framework develops the confidence, capability, and culture in and between schools to lead their own improvement through a continuous cycle of school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement. Schools who join become part of a national and collegiate network engaged in peer review with opportunities to influence the development of the model and learn from each other's practice.

We know that isolation is the enemy of improvement and our SPP schools are demonstrating that, through focused collaboration, they can achieve greater coherence and better outcomes. They are achieving this through having a clear sense of shared direction and priorities and securing lateral accountability within and between their schools.

Complex and demanding times call for authentic and principled leadership. We believe that this is alive and well in our system, as leaders work collaboratively with other schools in a spirit of collective improvement and ambition.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the valuable contributions of the school leaders who have been participating in SPP to date. Our particular thanks to: Ian Tyas, Ingham Primary School, Helen Barker and Marie-Claire Bretherton, KYRA TSA, Karl Rogerson, Billesey Primary School, Heidi Shewel-Cooper and Mark Precious, Primary 6 Partnership, Liz Robinson, Surrey Square Primary School, Helen Rowland, Lisa Needham, Andrew Ross and Nadia Sweryt-Hannam, Focus Trust.



What is SPP?

A sector-led cluster-based approach to school improvement, which has worked with over 800 schools and larger local systems to date.

The model develops the capacity and culture needed for impactful cluster working through a continuous cycle of school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

8000+

Schools to date

We work with Primary, Secondary, Special and Faith Schools as well as Academies and LA funded schools.

143

Clusters

We work with formal clusters of TSAs and MATs as well as informal clusters of schools.

1,0000+

School leaders trained and supported

We have supported Senior Leaders, Middle Leaders and Subject Leaders.

The role and impact of peer review in a self-improving system

Through our work with SPP, we have seen that well designed, well managed, rigorous peer review that involves senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers is one of the most valuable and impactful activities that schools in a mature, sector-led system can undertake.

Adopting this approach helps to build a culture of trust-based accountability, backed up by a focus on tangible improvement, and a commitment to school-to-school support. Michael Fullan and Steve Munby, in writing about the emergence of a new 'middle tier' in education, note that one of the critical success factors for effective, system-wide school collaboration is: 'a commitment to, and capacity for, effective peer review which forms the engine that drives improvement'¹

Peer review done well should ensure that no school is isolated; it should enable schools to systematically review and address weakness and to share effective practice within and between schools. Because the most effective peer review is embedded into a process of support and improvement, it produces the data and evidence on which effective school-to-school support can be provided.

'Peer review provides a backbone for the school improvement cycle...it is well organised and trusted by all stakeholders.'

Headteacher, Centurion partnership

What impact are we seeing?

We are developing a strong emerging evidence base of the impact of engaging with peer review; schools are reporting improved outcomes for pupils as a result of engaging in peer review. Recently, we conducted an analysis of Ofsted performance for schools engaged in SPP for at least one year. We found that schools are;

Improving against their baseline Ofsted grades upon joining the programme;

SPP schools are significantly more likely to improve by one or more grades in inspection than the national average (67% vs 61.8%).

Why engage with peer review?

Peer review cannot be imposed on a group of schools. It has to come about as a result of their deep desire to be responsible for their own improvement and to be committed to putting in the time required to achieve this. Through SPP, several schools that have an 'outstanding' Ofsted judgment have wanted to engage in peer review because they worry about complacency; they want to encourage more innovation, they want to keep an eye on risk and want to go beyond what Ofsted see as the core features of effective schools. Others engage in peer review because they know that gaining another perspective on their own school's performance from a trusted peer will shine a light on areas they may not be aware of, or – as is more frequently the case – are aware of but have not had the time or means to address.

'Our experience of peer review as a collaboration has been extremely powerful. It has been a great privilege to have unlimited access in each other's classrooms and we have been able to shine a light into all aspects of our schools.'

Helen Barker, head of Kyra Teaching School, Lincolnshire

'It [peer review], was part of my evidence base for our recent inspection and it impacted on the judgement, particularly in relation to leadership and management.'

Headteacher, SPP school

¹Inside out and downside-up: how leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems: Munby, S and Fullan, M, Feb 2016

Creating the right conditions for effective peer review

In our experience to date, a robust framework such as SPP is instrumental in the long-term success of peer review as it formalises the practice and embeds it into school life. We have found that impactful peer review cannot happen without the right leadership skills and mindset to lead it. As David Hargreaves observes² peer review in mature collaboration requires school leaders to develop the skills of analytic investigator and skilled coach if the school system is to be truly self-improving. He goes on to note that, 'Peer challenge is possible if sufficient social capital (mutual trust, transparency and reciprocity) and collective moral purpose has developed between the partners.'

SPP is deliberately designed to support this by:

- Building the technical skills of peer review and school improvement so all members of a cluster can engage in regular scrutiny of each other's practice, gather and analyse evidence, give and receive feedback, and both provide and accept effective and focused improvement support
- Developing a culture characterised by a commitment by everyone in the cluster to continuous improvement in a climate of openness, trust and honesty, and a willingness to hold each other to account for agreed outcomes. Mature clusters are agreeing one or two cluster priorities as a result of peer review, setting agreed outcomes and holding each other to account for them

'SPP is driving change in our schools at the moment and is the backbone of our planning for next year. It provides good accountability for the school and is getting us to think more broadly raising the bar.'

Mark Precious, headteacher, Old Basford Primary School

The SPP framework, which was co-constructed with clusters of schools, is clear about the conditions under which peer review is most effective. This means:

- articulating the purpose of the peer review,
- taking account of the culture in which it can thrive
- identifying the leadership that's required to ensure it is rigorous and robust,
- developing the skills needed to both review, and be reviewed,
- ensuring follow-up action to secure a change in practice that will lead to better outcomes.

By adopting the model, schools say they gain the 'legitimacy' to have conversations about what needs to improve in each other's schools as well as celebrate effective practice. Effective peer review is not a cosy chat, it is a professionally demanding process and, to be effective, requires a planned and managed approach.

'Peer review provides the legitimacy and permission to have those conversations about improvement you know have been needed for some time, but never quite found the right moment to have them – in a context of support and trust.'

**Liz Robinson, headteacher,
Surrey Square Primary School, London**

'We have developed a language of challenge, helping to hold ourselves collectively to account for subsequent actions. We have found new ways of engaging with staff at every level so there are more people asking, "how can this part of school life improve?"'

Heidi Shewel-Cooper, partnership manager and improvement champion, Primary 6 Partnership, Nottingham

²Hargreaves, A Self-improving School System: Towards maturity. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership, 2012

The SPP model in action

Our structured approach to peer review is underpinned by a rigorous 3-stage cycle of continuous improvement. Three phases of training and support mean clusters can embed the practice at every level in their schools.

Stage 1: self-review

Effective peer review starts with how well the school knows itself. As it is led by the school being reviewed, a consistent approach to this first phase is essential. The framework, based on enquiry questions, supports schools in carrying out robust self-review to help inform the focus of the peer review.

Stage 2: peer review

The most effective peer reviews have an agreed focus. An initial conversation between the lead reviewer and the reviewed school is necessary to agree this focus, which is defined by the school and tested by the review team. The role of the team is to make sure that this agreed focus is based on evidence of what needs to improve and the outcome is going to be of most benefit to the school. It is in this initial conversation that the evidence to be collected in the peer review will be agreed.

The peer reviewers are in the school for one to two days to enquire into the areas agreed by the school. Our experience is that peer reviewers working as a

team or trio work best where they can triangulate evidence and jointly analyse their findings. They are not there to pass judgement but to seek evidence and agree findings that are then shared with the school. As peer review is also a professional development opportunity, we encourage a middle or senior leader in the school to take the opportunity to shadow the review team and give them feedback at the end of the process.

Immediate feedback is important, as is coming to a shared agreement on what needs to improve. For this reason, the peer review ends with a feedback conversation where the evidence is shared and initial findings agreed.

Stage 3: follow up workshop and school-to-school support

If peer review is going to be a vehicle for ongoing improvement in school systems, then it must go further than the review itself. Our experience shows that where the outcomes are owned by the staff, the long-term and sustainable impact is greater. The SPP model includes a post-review improvement workshop that takes place no more than two weeks after the review. For most schools this takes place in a staff meeting and, using a range of facilitation tools, is designed to get to the root cause of issues, agree actions and broker any necessary support from other schools in the cluster.

Peer review – the future

There is a powerful 'drumbeat' underpinning peer review. It is not episodic, something that's done and ticked off on an annual calendar. It is fundamentally a way of being for groups of schools that will change the way they work together.

As the school system becomes more mature, it will gradually become more effective at the core functions of review, intervention and improvement. As schools become more autonomous and more accountable, peer review creates a climate and a culture where connected autonomy and trust-based accountability can grow. Schools engaged in SPP are now increasingly extending the practice to middle leaders and teachers within and between schools, so that the cycle of collaborative improvement is embedded at every level.

However, peer review could just as easily become something else. It could become cosy chats in each other's offices. It could become a model that isn't reciprocal but 'done to' schools. It could become one where the conversations that need to happen don't happen because it's hard. It could become one where we review but don't improve each other's schools. It is up to us.

As peer review becomes an established practice, there are other risks that need to be addressed:

- Competing priorities can distract schools and clusters from the relentless focus on the agreed peer review improvement priorities.

- Just as schools can be isolated, so too can clusters. The SPP peer review model is supporting and brokering cluster to cluster, MAT to MAT and TSA to TSA peer review to reduce isolation and increase learning at 'middle tier' level.
- Peer review needs to be fully integrated with national and local accountability systems.

Our view is that, done robustly and rigorously, it forms the backbone of accountability systems at local, regional and national level.

Conclusion

We believe – and the case studies and testimonials in this report bear this out - that there is a growing number of leaders prepared to invest in reciprocal peer review because they believe it's the right thing to do and it gets results. They want to 'reclaim' what it means to be a great school, and to have the necessary conversations with each other about what needs to improve.

Above all, the leaders we have had the privilege to work with, some of whom are featured in this report, know that peer review makes a reality of 'collective moral purpose.' They model this through being willing to hold themselves and each other to account for improvement, through being ready to make their best practice available to each other across the cluster and through their willingness to tackle issues of collective importance that affect the greatest number of children and young people.

Case study 1

Impact of peer review on pupil outcomes, Centurion Partnership, Lincolnshire



Ian Tyas, headteacher, Ingham Primary School

The Centurion Partnership is a group of 7 small primary schools based in Lincolnshire who had worked collaboratively for many years, and were heavily involved with the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) from its pilot year.

By engaging in peer review, the partnership has seen measurable improvements in key areas of development. In one of the schools, work on spelling – identified in the peer review – led to a rise in standardised spelling scores from 62.2% with a standardised score above 100 to 90.4% by the end of the year. In another school where there was a focus on mathematics standards, these have improved over the two-year period since the first review from below national average to above national average.

“The first year especially had a huge impact here, shifting us from a group who had worked together loosely arranging events such as sports competitions and music festivals to a far deeper relationship based on a clear moral purpose to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools so that every child’s school experience is excellent. This shift has had a dramatic impact on our own meetings as headteachers and they have become much more about leadership and pedagogy, and importantly about how we can support each other in our own school’s journey.”

Headteacher, Centurion partnership

Case study 2

Peer review as a driver for culture change, Kyra Teaching School Alliance, Lincolnshire



Marie-Claire Bretherton, Leader of Kyra Teaching School Alliance

Kyra Teaching School Alliance, based at Lincoln Mount Street Academy in Lincolnshire, began in 2012 as a partnership of seven schools. Since then, it has grown to be a large strategic force for school improvement in Lincolnshire and now includes over 50 schools.

Peer review within the alliance emerged in response to the question of how to build deeper partnerships that directly impacted on the quality of education each school could provide.

The aim was to build a network of improvement partnerships that moved beyond transactional interactions between schools, and into transformational interactions.

As a result of the working together on peer review, they observed a number of positive outcomes:

- a deeper commitment to each other's improvement
- an agreed mechanism for challenging one another to be even more ambitious for children
- the creation of an authorising environment where the focus is on giving and receiving support for improvement
- examples of success systematically captured and shared by leaders.

"As our partnership has deepened in maturity we've learnt lots of lessons and reviewed our methods and one of the reflections from the first year was about how we follow through that sense of responsibility for each other's schools. We've now built in a stronger mechanism for accountability, for checking back and seeing how it's going."

Headteacher, Kyra Teaching School Alliance

Case study 3

Improving mathematics provision across the school, Elliot Foundation (MAT)



Karl Rogerson, principal, Billesley Primary School

Billesley Primary School in Birmingham is part of the Elliot Foundation of schools, based in the West Midlands.

Having completed the first phase, self-review, we knew that we wanted our peer review to focus on our mathematics provision from nursery up to Year 6. The peer review findings highlighted that the quality of mathematics provision across the school was inconsistent; we had some highly effective practice and some less effective. We were also able to see that the structure of lessons was inconsistent and did not always provide adequate time for teacher modelling and assessment for learning. The review also highlighted a central question: how can we use information/data/assessment to better meet the needs of all learners?

We put together an action plan following the peer review which included training on lesson structure and multiple, whole-school inset days focusing on developing teachers' curriculum knowledge, reasoning skills, questioning, planning and assessment.

The impact of these actions to date on our mathematics provision has been that 90% of lessons that were graded are good or better and 35% are outstanding. We also found that children were receiving a more 'personalised' maths education with modelling and questioning being identified as a strength, an improvement made since the review, and an identified action in the post-review workshop.

Having the opportunity to ask key questions of colleagues in other schools and sharing the good practice with other teachers across the cluster has been excellent professional development. We are always looking for ways to develop our leaders and this process has been a real positive.

Case study 4

Reviewing the teaching and learning of reading to impact on improved outcomes, Focus Trust MAT

Nadia Sweryt-Hannam, Principal, Birstall Primary Academy

Lisa Needham, Executive Principal, Roundthorn Primary Academy

Andrew Ross, Principal, Rudheath Primary Academy



Birstall, Roundthorn and Rudheath are all primary academies within Focus Trust, a charitable multi-academy trust based in the North West of England. The demographics of the schools are very different but all three schools are deemed 'good' by either Ofsted or Focus Trust.

Following an analysis of pupil outcomes in each of our academies it was decided that the teaching and learning of reading was the area that we would focus our peer review on.

As a result of the improvement champion workshop, bespoke CPD has been organised between staff. There has been a significant impact on all learners (staff and children) within school. Guided reading has been under development and all schools are now more consistent across in their approach and activities.

We agreed that the peer review had to work for our schools and that the peer review supported the schools' self-evaluation. Questions were asked that had not been considered (or that had been avoided) before in a very challenging way. Although some of the information revealed was not what we wanted to hear it was shared in a constructive way and we felt positive about ways to move forward.

Staff within the schools felt involved in a more collective process. As it was a peer leading the review/workshop, rather than the Trust, it was seen to be less judgemental and more a supportive and developmental process. Despite it appearing less judgemental to the staff, the professional dialogue challenged the self-review process within each school.

Being part of SPP has given us a structure to ensure that peer review has greater impact on school improvement through more rigorous self-review and effective school-to-school support.

WHO CAN JOIN?

Groups of schools: over 140 formal (TSAs & MATs) and informal clusters have already engaged with the programme.

Local systems: a number of local authorities or equivalent sector-led bodies – including Essex LA and the Birmingham Education Partnership – have engaged with SPP and our wider strategic support in order to support sustainable sector-led improvement across their local system.

WHO ARE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT TRUST?

At Education Development Trust, we transform lives by improving education around the world. Our specialist knowledge means we design and deliver effective, sustainable education solutions tailored to the local context. As a not-for-profit organisation, we invest annually in our programme of research because it matters to us that teachers benefit from the latest best practice.

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