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School-to-school support within a competitive education system: views from the inside

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3 **School-to-school support within a competitive education system: views from the**
4 **inside**
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22 This paper draws on evidence from a study carried out in England to explore how
23 schools can support one another's improvement within a policy context that
24 emphasises competition. The findings offer some reasons to be optimistic, and
25 are suggestive of the capacity and potential of the school system in England to
26 "self-improve" through collaborative means. However, light is also thrown on a
27 number of barriers that need to be overcome to make such an approach work.
28 The paper argues that developing a greater understanding of the social
29 complexities involved in school-to-school support requires research that takes
30 account of the views of those involved. With this in mind, the paper reflects on
31 the experiences of a group of school leaders in England, leading to lessons that
32 are likely to be relevant to those in other national contexts where competition is
33 seen as a driver for school improvement.
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43 **Keywords:** School-to-school support; system leadership; educational
44 improvement; educational reform
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Introduction

In his introduction to a special edition of this journal, Muijs (2010) refers to the potential of networking and collaboration as a way of improving schools in relation to both standards and equity. Since then, we have seen developments in many countries that further emphasise competition between schools as the way forward, a trend that hardly seems conducive to schools working together. In this paper, we explore this matter in the context of England, a country where national policy has been subject to radical reforms that involve the use of market forces to intensify efforts to improve standards.

Central to the English reforms is a greater emphasis on schools becoming more autonomous, taking responsibility for their own improvement. At the same time, it is envisaged that schools will increasingly turn to each other for support in moving forward. At present, there are many views as to whether all of this is having the desired effect and, of course, it is still early days as far as determining the impact on student outcomes. There are also increasing concerns that the reforms are leading to fragmentation within the education system that runs the risk of further disadvantaging learners from economically poorer backgrounds. There is, therefore, a need to learn from experiences in the field in order to minimise the risks and maximise the potential of the reforms. This necessitates research that draws on the experiences of those who are attempting to put this policy into action.

With this in mind, this paper reflects on the findings of our research into the views of school leaders who are attempting to move the English reform agenda forward. This leads us to throw light on the challenges involved in promoting school-to-school cooperation within a highly competitive education system. At the same time, we draw attention to some promising developments. Reflecting on these experiences, we draw

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3 lessons that could be helpful, both in England and in other national contexts. We begin,
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5 however, by setting the context for our research, first of all, in terms of policy
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7 developments and then with regard to relevant research literature.
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12 **The English policy context**

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16 The last 20 years have seen intensive efforts by successive governments to improve the
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18 performance of the English education system. Competition between schools is seen to
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20 be one of the keys to “driving up standards”, whilst at the same time further reducing
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22 the control of local authorities¹ over provision (Whitty, 2010).
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25 More recently, the emphasis on competition has been intensified as increasing
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27 numbers of state schools have been encouraged – and, in some instances, required – to
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29 become academies. These schools are funded directly by national government, rather
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31 than through a local authority. This is intended to liberate schools from the bureaucracy
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33 of local government influence and, in so doing, establish a form of market place. In this
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35 way, it is intended that families will have greater choice as to which school their
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37 youngsters will attend (Adonis, 2012).
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40 As a result of the expanding academies programme, as well as other contributing
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42 policies, the education system in England has become increasingly diverse.
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44 Furthermore, the introduction of various other types of schools that operate under the
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46 academy legislation – such as free schools, based on the Swedish model, studio schools,
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48 and university technical colleges – has contributed to the complexity of the scene.
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51 An independent commission set up to review these developments pointed out
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53 that the original aim of academies was “to address entrenched failure in schools with
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55 low performance, most particularly, schools located in the most disadvantaged parts of
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3 the country” (Husbands, Gilbert, Francis, & Wigdortz, 2013, p. 4). Subsequently, the
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5 focus has changed towards increasing the autonomy of all schools. At the same time,
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7 there has been a growing emphasis on schools supporting one another, leading to an
8
9 unusual cocktail of competition and cooperation.

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11 Since the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010,
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13 followed by the Conservative government in 2015, all of this has become much more
14
15 central to education policy in England. The basis of the approach was outlined in a
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17 White Paper that set out plans to improve the quality of teachers and school leadership
18
19 through school-to-school support and peer-to-peer learning (Department for Education
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21 [DfE], 2010). Speaking about these plans in June 2011, the then Secretary of State for
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23 Education argued that, in order to address the issue of educational underperformance,
24
25 particular amongst disadvantaged groups of learners, there is a need to develop a
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27 “culture of collaboration”. More specifically, he emphasised his intention to develop
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29 “culture of collaboration”. More specifically, he emphasised his intention to develop
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31 networks of schools in order to create a “self-improving system” (Gove, 2011).

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33 David Hargreaves has been an influential voice in relation to these
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35 developments. In a series of what he describes as “think pieces”, he sets out a set of
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37 ideas that throw light on what a self-improving system involves (D. H. Hargreaves,
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39 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b).

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41 Central to the strategy that has subsequently evolved is a national network of
42
43 “teaching schools” (Matthews & Berwick, 2013). Analogous to teaching hospitals, the
44
45 intention is that these schools will have a key role to play in leading the training and
46
47 professional development of teachers and school principals. Teaching schools are
48
49 expected to work together within an alliance: a group of schools and other partners
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51 supported by the leadership of the teaching school (Gu et al., 2016).

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3 Earlier research has led us to take a positive view of the thinking that guides
4 these developments, particularly the emphasis they place on school-to-school
5 collaboration (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2016). However, we suggest there
6 are considerable difficulties facing the implementation of this approach and argue that
7 these difficulties arise from policy contradictions, not least in relation to pressures
8 created by accountability procedures. All of this throws further light on the challenges
9 facing efforts to use school-to-school collaboration to foster improvements within
10 policies that emphasise competition between schools.
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20 Leadership is an important factor in the move towards David Hargreaves's idea
21 of a self-improving school system. The Government's response to this has been to
22 create a cadre of what Hopkins (2007) calls "system leaders". Known as national
23 leaders of education (NLEs), these are successful school leaders who have experience of
24 supporting schools in challenging circumstances (DfE, 2014). The policy suggests that
25 they should work with teaching schools and other system leaders to provide high-
26 quality support to those schools that need it most.
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35 Alongside the development of teaching schools and the introduction of system
36 leaders, there has been a growing trend towards the formation of academy groups,
37 referred to as multi-academy trusts (MATs). Adding further complexities is the fact
38 that some MATs are part of teaching school alliances. As we will show, all of this can
39 lead to tensions within the system, with school leaders left uncertain as to where they
40 should position themselves in relation to the structural changes that are being
41 introduced.
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50 This raises questions regarding the local coordination of the school system and
51 is one of the most worrying aspects of the current policy context, with its emphasis on
52 school autonomy, competition, and new governance structures that can discourage
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3 schools from working with others. A further factor is that recent years have seen a
4
5 gradual reduction in the power and influence of the local authorities that have
6
7 traditionally taken on this responsibility.
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10 Meanwhile, in September 2014, eight regional schools commissioners (RSCs)
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12 were appointed to oversee the growing numbers of academies in England. Since taking
13
14 up post, their roles have expanded to include decision making in tackling
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16 underperformance in local authority maintained schools. As a result, they have rapidly
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18 become an important and powerful feature of the English education system (Durbin,
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20 Wespieser, Bernardinelli, & Gee, 2015).
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23 In summary, then, the recent reforms within the English education system can
24
25 be seen as an attempt to replace what is seen by some policymakers as a failed system.
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27 It is argued that this will be achieved by:
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- 32 • allowing schools greater space to explore new ways of accelerating the progress
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34 of their students, freed from the heavy bureaucracy and inefficient management
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36 that are seen to have been a feature of public administration;
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- 38 • putting practitioners in a better position to address the particular needs of their
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40 students, due to their increased freedom to make decisions about educational
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42 practices;
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- 44 • increasing parental choice and diversity of local schools, and, as a result,
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46 improving overall standards by further intensifying competition between
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48 schools; and
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- 50 • encouraging schools to support one another in making this work, using teaching
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52 schools and MATs as a means of coordinating arrangements.
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5 It is worth adding that similar thinking is increasingly guiding policy developments in
6 other countries, most notably in Australia, Sweden, and the USA (Salokangas &
7 Ainscow, 2017). In the meantime, within the English context, the implementation of
8 this approach is leading to uncertainties and tensions, as those involved try to make
9 sense of the complexities involved although, as our findings suggest, it is also leading to
10 some promising developments.
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21 **Schools supporting schools**

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24 There exists a growing body of research evidence that suggests school-to-school
25 collaboration can contribute to improvement by strengthening the capacity of expertise
26 available and facilitating more meaningful responses to learner diversity (see Ainscow,
27 2015; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Fielding et al., 2005; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, &
28 West, 2011). At the same time, concern has been expressed by Croft (2015) about what
29 he sees as a lack of “hard” evidence of the impact on student outcomes, since, he
30 argues, the research has been dogged by weak methodology. He goes on to suggest that
31 this leads to findings that are of limited use in relation to what actually makes the
32 difference to pupil progress and attainment.
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43 These sentiments are echoed by Ainscow (2015), who also highlights a lack of
44 evidence relating to how different types of collaborative arrangements might vary in
45 effectiveness, sustainability, and the kinds of impact they make. It has also been noted
46 that there are few studies assessing the ways in which attitudes and practices are
47 evolving on the ground as a result of these radical English policy changes (Greany,
48 2017). In particular, little is known about how practitioners are reacting to what we
49 referred to earlier as an unusual cocktail of competition and cooperation.
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3 Such critique is not without merit given that the evidence for a tangible
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5 connection between school-to-school collaboration and student outcomes is mixed at
6
7 best. Some studies report no links at all between schools working together and
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9 increases in student attainment (Sammons, Mujtaba, Earl, & Gu, 2007; Woods et al.,
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11 2006), whereas others point to a possible association (Hutchings, Greenwood,
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13 Hollingworth, Mansaray, & Rose, 2012). There are, however, a small number of
14
15 notable exceptions. For example, Chapman and Muijs (2013, 2014) undertook
16
17 comparative research with federations of schools and a matched sample of non-
18
19 federated comparator schools in England. By controlling for a number of factors, the
20
21 researchers were able to isolate the influence of federation membership and demonstrate
22
23 that certain types of federation – those where underperforming schools had been
24
25 partnered with high-performing settings – had a positive impact on student attainment.
26
27 In a related study, Muijs (2015) explored the impact on student attainment of
28
29 partnerships between high- and underperforming schools within the primary sector in
30
31 England. The findings of a quasi-experimental design to generate a matched sample
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33 showed that pupils in partnership schools outperformed their peers in comparator
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35 schools, with successful partnerships typified by intensive interventions within the
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37 classroom and at leadership level.
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41 Additionally, a growing body of empirical research and theoretical debate is
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43 providing much-needed insight into the changing roles of educational stakeholders
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45 within the context of a “self-improving school system” in England, and the socio-
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47 political forces that shape and influence such activity. For example, Greany (2015)
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49 explores the means by which local authorities and school leaders in two areas of
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51 England are responding to the structural reforms implied by the push towards a self-
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53 improving school system. His findings suggest that, despite an academies programme
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3 that has politically marginalised local authorities, they continue to play a crucial role in
4
5 the monitoring, intervention, and support of schools within their locality. Further, in the
6
7 examples he provides, reductions in funding have led to local authorities establishing
8
9 networks of schools that can support one another through school-led improvement.
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11 Other research paints a similarly positive picture of innovation in respect of new
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13 and emerging collaborative arrangements involving local authorities, schools, and
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15 school leaders (see Aston et al., 2013; Gilbert, 2017; Sandals & Bryant, 2014).
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17 However, Hatcher (2014) offers a more critical view of such developments in his
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19 reflections on a case study of a head teacher-coordinated partnership between schools
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21 and their local authority. He asserts that the collaborative intent underpinning such
22
23 arrangements can mask a limited focus on compliance with policy-directed
24
25 improvement priorities, at the expense of more developmental and democratic
26
27 structures. He goes on to suggest that, while school partnership arrangements can be
28
29 potential sites for “school improvement”, development, and radical innovation, the
30
31 narrow focus and the “exclusionary membership” of such networks suggest they are
32
33 more accurately understood as “closed managerialist networks” that serve as vehicles
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35 for the government performativity agendas (p. 367).
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39 Some key messages emerge from these studies. First, it is clear that local and
40
41 regional school systems have been responding to recent structural reforms and policy
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43 shifts in localised and context-specific ways. Second, it is evident that there is a strong
44
45 appetite across the school system for collaboration and partnership working amongst
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47 school stakeholders and an understanding of the potential for sharing knowledge,
48
49 intelligence, and resources as a means of improvement (Gilbert, 2017; Higham &
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51 Earley, 2013). Finally, it is clear from the evidence base that school-to-school
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53 collaboration is not necessarily a simple strategy that will guarantee progress. Indeed, it
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3 might simply be a fad that goes well when led by skilled and enthusiastic advocates but
4 then fades when spread more widely. Concerns have also been expressed that: school
5 partnerships can lead to lots of non-productive time, as members of staff spend periods
6 out of school; schools involved in working collaboratively may collude with one
7 another to reinforce mediocrity and low expectations; those schools that most need help
8 may choose not to get involved; and some head teachers may become “empire
9 builders”, who deter others from getting involved (Ainscow, 2015; Coldron, Crawford,
10 Jones, & Simkins, 2014; Greany, 2015).

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20 Bearing all of this in mind, in what follows we draw on the views of school
21 leaders who are closely involved in promoting greater cooperation within a national
22 policy context that is increasingly driven by competition between schools. This leads us
23 to pinpoint what seem to be promising developments, as well as barriers to progress. In
24 so doing, we make use of the work of Muijs and Rummyantseva (2014), who have
25 explored how competition and collaboration can sometimes coexist through what they
26 describe as “cooperation”. They note, however, that there are few studies of this
27 approach in the field of education.

40 41 **Gathering the views of insiders**

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44 The evidence we draw on was generated through in-depth focused interviews with a
45 group of stakeholders who were in a position to offer views “from the inside”. These
46 data were selected from a larger United Kingdom government-commissioned evaluation
47 of the School to School Support Fund (StSS) initiative (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2017).
48 This involved funding for which eligible schools applied to support other schools that
49 were underperforming.
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3 Acting as evaluators on behalf of the government gave us privileged access,
4 enabling us to talk with key stakeholders drawn from two regions of the country. These
5 regions included areas where school-to-school support was said by government officials
6 to be at a relatively mature stage and others where this was believed to be less so. In
7 this article, we draw on the ideas of 14 system leaders, seven in each region, all of
8 whom were direct recipients of the StSS funding and therefore responsible for providing
9 support to schools. In addition, we take account of the views of the coordinators of
10 arrangements for school-to-school support in each region, as well as the team of civil
11 servants closely involved in the further development of national policies related to this
12 agenda.
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24 We acknowledge some important limitations associated with the generation of
25 data in this way. First, it is possible that the government-funded nature of the initiative
26 we were tasked with evaluating may have influenced the extent to which interviewees
27 felt able to provide honest responses to the questions posed. In response to this
28 possibility, participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity in their
29 responses, whereby pseudonyms for school names and individuals would be used for
30 dissemination of data from the project (including reporting to the funder). Furthermore,
31 data would be reported and discussed in regional terms to ensure specific locations of
32 schools and individuals could not be identified. It was anticipated that these steps
33 would provide participants with the confidence to talk openly about their experiences of
34 this initiative. We should add that many of the respondents did provide comments that
35 were critical of current national policies, as well as of the local arrangements for
36 implementing these policies.
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52 Second, the system leaders we interviewed were all recipients of the StSS
53 funding, and therefore providers of the support in question. We recognise that this is a
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3 limitation of the data we present: A more comprehensive and balanced perspective of
4 school-to-school support would have included the views and experiences of colleagues
5 on the receiving end of such support. Unfortunately, this was not possible within the
6 parameters of the evaluation we undertook. Nevertheless, we remain confident that the
7 views of the participants we spoke to provided us with meaningful insights into the
8 nuances of school-to-school support within their local and regional contexts.

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11 In carrying out the interviews, we aimed to make the process a useful
12 professional experience for the respondents, all of whom were highly experienced
13 practitioners. At the same time, we intended that the process would encourage the
14 sharing of experiences so as to throw light on the complexities involved in carrying out
15 this challenging work. This was facilitated through an interview protocol that was
16 designed to explore both the functional aspects of the participants' involvement in the
17 StSS initiative (i.e., how funding was utilised, the nature of the support provided,
18 impact of the support, etc.) and also some of the broader contextual factors that inhibit
19 and enable school-to-school support. This approach allowed us to elicit information
20 that would attend to both the evaluative requirements of the research and also our own
21 broader research interests in the issues we raise within this paper.

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24 With all of this in mind, each interview, although following a common agenda,
25 needed to be flexible and responsive to the accounts and explanations provided by the
26 respondents. Our own extensive knowledge of relevant research was, therefore, vital in
27 helping to focus and push the discussions forward. The interviews concluded with the
28 researcher offering a summary of key ideas that had emerged, a procedure often used in
29 qualitative studies in order to check the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
30 This proved to be particularly effective, not least in allowing respondents to correct
31 misinterpretations and offer additional thoughts.

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3 Following each interview, the recorded discussions were transcribed and
4 analysed to draw out lessons that could be used to inform policy and practice in the
5 future. Then, at a later date, these texts were reconsidered in relation to the agenda of
6 this paper. In this context, our varied experiences and expertise proved to be
7 particularly useful in providing alternative explanations, as recommended by Wasser
8 and Bresler (1996).
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15 16 17 18 19 **Promising developments**

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21 Whilst the data we draw on were generated in response to a specific and focused
22 government initiative, they allow us to think more broadly about the potential and
23 appetite that exists within a highly competitive system for schools to help one another in
24 supporting improvement efforts. In this section, we present what we see as promising
25 developments in respect of this. In particular, we focus on the mobilisation of
26 educational stakeholders and the forms of school-to-school support they have
27 established that provide encouraging signs of system-led improvement.
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37 A key finding in this respect is the emergence of new coordination mechanisms
38 through which arrangements for partnerships can be made. These start within schools,
39 where new organisational arrangements have to be made so that key members of staff
40 can be freed to work offsite. They then require new forms of coordination set up to
41 assess local needs and facilitate relevant partnerships between schools. Inevitably, this
42 sometimes leads to tensions, as those with varying priorities seek to find ways of
43 addressing their differences. Our findings suggest that this problem was being
44 addressed, albeit at a different pace in each context. These differences relate, at least in
45 part, to historical and geographical factors.
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3 So, for example, an inner-city region provides a particularly strong example of
4 maturity. There, stakeholders have created an overarching learning partnership,
5 comprising representatives from local authorities, teaching schools, and the regional
6 schools commissioner. They also have an independent chair. System leaders in the
7 area highlighted the role of this partnership in bringing educational stakeholders
8 together. One school leader commented:
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18 The partnership has worked really hard to ensure every stakeholder is represented.
19 In the space of just two years there has been a massive shift in terms of the people
20 in the room, the messages being communicated and the things we are getting done.
21 They have done a brilliant job to be honest.
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28 As part of its remit to coordinate school-led improvement across the area, the learning
29 partnership plays a central role in screening which schools require support and which
30 are best placed to provide such support. This has been possible because of the
31 willingness of all parties to communicate, and share local intelligence and school-level
32 data. It has created a system that not only identifies schools that are categorised as
33 failing by the nature of their inspection grades and pupil assessment data, but also those
34 that are at risk of falling into such categories. As this head teacher explains:
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46 The new system we have is much better because we can collectively bring local
47 intelligence together about where the system leaders are, where the schools at risk
48 are and who we should be looking at and then the local authority give their rank
49 order in terms of priority.
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3 In addition to the coordination provided by the learning partnership, there is a school
4 improvement group, comprising system leaders, the local authority, and representatives
5 from the teaching schools. It meets every half term to share intelligence regarding
6 schools that are in need of support, as this head teacher describes:
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14 The local authority brings all the data on all the schools, basically everything that
15 schools are held accountable for. We also look at Ofsted recommendations and the
16 local authority's own quality assurance data from school visits they have
17 undertaken, so all the information is on the table. People then have a bit of time to
18 think about what support they can offer, some sign up there and then others go
19 back to their schools to discuss capacity and then get in touch but we know we are
20 basing this on all relevant data and information.
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28 These partnership arrangements emerged out of the legacy of a previous national
29 initiative that was characterised by school-to-school collaboration and provides the
30 roots of much of the activity that we see in this area today. As such, it illustrates how
31 previous experiences within a locality can provide a sense of optimism as to what is
32 possible with regards to schools working together. This historical context is important
33 to acknowledge, as it is within these previous experiences of partnership work that
34 schools and other educational stakeholders within this area forged their current
35 relationships, and the mutual trust and willingness to work together that underpin their
36 collaborative activity.
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47 Another example of successful partnership work was found in a rural county. It
48 involves three alliances of system leaders that represent the north, west, and south of the
49 county. They each take responsibility for monitoring all the schools in their areas. This
50 then feeds directly into discussions surrounding the schools that are suitable for school-
51 to-school support, as this head teacher explains:
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6 We sit round the table at the alliance strategy meetings and go through every single
7 school including their strengths and their capacity to support other schools, good
8 practice, case studies, school-level data and any other intelligence ... we've really
9 tried to push for schools to improve their communication with us and each other
10 and to understand that they need to support each other rather than rely on the local
11 authority for help and then the alliance can broker any additional funding streams
12 where necessary.
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19 The stakeholders across this particular county have worked hard to break down
20 traditional barriers to the sharing of data and intelligence, and have moved towards a
21 culture of knowledge mobilisation. However, there remains room for progress and
22 some schools have yet to engage fully, as this head teacher explains:
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31 Not all schools have signed up to their local alliance but we wouldn't let a school
32 fail without offering help, regardless of whether they are signed up. It's that moral
33 imperative.
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39 This example is all the more encouraging because of its rural context. This reminds us
40 that, as far as school-to-school cooperation is concerned, context matters. It suggests,
41 too, that urban localities have an added advantage in that movement between schools
42 tends to be made easier because of shorter distances between schools and greater
43 transport options. There also tend to be much higher numbers of teaching schools in
44 these contexts.
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52 There are, in fact, vast areas of England where there is limited access to support
53 from teaching schools and NLEs. Together, these factors make the development of
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3 school-to-school support arrangements in rural areas more challenging. However, as
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5 the system leaders in this particular example have demonstrated, such barriers can be
6
7 overcome through collective mobilisation of resources, sharing of intelligence, and a
8
9 willingness of all stakeholders to work together.
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11 These examples highlight the apparent willingness and appetite amongst
12
13 educational stakeholders to mobilise and pool their resources, expertise, and knowledge
14
15 as a means of strengthening and improving their regional and local school systems.
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17 Interestingly, although the national educational policy landscape has undoubtedly
18
19 facilitated and in many ways necessitated such partnership work, much of the activity to
20
21 which we have referred in this section has been school led. Furthermore, common to
22
23 the examples is the key coordinating role of local authorities, which, despite national
24
25 policies, remain central to school-to-school support and improvement in the two areas.
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32 **Barriers to progress**

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34 While these promising developments offer reason for optimism with regard to the
35
36 English school system's capacity to collaborate, we also identified various barriers.
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38 These include confusion over seemingly uncoordinated policy directives, and
39
40 uncertainties over roles and responsibilities, all of which have contributed to a lack of
41
42 coordination at the regional level, and struggles for power over decision-making at the
43
44 local level.
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47 For instance, in another rural area, some interviewees suggested that schools
48
49 were being pulled in different directions by uncoordinated educational policy directives.
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51 Many of these issues centre on the competing and conflicting priorities of local
52
53 authorities, teaching schools, and multi-academy trusts, not least regarding the
54
55 allocation of government funding to facilitate school-to school support. For example,
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3 one system leader, who heads up a MAT made up of five schools, talked of tensions
4
5 with her local authority regarding which schools should be targeted for support:
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10 It is all controlled by the local authority people. They tell us who should get
11 money to pay for support. You see, they hold the data – this means that the heads
12 don't know which schools are struggling.
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18 We also heard of tensions faced by colleagues involved in the work of teaching school
19 alliances who are increasingly spending their time negotiating the creation of multi-
20 academy trusts. Meanwhile, uncertainties were sometimes created for those working in
21 local authorities by the increasing emphasis on teaching schools as the main source of
22 support for school improvement. For example, the head of one teaching school argued
23 that she now finds herself in direct competition with her local authority, which, she
24 argues, is trying to access funding to support its own central school improvement
25 service.
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35 Other school leaders talked of problems created by competing policies. For
36 example, a head teacher of another successful school told of how she had founded an
37 alliance involving nine schools, most of which had been defined as requiring
38 improvement following inspections. She described the group as a “loose federation”.
39 Gradually, some of the schools have chosen to join more formal collaboratives, that is, a
40 MAT or a teaching school alliance. The head explained that this had led to periods of
41 confusion as schools were pulled in different directions. She commented: “There is a
42 danger of networks being too loose”. Similar feelings came from another head, who
43 commented that his “biggest beef” was the arrival of free schools² “here and there”,
44 which, he suggested, was making local cooperation even more difficult.
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3 Many of these issues stem from a lack of clarity regarding the roles and
4 responsibilities of the various stakeholders. In particular, confusions seem to have
5 arisen about the intended role of local authorities and teaching schools within a system
6 where multi-academy trusts are becoming the dominant organisational arrangement for
7 school-to-school cooperation. For example, one NLE explained how the academy he
8 was expecting to assist had been instructed to source support from within its own trust,
9 rather than from his teaching school. His view was that the absence of effective
10 coordination in his local area had left a degree of ambiguity regarding this issue. His
11 thought was that the newly established regional school commissioners were in better
12 position to take on this role, although they too are still struggling to define their roles
13 and responsibilities.
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26 Likewise, there remained comparable tensions as different actors jostle for
27 positions, as this system leader explains:
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34 We have a half-termly meeting where all the teaching schools and the local
35 authority get together and discuss stuff, but it's not always a useful and productive
36 meeting ... I don't think the local authority people really understand the teaching
37 school agenda and therefore they're not sure where they fit.
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43 Some participants also explained that there had been some regional coordination in the
44 past, and this had proved helpful for sharing experiences and expertise. However, the
45 same participants also claimed that there is currently very little of this kind of activity.
46 Moreover, the distances between schools, and the often isolated and remote geography
47 of a region, were seen as barriers to this kind of cooperation.
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54 Given the relative immaturity of established school-to-school activity in rural
55 areas, it is perhaps unsurprising that participants cited an absence of trust, collaboration,
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3 and knowledge mobilisation. In one county, it was suggested that this problem is a
4
5 direct result of the local authority choosing to retain its own school improvement
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7 service, which is seen to be in direct competition with the teaching schools. It was also
8
9 argued that funding issues has added to these pressures, because the central school
10
11 improvement service generates income for the local authority. This led the head of a
12
13 large secondary school to describe himself as being very negative about the
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15 contributions of local authority staff, although he did admit that their involvement has
16
17 helped to improve what had previously been a chaotic arrangement for nominating
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19 schools for support.
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26 **Drawing some lessons**

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28 In reflecting on the evidence we have presented, in this section of the paper we draw
29
30 lessons that might be relevant to those in other contexts where policy is encouraging
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32 schools to compete and collaborate. In particular, we consider to what extent and in
33
34 what ways schools within a competitive policy context can support one another in
35
36 promoting improvements. We also consider the extent to which positive rhetoric
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38 surrounding school collaboration from policymakers and practitioners is compromised
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40 by the realities of such activity. To help us think through these issues and frame our
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42 analysis, we draw on the notion of “coopetition”, as defined by Muijs and Rummyantseva
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44 (2014), and the following conditions that they suggest are needed in order for it to be
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46 effective: partners who see *clear and tangible benefits* from collaboration; *trust between*
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48 *partners*, established through the careful development of relationships between key
49
50 actors; *clear goals and agreements* between partners; and *forms of leadership that are*
51
52 *skilful* in managing tensions. Muijs and Rummyantseva go on to argue that these
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54 conditions are likely to be hard to achieve in competitive situations. Bearing this
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3 concern in mind, in what follows we consider each of these conditions in turn, whilst
4
5 also acknowledging that they do not exist in isolation but, as our data illustrate, are
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7 fundamentally interwoven and interdependent.
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10 11 12 ***Clear and tangible benefits*** 13

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15 Where we saw progress towards school improvement based on cooperation, it was clear
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17 that those involved had recognised the potential benefits. In particular, the colleagues
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19 we talked to whose schools are providing support frequently spoke of the impact on
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21 their own schools. Much of this seemed to be about the professional development
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23 opportunities provided by having to support schools facing much more challenging
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25 circumstances. This pattern is important in that it draws attention to a way of
26
27 strengthening relatively low-performing schools that can, at the same time, help to
28
29 foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to
30
31 why relatively strong schools should support other, less successful schools. This also
32
33 aligns with research findings that demonstrate a positive impact on student attainment in
34
35 both higher and lower performing schools as a result of their partnership activity
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37 (Chapman, 2015). Put simply, “the evidence is that by helping others you help
38
39 yourself” (Ainscow, 2015, p. 71).
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44 As our findings suggest, those contexts that are more collaboratively mature
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46 feature a range of educational stakeholders working together, sharing their individual
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48 perspectives and insights to facilitate school-to-school support and improvement across
49
50 their respective localities. We would argue that the educational stakeholders in these
51
52 contexts are demonstrating characteristics of the “deep partnerships” that Greany (2015)
53
54 suggests currently remain absent from many local and regional school systems in
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56 England. Furthermore, our data suggest the local authority is playing a key role in
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3 facilitating this activity. This is noteworthy because of the reduced capacity of this tier
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5 of government in recent years as a direct consequence of educational policy directives
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7 that have handed more responsibility for organisational maintenance and management
8
9 to individual and networks of schools. Indeed, as Greany (2015) suggests, in the
10
11 context of recent structural reforms, local authorities have at once been required to
12
13 sustain their traditional function of support and challenge, whilst developing new
14
15 bridging and brokering roles. Moreover, recent research suggests that, despite structural
16
17 reforms that have significantly reduced the capacity of local authorities in England in
18
19 recent years, those schools that remain maintained by their local authority perceive a
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21 positive relationship with this middle tier of government as a key factor in relation to
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23 school-to-school support. In particular, this relates to the role of the local authority in
24
25 sharing data and intelligence, and commissioning support for school improvement (Gu
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27 et al., 2016).
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34 *Trust between partners*

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36 A willingness to share intelligence and engage in professional dialogue was seen as a
37
38 strong indication of the growth of trust amongst schools. Although such conversations
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40 tended to centre on statistical data regarding student progress and school performance,
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42 what appeared to be potentially more powerful was the means by which these parties
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44 bring their varied experiences and expertise together in order to scrutinise such data. In
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46 this way, they are each confronted with different interpretations of the same set of
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48 evidence.
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52 We found that, where this works well, it has the potential to challenge taken-for-
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54 granted assumptions and, in so doing, stimulate creative thinking and problem solving
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56 with regard to particular schools and, indeed, the whole education system. In this way,
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3 relationships and trust were strengthened. Such analytical discussion and investigation
4 represent a key facet of the deep partnerships between educational stakeholders that D.
5 H. Hargreaves (2012b) suggests are a necessary ingredient for a functioning self-
6 improving school system. We recognise that there are a number of other important
7 conditions required for such a system to be fully realised. Nevertheless, we argue that
8 pockets of activity such as those described in this paper provide reasons for optimism as
9 to whether the school system in England has the capacity to self-improve.
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18 However, as our data also highlight, there remains the problem of how to get
19 those who are reluctant to join in with processes that they do not see as being to their
20 advantage within the competitive educational market place. Indeed, as Muijs and
21 Rumyantseva (2014) point out, any uncertainty regarding the benefits of the partnership
22 serves to weaken the ties between partners.
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29 Given the complexities surrounding the development of trust within a
30 competitive environment, it is interesting to note the positive influences of the local and
31 regional systems of accountability and evaluation of school-to-school support and
32 improvement that have been established in the examples provided in this paper. In
33 these circumstances, participants reported the importance of having space and a forum
34 through which they can reflect on the work they are undertaking together to support
35 schools and how this process might be improved going forward. So, whilst they often
36 remain in competition, they are still prepared to work towards a broader aim of
37 educational improvement across the localities within which they are situated. The
38 process of members coming together regularly to ensure they are fulfilling their
39 obligations seems to facilitate and strengthen trust between each one.
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52 Seeking to explain such circumstances, Muijs, West, and Ainscow (2010) reflect
53 on social capital theory within the context of networks, suggesting the value of
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3 collaboration from this perspective is that it allows for the harnessing of resources held
4
5 by all parties as a means of increasing the flow of information. Drawing on the work of
6
7 Burt (1992), they suggest this kind of networking can plug structural gaps where there
8
9 exists a paucity of intelligence. Collaboration then becomes a potentially constructive
10
11 enterprise for all parties, since each, in theory at least, can contribute to plugging these
12
13 gaps in knowledge, the likelihood of which escalates as the number of actors in a
14
15 network increases. In short, the partnership becomes stronger than the sum of its parts.
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17 Similarly, in his thinking around the self-improving school system, D. H. Hargreaves
18
19 (2011) draws on social capital as comprising two key elements: trust and reciprocity.
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21 He suggests deep partnerships are those in which intelligence and expertise are shared
22
23 freely thus enhancing and strengthening reciprocity and trust between members.
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27 We argue that, in respect of the data presented in this paper, in those regions
28
29 where stakeholders have embraced collaboration there is an understanding that, by
30
31 working together and drawing on their respective strengths, they can ensure the local
32
33 and regional school systems to which they belong can better meet the needs of the
34
35 students and the communities they serve. Moreover, in engaging in such collaborative
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37 activity and working together to solve issues and address the myriad of challenges they
38
39 face, these local and regional systems are demonstrating characteristics of the self-
40
41 improving system imagined by David Hargreaves.
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45 However, it is naïve to ignore the political complexities involved in all of this.
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47 In particular, the examples we have drawn upon suggest that there remains a need for
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49 sensitivity with regard to what might be seen as a shift in decision making and
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51 influence, from local authorities, towards teaching schools and/or multi-academy trusts.
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53 Within some contexts, this transition appears to have been reasonably smooth. Yet, as
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55 we have illustrated, those in other areas suggested there were tensions that are
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3 characteristic of power struggles regarding decision making. Often, too, access to
4 funding is the battleground around which these struggles take place. While schools
5 continue to compete for financial resources, either through the number of students they
6 can attract, or other sources of income such as the fund discussed in this paper, these
7 tensions will be present. As Muijs and Rummyantseva (2014) suggest, any ongoing and
8 future prospect of competition between members is likely to be detrimental to the
9 strength and sustainability of any partnership.
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21 ***Clear goals and agreements***

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23 While we have drawn attention to a number of promising developments that offer
24 encouragement as to how school systems might harness the capacity, capability, and
25 willingness of stakeholders as a means of self-improvement, we have also identified
26 some key issues that are likely to inhibit such progress unless they are addressed. These
27 relate to disputes regarding overall purposes, within a policy context that seems to pull
28 stakeholders in different directions. Related to this are disputes over roles and
29 positioning within the system that can lead to confusion amongst stakeholders and, as
30 we have noted, struggles for power.
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41 Those areas that are more collaboratively mature are characterised by clarity of
42 purpose amongst members as to the aims and goals of their partnership activity. In
43 these contexts, as the preceding sections suggest, this seems to have been achieved
44 through the establishment of clear and tangible benefits for those involved, and the
45 careful nurturing of trust between all parties. Conversely, these features and the
46 conditions within which they have emerged are largely absent from those contexts that
47 are less mature collaboratively. As we have discussed, one of the key challenges for
48 stakeholders across all the areas in which we generated data relates to the shifting roles
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3 of various actors as a result of the on-going structural reforms within the English
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5 system. On the one hand, the frantic pace and intensity of such reform is tending to
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7 create an overall climate of innovation; whilst, on the other hand, it is leading to some
8
9 confusion amongst those in the field, not least practitioners, for whom the intensity of
10
11 daily professional duties leaves limited time for keeping in touch with what is going on.
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14 Related to all of this, Higham and Earley (2013) suggest the level of turbulence
15
16 and change that has accompanied the structural reforms in England in recent years has
17
18 left school leaders with a number of concerns. These include the willingness of
19
20 struggling schools to seek and engage in collaborative support, the means by which
21
22 local authorities are evolving differently, and the motives of profit-making providers.
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25 The danger is that, within this complex policy context, those trying to promote
26
27 school cooperation can sometimes become marginalised. Furthermore, as the examples
28
29 we have provided suggest, some of those involved are pulled in different directions.
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31 We have reported, for example, tensions created for colleagues involved in the work of
32
33 teaching school alliances who are increasingly spending their time negotiating the
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35 creation of multi-academy trusts. We also heard of the uncertainties that are being
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37 created for those working in local authorities by the increasing emphasis on teaching
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39 schools as the main source of support for school improvement.
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42 In addition, further complications have arisen where multi-academy trusts are
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44 developing their own in-house school improvement arrangements. In such contexts,
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46 there remains a need for sensitivity with regard to local politics and what might be seen
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48 as a shift in decision making and influence, from local authorities to teaching schools
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50 and/or multi-academy trusts. There also needs to be clarity of purpose and
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52 understanding of roles and positioning as regards responsibility for local and regional
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54 school improvement. Although this is the case in some contexts, there are other areas
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3 where such clarity or purpose is absent and tensions have arisen as stakeholders jostle
4 for space and influence. This relates to a large-scale survey of school leaders
5 undertaken by Higham and Earley (2013). Amongst their findings was a lack of clarity
6 and a concern amongst head teachers in England as to whether the “patchwork of
7 provision” that has stemmed from the structural reforms “would provide adequate and
8 equitable support” (p. 714) for the schools within the system going forward.

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16 The data presented in this paper align with the findings of other research (e.g.,
17 Greany, 2015; Wespieser, Sumner, & Bernardinelli, 2017) in suggesting the level of
18 collaborative maturity across the national school system in England differs
19 considerably. While there are likely to be a multitude of reasons for this, the evidence
20 we have collected suggests that historical factors are particularly important. For
21 example, the large urban context that forms part of our sample has a strong legacy of
22 school-to-school support and improvement. The relationships and trust that have been
23 established over time through such previous partnership work have provided robust and
24 meaningful foundations for their current collaborative activities and a platform on
25 which they have been able to establish clear partnership goals and agreements. In other
26 areas of the country, there is less of a legacy of this kind of collaborative practice. As
27 such, the depth and formality of partnership work is limited at best. Put simply, in these
28 areas, the schools are accustomed to operating in relative isolation rather than working
29 with and supporting one another. This suggests that historical context is a key factor
30 with regard to school-to-school support that needs to be both acknowledged and
31 understood by policymakers and stakeholders.

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50 In a similar way, establishing goals and agreements is influenced by geography.
51 As Coldron et al. (2014) suggest: “proximity and shared community is a natural and
52 therefore common basis for a continuing professional relationship between schools” (p.
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3 395). In this respect, we have argued that urban contexts can have a natural advantage
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5 with regard to collaboration, in that movement between schools tends to be made easier
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7 because of shorter distances between schools and greater transport options. At the same
8
9 time, proximity is likely to lead to greater competition amongst schools, not least
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11 regarding the enrolments of students. As we have noted, there also tend to be much
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13 greater numbers of teaching schools in urban areas. On the other hand, there are vast
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15 areas of the country with limited access to support from teaching schools and NLEs.
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17 Together, these factors make the development of school-to-school support arrangements
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19 much more challenging.
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26 ***Skilled leadership***

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28 Despite the problems we have identified, the evidence we have presented points to
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30 encouraging developments within the English education system regarding schools
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32 supporting one another. In particular, we have described what appears to be the
33
34 emergence of a new generation of school leaders who are developing their skills as
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36 system leaders. In working with their colleagues – particularly those with longer
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38 experience of supporting other schools – they are enhancing their expertise and growing
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40 their professional confidence. It occurs to us that, in the future, these individuals can go
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42 on to have an even wider impact by supporting other school leaders in following the
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44 path that they have laid.
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48 In moving forward, it is important to note that the positive examples of schools
49
50 collaborating involved shared leadership. In particular, we saw examples of head
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52 teachers working together and with other stakeholders to create a new form of middle
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54 tier. In these contexts, local authority staff were seen to be taking on new roles,
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56 facilitating these new arrangements and bringing to the discussions their wider
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3 knowledge of the local education system. Commenting on such “leading from the
4
5 middle” approaches, A. Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) argue that they can

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9 provide a valuable focus for school improvement; be a means for efficient and
10 effective use of research evidence and analysis of data across schools; provide
11 support so schools can respond coherently to multiple external reform demands;
12 and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair
13 deal. (p. 44)
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19 An interesting feature of these emerging arrangements for school-to-school
20 support is that the stakeholders themselves have taken the lead in mobilising their
21 resources and expertise. In so doing, they have established coordinating mechanisms
22 for stakeholder cooperation that provide a formal means of accountability and scrutiny
23 of their collaborative activity. Conversely, the conclusion of the review of the evidence
24 relating to school partnerships and collaboration undertaken by Ainscow (2015) was
25 that the vast majority of the knowledge in this area of the field is reliant upon
26 evaluations of government policy initiatives that were underpinned by or comprised a
27 significant element of inter-school collaboration.
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38 Of course, policy does matter and is influential. In this respect, the examples we
39 have presented have undoubtedly been facilitated by the overarching structural reforms
40 to the school system in England, resulting in an on-going period of repositioning
41 amongst the various actors involved. Again, this might be considered symptomatic of
42 the decentralisation that D. H. Hargreaves (2010) suggested would create the necessary
43 conditions for system-led improvement. Certainly, the stakeholders we spoke to
44 suggest the current educational policy landscape has brought about an educational need
45 for the collaborative arrangements they have established. Furthermore, this was the
46 major driving force behind such activity, rather than any particular initiative and
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3 associated financial incentives. If we are to have any confidence that school systems
4 have the capacity and capability to self-improve, then such examples offer some
5 grounds for optimism.
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11 12 **Conclusion**

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15 The evidence we provide in this paper suggests that schools are able and willing to
16 support one another, even within a policy context that uses competition as the major
17 driver for improvement. It seems, then, that “coopetition” is possible, although it is
18 difficult to achieve and often remains fragile as a result of policy decisions that pull
19 stakeholders in different directions. Therefore, we must be wary of falling into the trap
20 of thinking all of this is simple and straightforward. For example, writing about the idea
21 of school networking as an improvement strategy, Lima (2008) argues that, despite their
22 growing prevalence, networks have become popular mainly because of faith and fads,
23 rather than solid evidence of their benefits. There is, he argues, nothing inherently
24 positive or negative about a network: “... it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and
25 bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be
26 democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests” (p. 2).
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41 This is why, in our view, some form of locally led coordination is needed in
42 order to facilitate mutual accountability in relation to agreed principles, and to
43 determine needs, engage stakeholders and broker partnerships. The relatively
44 successful examples of this that we found suggest a possible way forward. They
45 involved shared leadership from within schools, built on previous experience of schools
46 collaborating that had helped to develop relationships and confidence in sharing
47 responsibility. However, our research also led to what was, for us, a surprise in respect
48 to the significant roles played by local authority staff. In some contexts, their actions
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3 acted as barriers to local cooperation, whereas elsewhere they made crucial
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5 contributions to its success.

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7 It is predictable that these changing relationships would lead to periods of
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9 organisational “turbulence” (Ainscow, Hargreaves, & Hopkins, 1995). The nature of
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11 this phenomenon varied from place to place, but in general it arose as a result of the
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13 reactions of individuals to ideas and approaches that were disruptive of the status quo of
14
15 their day-to-day lives. It is worth noting, however, that there is research evidence to
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17 suggest that without periods of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to
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19 occur (Fullan, 2007). In this sense, turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that
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21 things are on the move.
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24 In reflecting on what this involves, we are reminded of Robert Bales’s theory of
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26 group systems, used in earlier school improvement research (see Ainscow et al., 1995).
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28 Bales predicts that attempts to get different stakeholders to pull together around a
29
30 common purpose are likely to provoke tensions between the need to establish cohesion
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32 amongst groups, whilst, at the same time, taking actions to achieve these goals. Put
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34 simply, it is relatively easy to maintain cooperation until the moments when hard
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36 decisions have to be made, most particularly regarding the setting of priorities and the
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38 allocation of resources.
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41 We must also keep in mind the concern of Hatcher (2014) that the collaborative
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43 intent underpinning such arrangements can involve a limited focus on compliance with
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45 policy-directed priorities, at the expense of more developmental and democratic
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47 structures. In such policy contexts, rhetoric regarding school autonomy that is intended
48
49 to lead to greater innovation may result in what Lubienski (2003) refers to as “curricular
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51 and pedagogical conformity” (p. 419).
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3 District-level administrators can play important roles in this respect. However,
4 they have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of
5 improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must
6 monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities,
7 whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of
8 improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, district-level staff can position
9 themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families –
10 protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities
11 (Ainscow, 2016).
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22 Finally, of course, all of this has significant implications for national
23 policymakers. In order to make use of the power of collaboration as a means of
24 achieving excellence and equity in schools, they have to foster greater flexibility at the
25 local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular
26 circumstances and determine priorities accordingly.
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35 Notes

- 36 1. There are 152 local authorities in England. Traditionally, they have been responsible
37 for managing the schools in their areas.
- 38 2. These are schools set up by an organisation or a group of individuals, funded by the
39 government but not controlled by a local authority.
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3 systems effective for all children and young people. Between 2007 and 2011, he led the Greater
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