

Opinion

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FRANK NORRIS

Education and skills adviser,  
Northern Powerhouse Partnership

Only local and independent oversight can deliver inclusion

**Frank Norris makes the case for an independent middle tier of system leadership to coordinate local efforts to drive inclusion and improvement**

Various governments have been hesitant to grant greater control to local areas, such as through the mayors of the combined authorities. But there is growing recognition that this limits responses to what are predominantly local issues and challenges, and not least because it prevents a range of budget holders from merging their funding streams to tackle them more effectively.

These challenges are substantial and growing. They include SEND provision, attendance and wellbeing, as well as falling rolls in primary schools, improving the education estate and ensuring the local offer meets the needs of the community and employers.

New forms of area partnerships meet some of these challenges, perhaps encouraged by a pandemic response that proved the power of mutual support. Yet our highly centralised model hampers locally elected mayors' efforts to interact effectively with local authorities, MATS, teaching school hubs and individual schools. It also inhibits schools, who fear this will translate to yet more accountability

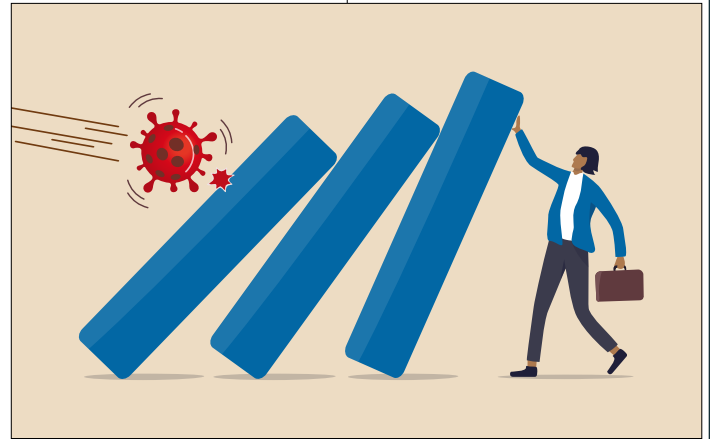
measures.

Professor Mel Ainscow recently reviewed the effectiveness of strategies developed to improve equity, arguing that teachers, especially those in senior positions, must see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children and young people, not just those in their own schools.

For schools, this means aligning their efforts with those of other local players around a coherent strategy. And for those who administer local systems, it means adjusting their priorities and practices in response to improvement efforts led from within their schools.

Ainscow's paper identifies a "middle tier" that exists in four higher-performing national school systems and lacking in England. All four have district-level structures that demonstrate that local coordination and accountability are effective levers for equity and excellence. Our system has untapped potential to improve itself through networking and collaboration, but a lack of a locally appointed education leader with a remit to drive school improvement for the benefit of all restricts its possible effectiveness.

In early July, the DfE published details of how it proposes to use existing structures, including the department's regions group



“ Our system has untapped potential to improve itself

under the leadership of the regional director, to focus on the "creation, consolidation and growth of academy trusts". Crucially, control will continue to rest with government-appointed officials.

Meanwhile, its trust quality descriptors are based on a narrow view of inclusion and do little to address the obvious tension between a school's interest and that of the community. Increased devolution could ease this tension. In fact, some areas appear to be ahead of others in this regard.

Some local authorities and forward-thinking schools and trusts have appointed "independent chairs" to oversee cross-school developments and to sustain focus on locally agreed priorities. Formalising this role in every local area could ensure that:

- system leaders across an area can identify what good practice looks like and who can lead on its development
- networking and collaboration put community interest over self-interest
- locally sourced data and evidence is shared fairly and transparently

- evaluations determine whether provision meets local need
- evidence – including statistical data and targeted inspection activity – is used to establish whether improvement is happening
- education is playing its role in driving economic regeneration and business development.

Finding the right people is not easy. It requires individuals with broad experience at a senior level, a level of political independence and an ability to speak openly to those with more power.

And appointments should be codified. Competitive interview for a fixed-term post, with regional mayors and school leaders making up the appointment panel and undertaking annual reviews, would be minimum expectations.

But these complications aside, the role of an independent chair of local partnerships has considerable merit and could play an important part in securing more local control and oversight – a key facet of delivering a more inclusive and equitable education system.