House of Commons
Education Committee

School Partnerships and Cooperation: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2013–14

Fourth Special Report of Session 2013–14

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The Education Committee

The Education Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and its associated public bodies.

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Alex Cunningham MP *(Labour, Stockton North)*
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Fourth Special Report

On 6 November 2013 we published our Fourth Report of Session 2013-14, *School Partnerships and Cooperation.*[1] The Government response was received on 6 January 2014 and is published as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Government response

Potential for school collaboration

Importance of mutual benefit

1. Properly handled, school collaboration offers benefits to all schools involved. The Government should continue to promote this message so as to reassure reluctant governing bodies and promote equality of esteem among all participants. (Paragraph 31)

The government will continue to promote school partnerships with a focus on the more structured and formal partnerships such as multi-academy trusts.

In order to help primary schools to convert as part of a multi-academy trust, the Department for Education (DfE) is offering a one-off grant of £25,000 per chain. We envisage that many groups will use this money to part-fund a business manager to work across the chain, or hire a part-time project manager to oversee their conversion.

We have seen that strong chains of three or more academies can help drive up standards and provide opportunities for increased collaborative working among schools. We expect all schools that are performing well and applying for academy status to partner a weaker school.

The Governors' Handbook promotes partnership working as a tool for helping governing bodies increase standards, achieve value for money and generate efficiencies. By pooling their funding, schools working in partnership can share staff, functions, facilities and technology across all the schools. The handbook sets out the various partnership models that academies and maintained schools can follow.

Competition and collaboration

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1   Education Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2013-14, School Partnerships and Cooperation, HC 269

2. We believe that while there are tensions between competition and collaboration, these are largely creative tensions. Collaboration between schools is growing in many forms within a competitive school system. (Paragraph 35)

We agree with the Committee that collaboration between schools is growing strongly, but the increase in the number of schools working collaboratively indicates that there is little tension between competition and collaboration.

The growth of academy chains highlights the important role that chains are playing in driving forward school improvement. Almost half of all approved academy sponsors are high-performing schools, and almost 350 converter academies are approved as sponsors or are in the process of becoming so.

The evidence shows that, rather than having a negative impact on a school's attainment levels, working with others improves a school's outcomes. Chapman's research for the National College on federations[2] showed that in this model both the weaker school and the strong supporting school see an increase in performance.

Joint working has a positive impact on a range of factors such as leadership, staff development and the opportunity for leaders to impact on the wider school system. All these work together, leading to an improvement in overall performance.

Evidence of impact

3. Although evidence on the impact of school partnerships seems positive, it would still benefit from robust evaluation, particularly aimed at identifying what works and why. Given the importance of a school-led improvement system to its vision, we recommend that the Government embed evaluation into further initiatives relating to school partnership and collect systematic evidence on 'what works'. (Paragraph 39)

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the positive impact of school partnerships. Multi-academy trusts are having a significant impact on partnership working as the number of academy chains has grown. We review a chain's performance on an on-going basis, by looking at their overall results, how individual academies are performing, and whether there are any financial issues which need to be addressed.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) has a long standing and robust body of evidence which has closely reviewed the range of approaches for school leadership and the impact of school partnerships, including what works and why. A series of practical guides and resources for school leaders are available on the NCTL website[3], in

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2   Chapman et al, (2011) A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes, National College.

3   http://education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/index (accessed November 2013)

addition to a number of reports evaluating the impact and maturity of school partnerships.[4]

Teaching schools are another key way of encouraging and enabling greater partnership and collaboration between schools and are based upon the success of school networks within the City Challenge areas. An evaluation of the teaching schools programme has been commissioned from the University of Nottingham, by NCTL, and will review the overall effectiveness of the teaching schools model and evaluate the impact of teaching schools on the schools and pupils in their alliances. The first interim report will be published early next year and the final report will follow in 2015.

Diversity and desirable features

Diversity of models

4. We believe that, in common with the Government's view of the education system, schools are best placed to identify the most effective ways to work with other schools, based on their particular history, ethos and challenges. Schools should be able to adopt models of partnership and co-operation that suit their needs within a legislative and policy framework that is as non-prescriptive as possible. (Paragraph 45)

5. We believe that school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration. (Paragraph 46)

We agree with the Committee's conclusions that schools are best placed to identify the most effective ways to work with other schools, based on local context and circumstance. We think that this is best achieved through multi-academy trusts, where there is a formal partnership with clear accountability. We also believe that weak schools should be required to join partnerships under the leadership of a strong sponsor.

The government's vision is for a self-improving, school-led system where schools and teachers are able to respond to local need through school-to-school support and collaboration. These principles form the basis of the teaching school model, where partnerships are formed through alliances and, in some cases, through more formalised networks. We will continue to explore whether there is a greater role for government in helping schools to identify and understand the characteristics of effective partnership and collaboration to support more school-to-school working.

Families of schools

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4   Hargreaves, D.H.: (2012) A Self-Improving School System: Towards Maturity, NCSL; (2012) A self-improving school system in international context, NCSL; (2011) Leading a self-improving school system, National College; (2010) Creating a self-improving school system, NCSL.

6. The Government's publication of similar schools data is a useful first step but much more needs to be done to make this an effective resource for schools. In particular, the data should highlight schools' strengths and weaknesses so that schools find it easier to form partnerships where both parties can challenge and be challenged to improve. We recommend that the DfE review the presentation of similar schools data in consultation with schools in order to provide richer and more easily accessible information on possible partners. (Paragraph 50)

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgement of the usefulness of the similar schools data. We know that this is an important tool for schools and we want to ensure that schools have access to data that they can use to help create successful partnerships.

We have already reviewed the presentation of the similar schools data, taking into account feedback received since its introduction. In addition to grouping schools on the ability of their intake, we will introduce groupings of similar schools based on the proportion of their pupils eligible for free school meals.

The performance tables website enables schools to filter and sort by different characteristics, such as for pupils who have English as an additional language. This will make it possible to identify other schools with similar pupil characteristics, so that best practice can be shared by schools facing similar challenges.

7. It is regrettable that, in establishing the similar schools data system, the Department for Education did not adopt a model more like the original 'families of schools' and then use the familiar name to help achieve buy-in from schools. (Paragraph 51)

The Committee acknowledged the DfE's view that it would be confusing if we used the same name, but there were other reasons for not adopting the original families of schools methodology.

Contextual data and the contextual value added (CVA) measure were key features of the families of schools model. We dropped the CVA measure from 2011 because it was difficult for the public to understand and research showed it to be a less strong predictor of success than raw attainment measures. It also had the effect of expecting different levels of progress from different groups of pupils on the basis of their ethnic background or family circumstances, which we think is wrong in principle.

Geographical coherence

8. The preponderance of the evidence we received suggests that partnerships in which all members are located within close proximity are most likely to be effective. The DfE should bear in mind the significance of this when identifying sponsors for academies and should ensure that the advantages of geographical proximity are set

out in relevant guidance on school partnerships and cooperation more generally. (Paragraph 54)

We agree with the Committee's emphasis on the importance of geographical proximity and already take this into consideration when making decisions about the appropriateness of sponsors working with specific schools. We are currently exploring the benefits of geographical proximity in more depth, including using data to look at the relationship between having schools in clusters and sponsor performance, and whether there are any effects from having widely dispersed schools. We intend to share our findings with sponsors widely in the spring, including through updating relevant guidance on school partnerships and cooperation in order to point sponsors in the right direction.

9. We are concerned that the Government's definition of a "reasonable travelling distance" has not been sensibly applied to the similar schools tables. We recommend that the definition is altered to become "within an hour's drive" (ie 30 to 50 miles depending on location). (Paragraph 56)

10. We note that in rural and coastal areas the number of suitable partner schools within an hour's drive may be very limited. We recommend that the Government set out how the similar schools model applies to schools in rural and coastal areas and assess the applicability of the collaborative model to remote schools. (Paragraph 57)

Whilst an hour's drive would be ideal, to maximise the number of schools who have a better-performing similar school nearby we will keep the radius to 75 miles. Using the current criteria, 48% of secondary schools have a better-performing secondary school within 75 miles. If the radius was reduced to 50 miles only 38% of schools would have a better-performing secondary school nearby. We want to ensure that as many schools as possible are able to identify a better-performing school to work with.

In relation to schools in rural and coastal areas, where we are unable to find a better-performing school within the 75 mile radius, we have identified a better-performing school outside the radius, meaning that most schools are able to benefit from the model.

Incentivising partnerships

Ofsted

11. We agree with the Government that it would be incorrect and confusing for Ofsted to label outstanding schools differently according to their excellence in supporting other schools, when they deliver just as good levels of education to the pupils in their care. We strongly support Sir Michael Wilshaw's proposal for an excellent leadership award to be given to school leaders rather than schools, as the highest accolade available to headteachers and only for those who support underperforming schools in disadvantaged communities. (Paragraph 61)

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the important role undertaken by many school leaders in driving wider system leadership and striving to improve the educational outcomes not only for the pupils within their own schools, but for the pupils in neighbouring schools and beyond. The importance of high quality school leadership cannot be overstated. We recognise that those individuals undertaking system leadership roles are people-centred and motivated by a strong personal moral purpose with a willingness to collaborate in order to improve educational outcomes.[5]

The long-standing and successful National Leaders of Education (NLE) and National Support Schools (NSS) programmes provide national recognition for outstanding[6] school leaders and their staff who provide system leadership and support for schools in need. In addition, the Local Leaders of Education (LLE) programme provides national recognition for good[7] school leaders who provide coaching and mentoring support for other headteachers, but may also provide wider school support.

We are keen to avoid creating a proliferation of system leadership statuses. We will continue to explore whether there is more that the government can do to recognise excellent leadership for those who provide system leadership support for under-performing schools in disadvantaged communities.

School accountability measures

12. We regret that no one has yet devised a workable model of school accountability that incentivises schools to form partnerships, whilst preserving school level responsibility and retaining the impetus to maximise their pupils' performance. We see the potential of such an approach and encourage further efforts to generate an appropriate model. (Paragraph 63)

We hold individual schools to account, so that they can demonstrate the quality of their teaching and the breadth of their curriculum, and show how they are enabling every pupil to reach their full potential. Where a school is part of a multi-academy trust, the sponsor is responsible for the performance of all academies within the trust. The trust is accountable to the Secretary of State, and must explain any poor performance of the academies in the chain and put in place improvement measures where necessary.

Our accountability system helps us to identify those individual schools and sponsors that can, and must, do better. The development of academy chains and other forms of

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5   Harris and Chapman, (2002) Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances, NCSL.

6   Designated NLEs and NSSs are largely headteachers and schools rated as outstanding for overall effectiveness, and for leadership and management by Ofsted.Headteachers and schools are also eligible if they are rated good for overall effectiveness with outstanding for leadership and management if the school has been removed from Ofsted category, or if the school is serving an area of high social deprivation (% of children eligible for free school meals is above average).

7   Ofsted rating for overall effectiveness, but many headteachers who are rated as outstanding by Ofsted, may also be LLEs.

partnership working have grown substantially, so it is not clear that the current accountability framework creates any real barriers or disincentives.

Our reforms to the secondary school accountability system will introduce a fairer way of holding schools to account in the future. Secondary schools are currently accountable for the percentage of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades including in English and maths. This creates the perverse incentive for schools to focus on pupils near the C/D borderline at the expense of other pupils. From 2016, once our secondary accountability reforms are in place, the key accountability floor standard will be based on progress, and schools will be rewarded for the success of all their pupils.

Financial incentives

13. We believe that the Government should provide funding to help schools meet the costs associated with taking part in collaboration. We are concerned that the existing funding incentives are concentrated too narrowly on the academy sponsorship route. The Government should widen this funding to help meet the costs associated with formalising other partnerships. In particular, we recommend that the Government widen eligibility for the Primary Chains Grant to help schools cover the cost of forming federations, since many would benefit from working in partnership without leaving local authority control. (Paragraph 67)

There are no plans to widen the Primary Chains Grant to schools who are not moving to academy status, as we believe that the multi-academy trust model delivers increased freedoms for schools, leading to more benefits for pupils. To support more primary schools forming multi-academy trusts, we are extending the grant for small schools. Schools with fewer than 100 pupils will receive an additional £5,000 and those with between 100 and 210 pupils will receive £2,000.

The government is committed to supporting all schools who want to form partnerships. As part of the "Review of efficiency in the schools system", published in June, we proposed the reintroduction of small start-up grants to enable clusters of primary schools to take on a school business manager to provide support to the entire group. The grant would last for one year and contribute towards the initial recruitment costs, but we would then expect the role to become self-sustaining as the schools start to reap the benefits of that expertise. The grant will encourage schools and academies to work together. We will make further announcements about this in due course.

Funding for Teaching Schools

14. We recognise the challenges posed by the nature of funding for Teaching Schools but the take-up rate of the Teaching School Programme suggests that concern about the limited period of funding has not deterred schools from participating. We believe that the DfE has adopted the right approach in providing funding only to

help with start up costs with the expectation that they become self-sustaining organisations thereafter. (Paragraph 70)

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the merits of the current approach for funding teaching schools. The government has announced a fifth year of funding for the teaching schools cohort, and over time it is envisaged that teaching schools will become self-sustaining. We will explore whether there is more that can be done to inform the development of sustainability strategies for teaching schools.

Independent State School partnerships

15. Independent schools and state schools have much they can do for and usefully learn from one another. We welcome the Government's steps to promote closer links between the independent and maintained education sectors, but consider that academy sponsorship is not always the right engagement model for such partnerships. We recommend that the Government re-introduce targeted seed corn funding to encourage the establishment of sustainable Independent State School Partnerships. (Paragraph 73)

Independent State School Partnership (ISSP) pump prime funding was withdrawn as a result of the government's tight fiscal position. However, we know that many of the larger partnerships continue to flourish after the funding ended. We continue to support the Ministerial Independent State School Partnership forum, which is an important way of promoting partnership working and collaboration between the sectors. The government looks to the forum for its expertise and commitment in school collaboration to raise educational attainment, narrow the achievement gap and widen opportunities for children and staff.

While the government is unable to put further seed corn funding into ISSPs, we are supportive of these initiatives and are looking at ways we can support ISSPs from the centre under the leadership of the ISSP forum.

The government is hosting an ISSP conference in January 2014, which will showcase the wealth of good initiatives around the country, and inspire and enthuse schools, both independent and state, to form new partnerships or strengthen existing ones. This will be supported by an initiative to pull together data on existing partnerships to form a database recording the pattern of existing ISSP activities. This can be used by schools as a matching database to establish what is going on and how they can join or expand existing partnerships.

There are other government initiatives which can also support ISSP activity. Where an independent school is designated as a teaching school, the teacher training it offers will support teacher development at surrounding state schools. Some independent schools also operate programmes whereby their senior staff take on the role of governors of neighbouring maintained schools. This has a two-way benefit as the schools benefit

from the skills and experience of those senior staff, but the staff also get valuable learning and development from the experience of setting and driving the strategic direction of the school. An increasing number of independent schools are now acting as academy sponsors, using their leadership and management expertise directly to raise standards in underperforming state schools.

Coordinating collaboration

The middle tier and the new role of local authorities

16. Local authorities still have a critical role to play in a school-led improvement system, in particular through creating an "enabling environment" within which collaboration can flourish. We welcome Ofsted inspection of local authorities' school improvement services which has acted to highlight the importance of this role. We also support the new system which is emerging with recognition that the expertise lies within schools but with local authorities as part of the picture. The role of local authorities is still evolving and some clarification of what is expected of them is needed. We recommend that the Government set out clearly the role of local authorities in helping to broker school-to-school partnerships and acting as champions of all parents and children, with particular reference to academies in their region. (Paragraph 80)

Local authorities have considerable flexibility as to how they fulfil their statutory responsibilities, to promote high standards in primary and secondary education, which are set out in section 13a of the Education Act 1996. Statutory guidance already sets out the local authority's role in relation to schools that are causing concern. Within a system of increasing school autonomy, it is important for local authorities to retain the local flexibility that they already have. In the consultation document on planned reductions to the Education Services Grant, due to be published in the new year, the government will clarify its expectations of local authorities in relation to school improvement alongside a revised Schools Causing Concern statutory guidance.

Strategic oversight

17. We recommend that the DfE and NCTL take steps to identify and designate system leaders, such as National Leaders of Education and Teaching Schools, in areas where they are currently lacking. This should be coupled with increased incentives for existing system leaders to work in the areas of greatest need. Coordination of system leadership may well be better achieved at a sub-regional or local level than at the national level and we recommend that DfE and NCTL explore such an approach. (Paragraph 83)

It is important to recognise that many system leaders travel outside of their immediate locality to provide support and this often means travel outside of a local authority

boundary or working with schools in other regions. We also know that some schools without access to teaching schools, NLEs and others may use other forms of school support through academy trusts and wider established arrangements. The issue of geographical coverage and access is, however, a significant focus for NCTL in considering the designation process of system leadership roles and in prioritising future recruitment drives in areas where there is unmet need. We will continue to explore what more can be done to ensure that there is sufficient coverage and access to school support for those areas in greatest need.

Within the government's vision for a school-led system, the ambition is for schools to work in partnership to respond to need on a local basis. Teaching schools are already responsible for the recruitment, designation, brokerage and deployment of Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) to meet priority areas within their own alliances and to increase the leadership capacity of middle and senior leaders in other schools. In continuing the move towards a school-led system, NCTL will explore how we can best devolve other system leadership roles to a local level.

The government has also announced a new Talented Leaders programme, which will match excellent headteachers with under-performing schools in parts of the country that struggle to attract top leadership talent. The programme is a positive offer to schools; we will not be requiring any school to participate. The key success measure of the scheme will be that sustainable improvement is seen in the school, supported by effective succession planning.

18. The Government should set out how organisations in the middle tier will be held to account for strategic oversight of partnership working in all schools and how they will ensure that gaps are not allowed to develop or remain unfilled, particularly in rural and coastal areas. (Paragraph 84)

Roles and responsibilities are already clearly set out and we do not intend to change them. The legislative requirements of local authorities in relation to the schools they maintain are set out in statutory guidance, and the powers of the Secretary of State to intervene in the case of failure by local authorities are already well established. We will consider any case of failure on an individual basis, and retain the Secretary of State's discretion. In addition, our consultation on the Education Services Grant will set out our expectations of local authorities in school improvement within a system of increasing school autonomy.

Information on the role of academy sponsors, chains, and sector leaders such as NLEs are all available on the DfE's web pages. Accountability for academy trusts, including multi-academy trusts, is through the funding agreement with the Secretary of State. Breach of that agreement can ultimately result in its termination. In future, accountability for academies will move to Regional School Commissioners to inject sector and professional expertise into the management of the system, providing the means by which the Secretary of State exercises his accountability on a more regionally-

informed basis. In addition, we will continue to increase the location and activity of accredited sector leaders.

Role of advisers

19. London Challenge and City Challenge, two of the most successful school improvement initiatives of recent years, both relied heavily on the use of expert advisers. We recommend that the Department for Education make an assessment of the quality and capacity to provide this expertise within a school-led improvement system and ensure that schools are aware of where they can access such advice. (Paragraph 87)

Challenge advisers identified need and brokered support for under-performing schools before tailoring an individual package of support. The cost of the support and services brokered by the advisers were directly managed and covered by the DfE. Ofsted[8] noted that in London, many of these advisers were NLEs or LLEs.

Within the context of a school-led system, the government has focused on building and extending this approach through a national network of teaching schools, NLEs and LLEs, who often provide brokerage and support services. Evidence shows that the schools providing this support benefit from the interaction, as well as those schools receiving support.[9] The government will continue to explore how we can devolve responsibility to the most effective level within a school-led system.

Academies and collaboration

Inspection of academy chains

20. We conclude that parents should be provided with information about the performance of academy chains, as well as individual schools. We recommend that Ofsted be provided with the powers it needs to inspect academy chains. (Paragraph 90)

Ofsted already have powers to inspect groups of academies, either because they themselves have an interest, or where the Secretary of State asks the Chief Inspector for advice. Giving Ofsted the power to inspect sponsor chains would not provide any information about the sponsors that the DfE does not already have.

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8   Ofsted, (2010) London Challenge

9   Hill, R. and Matthews, P.: (2010) Developing Leadership: National Support Schools, Ofsted; (2010) School leading Schools II, NCSL; (2008) Schools leading Schools, NCSL.

It is not appropriate to try to seek 'parity' with powers Ofsted already have to inspect local authorities, because academy chains and local authorities are very different bodies. Local authorities have a core of central statutory responsibilities that Ofsted can inspect, whereas academy chains have contractual obligations through their funding agreement, which are quite different. Academy chains will vary enormously in their structure and approach. It is unclear what chain functions Ofsted would be inspecting and what information they would hope to glean that could not be gained from inspecting individual academies. We are not convinced that there is additional value in a "top down" approach over and above existing powers to inspect groups of academies from the "bottom up". However, from the end of January 2014, parents will be able to use the performance tables website to find the individual schools linked to particular sponsors and to compare their performance.

Moving on from partnerships

21. We recommend that the procedures for schools to leave academy chains by mutual consent are formalised and published. The Government should consider modelling them on those already in place for federations. (Paragraph 92)

22. It appears logical that in a mature education market, schools should have the flexibility to move between partnerships where this is the right thing to do for their pupils. We recommend that the Government explain how a school consistently judged 'Outstanding' would be able to leave an academy chain where this is against the wishes of the chain management. (Paragraph 94)

From our experience to date, it is extremely rare for an academy to wish to leave a multi-academy trust. If an academy within a trust (with or without a sponsor) is rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted and wishes to leave the trust, it might be possible for them to exit by mutual consent. An agreement would need to be reached between the academy, the controlling trust board and the Secretary of State, in order to make new funding arrangements to allow the academy to stand alone, join another chain/multi-academy trust or become a sponsor of weaker schools.

We are not convinced of the benefit of allowing an academy to exit a chain without the consent of the trust board. There is a risk that allowing this would undermine the role of the multi-academy trust, creating a situation in which the trust is afraid to challenge an outstanding academy for fear the academy might leave. We are also mindful to avoid a situation in which academies that, with the support of the multi-academy trust, have achieved an "Outstanding" rating cannot sustain this level of performance once they lose the benefits of the support of their chain. Further, promoting a system in which an academy can join a multi-academy trust, benefit from its support and then leave does not create any incentive for strong multi-academy trusts to offer this support to other academies. If an academy has undergone a period of improvement, their role within their multi-academy trust will evolve from being the recipient of support to having a

role in supporting weaker schools and sharing good practice with other schools in the trust.

An academy wanting to leave a multi-academy trust would constitute a significant change to an open academy. We already specify and publish the process for how an academy can join a multi-academy trust (with the consent of the Secretary of State) and we will consider how we can reflect in guidance the process of leaving a multi-academy trust.

Monitoring converter academies

23. We recommend that the DfE urgently review its arrangements for monitoring the expectation that converter academies support another school and implement more effective processes as soon as possible. We recommend that such processes include surveys of the schools which were promised support on converter academies' applications forms, since this would give a more accurate picture of the support being provided. (Paragraph 97)

The DfE will launch a survey in January 2014, to run for four weeks, which will explore academies' support for other schools and their use of freedoms. We will have headline results within a couple of weeks of the survey closing and a full analysis by mid-March. The results of the survey will be used to inform any future arrangements. We do not support monitoring that would be burdensome but will continue to encourage converter academies to work in partnership, including through sponsorship and in multi-academy trusts.

24. We recommend that the Government ensure outstanding converter academies are able to support other schools in the ways they think will bring about the best results. Some schools will wish to support others through models other than that of sponsoring another academy and this should be positively and actively encouraged by the DfE. (Paragraph 98)

We agree that converter academies should be able to provide support for weaker schools in a variety of ways, but we have never been prescriptive about how they should do so. Outstanding converter academies, and indeed good academies, support schools in a wide variety of ways. All that we ask is that the support given is focused on having a measurable positive effect on standards. Support for another school is a requirement of the converter application process and schools are asked to name the school they propose to support. It is not obligatory for converting schools to become a sponsor, and where schools do not have the capacity or desire to become a sponsor, they will be asked for more specific information about their support for another school as part of the application process.