Colchester Schools Consortium

Peer Review Case Study

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Context and Structure of the Partnership

The Colchester School's Consortium (referred to in this case study as 'the cluster') is a group of 15 schools, in and around Colchester, that have worked together with Teaching and Learning as a specific focus for more than 16 years. The cluster is comprised of 2 junior schools, 3 infant schools, 6 one form primary schools, and 4 larger primary schools (2 form and more.) One of the schools includes a specialist education provision unit. Approximately 3500 pupils are served by these 15 schools. The cluster is structured into 3 quads and 1 triad (prior to this year; all triads and 1 quad), with a lead Headteacher from each quad/triad reporting to a steering group that is led by the Chair and Vice Chair, with some administration support. The School Led Improvement Strategy and Peer Review for this cluster are closely linked. The cluster has a memorandum of understanding that sets out the manner in which the cluster works, the expectations of sharing information and supporting each other and also the protocols of joint working.

Identification of Key Issues and Development of Peer Review

The cluster utilises the 2016 'Effective Cluster Diagnostic' developed by the Educational Development Trust to determine umbrella foci as a method of measuring and expanding our capacity for effective joint leadership. This document has since been adapted by Essex LA to form the core of its School Led Improvement Strategy as 'The Partnership Evaluation and Development Tool'. Each quad/triad uses the cluster's agreed yearly aims as the driver for specific quad-related targets which then are taken onwards for specific actions within a quad/triad action plan. As an illustration, that process can be seen below:

In 2015-16, the aims were:
- To work collaboratively across all phases of education to improve outcomes for children;
- To provide a programme of continuing professional development designed to meet specific needs;
- To provide mutual professional and emotional support for colleagues;

In 2016-17, the aims were:
- Leaders within the consortium have an agreed plan for spreading the culture of collaborative improvement using common practice;
- A shared schedule of peer reviews leads to follow-up support from self and peer evaluation;
- Data is analysed regularly at cluster and triad level to identify areas of concern, strength and to evidence improvement;

In 2017-18, the aims are:
- Effective practice will be validated, celebrated and shared to develop still further a culture of collaborative self-improvement;

- A shared schedule of peer reviews leads to follow-up support from self and peer evaluation;
- Assessment and pupil outcomes are analysed regularly at cluster and quad level to identify areas of concern, strength and to evidence improvement;
- The impact of partnership is clearly evidenced and verified by an external party (this would be by utilising a Standards and Excellence Partner, who is currently allocated to our quadrant from Essex.

As a cluster, over a period of time, we developed a collaborative sharing ethos between all schools where Headteachers and Senior Leaders could feel enough trust to ask colleagues for support with: data, teaching methodologies and school to school support (including building peer review). This case study addresses September 2016 – March 2018 as the aims, methods and structure of the cluster have changed. In July of 2016, ready for the new academic year, the cluster undertook a self-assessment against our agreed outcomes and decided that peer review was an imperative development point; to improve rigour and promote development between triads (the structure at the time) that we built through training the cluster received on 'partners for progress'. This training allowed the cluster to reform into triads/quads where each head was trained as a coach to help build supportive mini-networks within the cluster as a whole (much like London Challenge Partners in structure, if not funding.)

In 2016 the cluster received training for Peer Review from EDT for 4 of the 15 headteachers and that training was cascaded to fellow Headteachers. 2 Improvement champions were trained; deputy heads of 2 schools within the cluster. Peer Review was set in that year as an improvement aim for the whole cluster, as was the aim to collate and share data outcomes as the 2016 data-set was the product of a landmark change. All specific actions undertaken by each quad/triad would be evidenced through peer review and open and honest conversations – minuted onto the quad's action plans.

2016 Peer Review Trial

Between September 2016 and March 2017, 2 of the (then) triads undertook peer reviews to trial the process and feedback to the cluster the outcomes and how effective the process had been.

Actions:

- Triad 1 took specific improvement points from each school and structured peer review visits based on those improvement points. As a result of this, each teacher was released to carry out a lesson study to improve a lesson jointly, based on the outcomes of the peer review linked to the individual schools' improvement point. In the summer term, a follow up Peer Review was carried out to provide a narrative about the changes and improvements from the original review.
- Triad 2 chose a single joint focus; Mastery Teaching and Learning seen through different aspects of the school. 1 school it was Girls' progress at KS2, for the other school it was progress in reading – particularly boys. Each Headteacher invited a peer review where the other Headteachers provided a narrative of elements of where mastery (or what was perceived to be such – this was 2016, where little had come from the DfE or OFSTED at the time) was found and where there was capacity to improve. This triad chose to focus on staff development around the outcomes

noted and a series of moderations and staff meetings occurred that pooled training and work sampling to develop mastery teaching in Maths.

Outcomes:

- o The first triad's trial peer reviews were supportive; each Headteacher had a welcoming ethos and open-door feel for the reviewers to move around and scrutinise the school. The reviews looked at a broad work sample, pupil perceptions, the landscape of data in end of key stage outcomes and any trends year on year within each keystage. The review reports were easy to read, concise and formulated of simply produced 'things to follow up' thoughts. Staff jointly working built a familiarity between the 3 schools and a lot of cross pollination of ideas occurred. Areas to note from this review cycle: the reviews were friendly and staff felt part of the process; heads were open and sharing; narrative contextual impact was reported from the Headteachers but no measureable outcomes in terms of data were achieved in this cycle. However, this triad's peer review trial and the reviews themselves were received positively by the cluster as a whole and discussion about how to proceed became a priority of the cluster as a result.
- o The second triad's peer reviews took a different approach. Like the first triad, these schools had an 'open door' ethos and challenge was welcomed. The reviews focussed on a drill-down aspect of each school. For the focus on girls' progress, work scrutiny and pupil perception were the main tools with the feedback given to the head that gender-questions and teaching styles were to be monitored as possible threads to explore. For the focus on reading – reading resources, pupil perception and SLT views were explored. The heads had extreme rigour on data mining and interpretation of data trends to develop factors to explore. Lessons were not observed as part of this review process. Staff engagement with the mastery aspects of teaching and learning in Maths had extremely good impact as 2/3 schools were subsequently inspected by OFSTED and any questions about Mastery and pupil challenge were shown as highlights in those reports.

What was learned from the trial:

Upon feedback to the wider cluster, several key points were identified to ensure that a roll-out of peer review to the cluster. There points were a matter of debate amongst the Headteachers. These have been recorded below as questions that were asked and the agreed way forward in italic, with the reasons why as discussed.

- o Should there be a set format for peer reviews so each of the 4 groups (3 quads, 1 triad) has consistency? *A format for peer review was put forward but each quad/triad felt they would want to develop their own style of narrative. Broad headings were agreed to write each review on.*
- o What data is useful to review in a peer review – historical end of key stage data or year on year data (with different assessment systems making year group data hard to compare). *Again, a consensus was hard to come to. The key priorities of each quad/triad would be reflected in the data used. There was a consensus as to looking at vulnerable groups (disadvantaged, SEND, gender, mobility, EAL) as this was a common thread for all schools, particularly those expecting OFSTED visits. Historical End of Key Stage data was used as a marker but year on year data was seen as most*

useful, therefore current EYFS entry, Year 5 and 6 or Year 2 data was expected to be recorded and scrutinised.

- o Do we use Improvement Champions and if so, how do we use them? *Although these Champions were trained, there seemed to be a wealth of experts and strengths within each quad/triad to lead on improvements and be familiar faces and so it was felt that Improvement Champions would not be utilised. Staff meetings within each school or, as seen through the quad/triad action plans follow up any points of improve or areas where questions were raised. Future actions are agreed at peer review based either upon what was observed or on the discussion with the Host Headteacher. Either way all outcomes are recorded so that the reviewers, when they return for a follow up, can follow the lines of enquiry from the host Headteacher but also review change of some of the practice seen in the first review.*
- o What should reviewers do if they see practice that would be unethical, unsafe or needing serious attention? *A peer review protocol would need writing: this would make explicit what reviewers were there or not there to do and what feedback or focus would be used.*
- o Does this process require 'rigour'? If so, how rigorous should it be? *The overriding question asked was 'so what': if improvement was not made, non-engagement occurred or simple diary clashing meant little was accomplished – what would the outcome be?*

With this discussion in mind, the chair was given the task of writing a peer review protocol. Maggie Farrar (Educational Development Trust) provided links to several skeleton protocols and a draft protocol was written that included processes for immediate notification of the head if concerns were raised (safeguarding or teaching practice). This protocol was shared with the cluster and the decision was reached not to adopt a one size fits all protocol but to allow each triad to adapt it to suit their working practice; each protocol would be agreed by the steering group. In order to facilitate and prompt engagement, each quad/triad was tasked with writing a funding bid to the cluster to fund an improvement focus of the quad/triad's choice. If there was non-engagement or lack of action then funding could be withheld by the cluster.

2017-18 Peer Reviews – Cluster Wide

Before the first steering group meeting in September of 2017, each quad had agreed on and set: a peer review protocol, an action plan based on outcomes from the previous year, set under the cluster's 4 development headings for 2017, booked peer reviews for the first half term with agreed foci from each school and written a bid for school improvement (funded by the cluster) linked to their action plan. The steering group would ratify and provide rigorous challenge to the bids and action plans, which would, in turn reflect a baseline landscape for peer reviews to narrate or evidence improvement. The actions below were agreed under the cluster umbrella target of:

- Assessment and pupil outcomes are analysed regularly at cluster and quad level to identify areas of concern, strength and to evidence improvement;

And all peer reviews, bids and data sets were to be shared with all Headteachers within the cluster as part of the cluster target of:

- Effective practice will be validated, celebrated and shared to develop still further a culture of collaborative self-improvement;

Triad 1:

Focus – To reduce the number of pupils who are attaining below age related expectations across the three schools in writing.

Reflective outcomes forming part of peer review:
  a. Do pupils know their next steps in writing?
  b. Do pupils know what makes a good writer (composition not transcription skills)
  c. Are perceived weaknesses the real reason behind pupils not achieving expectations (home environment barriers, attitude etc…)

Initial peer review findings:

The peer review consisted of: data scrutiny, book scrutiny (last year and this year's books), a climate walk, pupil perception, staff perception (teachers, HLTA, SENCO and English lead). Key factors of the school's strengths were made clear and any evidence that raised questions was communicated back as an element to follow up. During the peer review, subsidiary points were raised as strengths of the school (such as marking etc) that may have an impact on the main outcome being investigated. Questions were raised and recorded at the end of the peer review for a follow up peer review in the summer term.

Quad 2:

Focus – To improve outcomes for EYFS children so that EYFS provision and outcomes are equitable across the 3 schools with foundation pupils (inc nursery)

Reflective outcomes forming part of peer review:
  a. Undertake independent review of practice in EYFS inc peer review.
  b. Develop a sustainable model for improvement across all EYFS provision in the quad.
  c. Undertake joint moderation to ensure provision and assessment are linked.

Initial Peer Review Findings:

The peer reviews undertaken (not all completed at time of writing) are very teaching and learning based. They assume that the Headteachers have identified key lines to improve through the data and thus have not included a drill-down data analysis but devote the majority of the time to classroom observation, talking to children and scrutiny of work and environment. Very challenging observations, suggestions for improvement and questions to aid further development are recorded giving the peer review write-up a feeling of rigour and professional expertise/support.

Quad 3:

Focus – To increase the proportion of pupils assessed as 'at greater depth' at the end of KS1 and 2.

Reflective outcomes forming part of peer review:

a. Is there a joint understanding between schools, staff and leaders of what 'greater depth' and 'mastery' is?
b. Is assessment of greater depth learning consistent across the school and is assessment accurate; either masking or not picking up mastery of maths from the pupils?
c. Leaders to gather evidence of what mastery and greater depth learning looks like.

Initial Peer Review Findings:

The peer review of this quad was reflected in a group desktop data analysis (pupils or staff were not spoken to, nor lessons observed). A very comprehensive and detailed subject-level by vulnerable group comparison and scrutiny was recorded. Each of the Headteachers shared potential reasons for dips in outcomes and explanations for data were recorded and actions arising were further recorded.

Quad 4:

Focus – To raise standards in reading in all years by changing guided reading into a directly-taught model.

Reflective outcomes forming part of peer review:
a. To develop and implement the DERIC whole class reading teaching method across all schools. (Decode, Explain, Reason, Interpret, Choice)
b. Do pupils' attitudes to reading and their skill sets in response to comprehension improve through the year?
c. To develop a more robust evidence base of reading to ensure assessment is accurate and reflects pupils' true ability.

Initial Peer Review Findings:

The peer review records the context of each school; processes, pupil demographic and current challenges. Data is fully interrogated with a drill down question set reflecting the data landscape across the schools. Lesson drop-in observations were undertaken with work scrutiny and pupil perceptions during the lesson visits. The peer reviews record what was seen on one side of the page and any questions, strengths or things of note on the opposite side to reflect "X was seen, therefore the impact was Y" style of statements that were evidence based. This peer review also made clear any safeguarding issues or strengths.

Reflections of what was learned so far during the peer review process

Some lines of enquiry arose as a result of the steering group and headteachers' reflective consideration of the peer review process so far.

- An ingrained skill of the majority of Headteachers is to be able to make a judgement and also provide suggestions for improvement; part of the peer review process' power in the training was that, similar to coaching, improvements could come from within the host school's leadership or staff to improve themselves. The system of improvement champions (as per the peer review training) was adapted so that strong practice or leadership within a quad/triad could be utilised so that cross-school, trusted, leadership could develop: this built staff relationships. In a smaller cluster, the improvement champions process would possibly work, but across a

larger cluster, this needed down-sizing to make it more 'personal' to each quad/triad. Human nature being what it is, reviewers found that they could ask questions based on evidence seen but often host Headteachers would ask for examples and suggestions and so there are elements of mentoring coming through in reviews as well as coaching. In the main, feedback has been that this is welcome as long as the host school asks for advice or guidance in this manner and that the 'suggestions' are not given to mould practice to fit that of another school as part of a judgement.

- The use of evidence was very strong within peer reviews, often there were times where evidence contradicted the viewpoint of a host Headteacher. This was one of the more difficult aspects of peer review and where challenging conversations would happen.

- Linked to the point above, the level of rigour has been raised in discussion amongst cluster heads. Peer review is a supportive and open process but it is agreed that it should have a purpose. Finding the balance between following a given line of enquiry and needing to ask questions to tease out the background behind a piece of evidence seen at review was hard. Some reviewers stuck only to what they were asked to look at and others chose to take into account evidence that they saw during the review to create a holistic picture. This requires further discussion and agreement.

- The format of peer review is a vital aspect. The consistency of depth, breadth and language of the peer reviews differed greatly between the quads/triads. Where one review was around 5 pages and very detailed, others only had data and roughly bullet pointed questions. Whilst consistent between the smaller groups, across a cluster of schools that is large, there is variance of rigour and depth in the review across the cluster. We recommend having a set proforma and likewise this should be included within a peer review protocol. Likewise a smaller group of schools that work closely with each other is excellent for staff and leadership development but quads in particular found it difficult to carry out peer reviews in a short time to feedback to a steering or central group due to the need to release Headteachers to carry out reviews. This also impacts on consistency.

- Even with the intention of being open, honest, supportive and agreeing foci and the methods with which to proceed, the peer review process was still challenging to some heads and senior leaders. This may have been the result of too much 'rigour' by some reviewers or the expectation of the process not being clear to heads when in discussion in heads meetings for the cluster.

What was the Impact?

For the Partnership as a whole by undertaking peer review:

As the cluster works on 2 levels: the macro (steering group and Headteacher meetings and review) and micro level (quad/triad work) the process of peer review has had significant impact. The quad/triad structure has meant that leaders and teachers of each school has a familiarity and working relationship with teachers outside their own environment. That reviewing Headteachers are not seen as strangers but as equal, supporting colleagues is also a further strengthening aspect of peer review within this structure. Furthermore, at the quad/triad level is the small-cluster feeling: peer review is shared by each school and much more personal and thus trust is a more endemic and stable basis for helping to make suggestions, raise questions or promote strength. The cluster is a larger cluster of schools

and having split into smaller groups facilitates closer personal working. In fact, evidenced in several OFSTED reports, the quad/triad work provided significant challenge and support that showed improvements in pupil outcomes through increased learning attitudes.

There is significant trust amongst Headteachers at the cluster level in sharing data, challenges and areas where they need support. Like most in the teaching profession, there is a reluctance to promote 'good practice' due to modesty and sometimes capacity to share that practice but the peer review process highlights pockets of good practice or good practitioners to the steering group and so different schools' strengths are known and mapped over the cluster. If challenged, the steering group and to a large extent the cluster heads as a whole, could speak knowledgably about any school within the cluster based on the feedback that has been shared out of peer review.

For individual school leaders:

Across each of the quads/triads, leaders form part of the actions that will increase effectiveness/pupil outcomes. In each of the peer reviews undertaken, senior leaders across the smaller groups have become the 'improvement champions' for the focus of the action plan and improvement bid that forms part of the school led improvement strategy; this is an adaptation of the EDT 'champions model' to grow and utilise local leaders within each quad/triad. Deputy Headteachers have a separate forum within the cluster as a whole where they also report back on the impact of peer review and triad/quad working. Further training could be provided to make these leaders 'champions' but with the direction of reviewing Headteachers, funding from the cluster and in particular support and scrutiny of their outcomes across the quad/triad and then the steering group for the cluster; this process is currently supportive and rigour is applied by the leadership of a Headteacher from the cluster headteacher's steering group to help facilitate the meetings.

On the staff of the process:

Staff impact has been the most variable currently. Where Headteachers and, to an extent, other senior leaders have a commonality of experience, staff in the cluster have a more wide ranging experience. Working in quads/triads has facilitated staff in most schools to develop a strong working relationship; this relationship is, however, varied. In one triad, staff have worked to perform lesson studies and joint lesson observations over time (linked to the outcomes of peer reviews) and so they know colleagues and their partner schools' processes very well and in so doing informing a cross pollination of ideas that provide strong self-improvement ethos. In other groups, staff are familiar with each other and their systems due to moderations, joint staff training. In some groups the staff may only be aware of the Headteacher of other schools which, even if the reason behind peer reviewing is well communicated, can lead to a feeling of being 'done to'. Communication here is the key and therefore consistency of message is the most pivotal aspect to peer review and all the follow-up actions.

On school improvement/outcomes of peer review:

Each school links their school improvement plans to the cluster improvement plan. This is ensured to be 'beyond lip service' by allowing quads/triads the flexibility to discuss the previous year's outcomes and feed that back into the steering group who then find common improvement aims from the cluster diagnostic (that allows the cluster to measure

effectiveness also). These aims then allow quads/triads to plan actions based on peer review outcomes and school needs so that objectives in school improvement plans match the cluster plans as a whole. Peer review then becomes an integral monitoring as well as support tool for the schools and steering group alike.

What is your partnership going to do next based on the learning/impact of the Peer Review?

- Through discussion with our School Effectiveness Partner, the historical data has suggested that some of the cluster's quads/triads have indicators of need that are centralised within 1 or 2 of the groups; this indicates that this year the cluster has a structure where schools with 'need' are supporting each other where schools with strengths are supporting each other: this is not effective. Therefore we have realigned our quads/triads to spread support based on need – this requires further work and also the steering group will need to address how to map and provide support between quads/triads rather than continually change the structure each year (for staff effective working and sustained impact.)
- A definitive protocol and format to record peer review will need to be created; again an external advisor will help with this as consistency and rigour must be maintained across the cluster in terms of the evidence base coming out of each review. The Headteachers themselves have the skills to have challenging yet supportive conversations but the consistency of feedback and evidence needs tightening. This may be due to the size of the cluster – smaller clusters may find agreeing a set format easier.
- Comparison of data sets relies on assessment systems that are aligned. Doing this across a large cluster of schools in the current landscape of assessment is hard beyond the statutory EYFS, KS1 and KS2 frameworks. The cluster needs to work on the commonality of language used, particularly around what is expected by 'greater depth'.
- Funding and revenue linked to School Led Improvement is key to implementing and supporting leaders with the outcomes of peer review. Sustainable support is key to driving forward improvement when peer review has allowed direction to be decided: no school can be left on its own as an island; peer review sits squarely within a multitude of techniques to ensure schools support each other to improve.
- We will return to our Peer Reviews in the Summer term to build upon the areas of improvement required – or highlighted – from the initial reviews. Further to this, through new heads joining the cluster, we will revisit the peer review training to ensure consistency in the practice moving into next year.