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What do we know about the self-improving, school-led system and what might be the implications for the new middle layer?

**Area-based Education
Partnerships Association Conference**

**Toby Greany
11th September 2019**



Institutional Darwinism (Philip Reeve)?



Tour de France?



What are we talking about?

‘School Districts/Local Authorities’

‘New actors’

including charities, HEIs, non-formal providers, online, AP, school-led networks,
Multi-Academy Trusts, Charter Management Organisations etc

‘Middle tier’

‘Mediating layer’

‘Meso layer’

‘Middle/mediating layer’ - Any aspect of statutory and non-statutory
governance and support operating between individual schools/academies
and central government.



Middle tier roles/functions

Mourshed et al (2010) identify three roles: i) targeted hands-on support to schools, ii) a buffer between the school and the centre, iii) a channel to share and integrate improvements across schools.

Strategic co-ordination & improvement

- Place planning
- Provision for vulnerable pupils
- Aligning education with broader children's services offer
- Commissioning services (HR, governor development)
- Tracking school performance
- Holding schools to account
- Commissioning support for specific schools
- Ensuring teacher supply
- Ensuring leadership supply/succession

Capacity building and brokerage

- Working together on curriculum planning/development
- Observing, coaching and developing each other – inc peer review
- Facilitating work on inquiry-led learning
- Recruiting and training new teachers
- Running coaching/CPD programmes
- Running leadership programmes
- Deploying leaders and expert teachers
- Facilitating access to expertise

Several reviews of evidence on district/local authority leadership and governance show importance and impact of this function (Leithwood and Azar, 2017; Leithwood and Mccullough, 2017; Waters and Marzano, 2006).

Highlights importance of strategic and operational alignment, collective capacity building and knowledge sharing.

But... evidence is largely based on US/Canada models of (largely homogenous) districts.

Trujillo (2013) critiques limited validity and reliability of many studies.

Singapore, Estonia, Finland and Ontario demonstrate:

- a coherent middle tier: “All work to the principle of subsidiarity, where decisions are taken at the level closest to delivery... (but) none has devolved decision-making to schools to the extent that England has” (p17).
- equity prioritised for all pupils as well as sustained high performance
- a strong, educator-led, middle tier, directing resources to support the improvement of all students in all schools
- “QA is based on steering through information, support & funding rather than controlling... school inspections have been abolished and the use of data to rank schools has been replaced with a school excellence model” (p17).



- ‘A central system, locally administered’ (Volansky, 2003). England’s post-war national school system founded on strong & relatively autonomous Local (Education) Authorities, aligned to wider local government structures.
- By the 1980s, local government increasingly criticised as slow and bureaucratic – leads to continuing process of cuts & reorganisations.
- Wider rise in New Public Management emphasises efficiency, choice, accountability. Strengthened role for national government and increased autonomy for schools.

Centralisation – eg national curriculum, national tests, Ofsted inspections



‘Middle tier’ squeezed
(aka **disintermediation**,
Lubienski, 2014)



Decentralisation – school-based management/autonomy, Local Governing Bodies

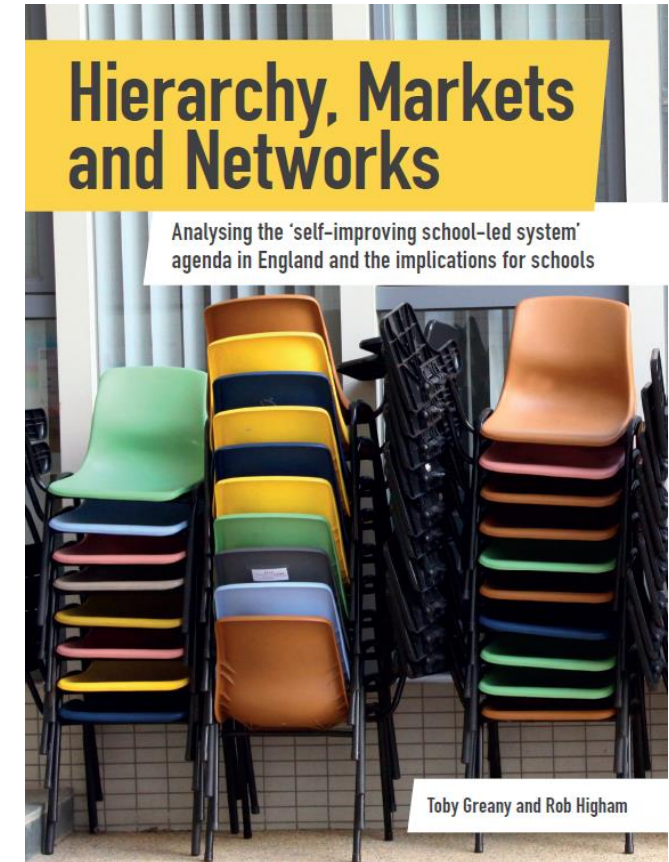
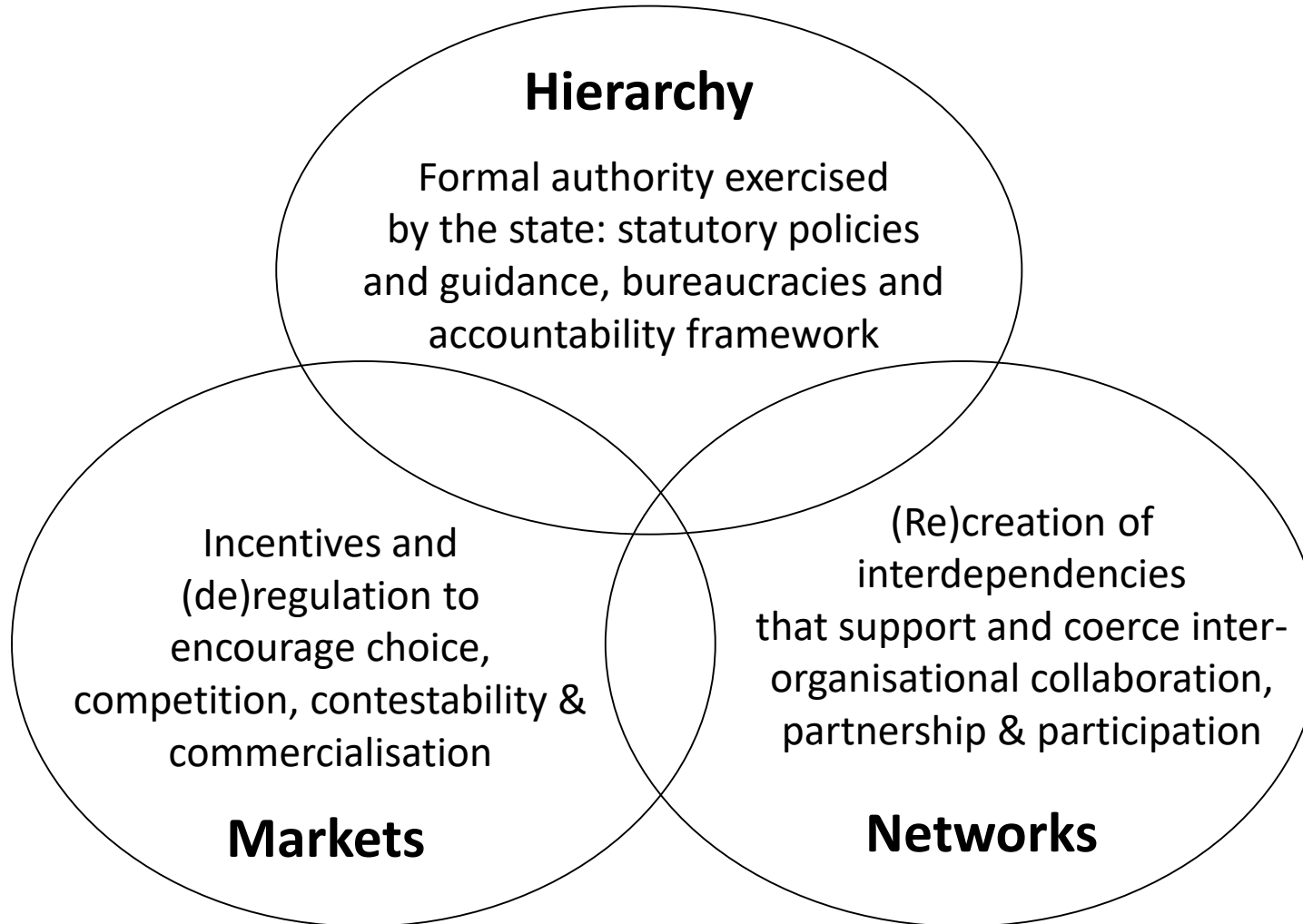


A problem of decentralised systems is not so much that they are decentralised as such, but rather the combination with centralised responsibilities, resulting in a mixed system in which central responsibilities come together with decentrality and autonomy dispersed around the system.

Frankowski, A., van der Steen, M., Bressers, D., Schulz, M., Shewbridge, C., Fuster, M., Rouw, W., (2018)
DILEMMAS OF CENTRAL GOVERNANCE AND DISTRIBUTED AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION Three Education Policies
in the Netherlands OECD



Conceptualising the policy agenda



Rhetoric of a ‘self-improving system’ based on self-organizing ‘deep’ partnerships is a partial, idealised account. Rather, we observed:

- Chaotic centralisation – power shifting from local to national government, but an uneven & often fraught process. Understanding ‘new rules of the game.’
- Constrained professionalism & coercive autonomy – pressure to perform and to prioritise the success of the school, fear of the consequences of failure, standardisation, self-policing and narrowing focus on results
- Reliance on clusters, networks & designated system leaders for support, but with these networks operating in the shadow of hierarchy and markets
- New operational freedoms for academies, but many now forced/opting to join MATs, with limited autonomy and less locally accountable bureaucracies.



A new, more complex and 'entrepreneurial' middle tier...

Multiple 'middle tier' players, with:

1. (Sometimes) competing & (often) overlapping remits (including geographic) & claims to legitimacy/authority
2. Differing levels of knowledge and capacity for supporting schools

Implications:

1. Fragmentation/two-tier: differing levels of awareness/engagement with 'middle tier'
2. Balkanisation: 'local solutions', academies increasingly orienting towards MATs
3. Commodification of knowledge/expertise
4. SNOW - schools that no-one wants

Typical 'middle tier' players:

- Regional School Commissioner
- Local Authority
- Ofsted Regional Director
- Multi-Academy Trusts
- Teaching School Alliances
- Locality-wide partnership/s
- School partnerships/clusters
- Dioceses
- Informal networks
- Government funded providers
- Primary/Secondary Heads
- Project/area-based initiatives/roles

I think the old system of Local Authority Advisors was just of no use at all... I think it's far better... that we can go to the schools that we want to go to, that we trust, where we know the value's going to be better.

Head teacher, Secondary, Ofsted Good



But... also, exclusive development and institutional self-interest

SUCCESS appeared, because we felt we couldn't wait. The world was changing around us, and if we didn't do something, we'd be left on our own. I think it's unfortunate that probably the six strongest schools in [the cluster] formed SUCCESS. And that was to our shame, a little bit, I think, that the egalitarianism stopped. And I think that our vulnerable schools within [the cluster], within the locality, are on their own, because they weren't able or willing to join.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Protect: isolationist and protected expertise

- “We can solve our own problems”
- “Buy in specific expertise we need”
- Not interested in open ended collaboration
- Looking to build a MAT, but hard to find willing participants

Sell: entrepreneurial, commoditisation

- Selling expertise: “we want to make money”
- Trading arm for CPD on Ofsted preparation, ‘leadership’
- Federated primary - the “worked example”
- Branded provider

Share: open source knowledge building

- Focus on learning with local schools: “mutual expertise”
- Seen as ideal collaborator locally
- Uncomfortable with school to school interventions
- Challenges in funding

It was Hargreaves who talked about many tribes, 'schools are members of many tribes' – that's fine, but quite often, when you're a part of many tribes, the Venn diagram nature of your relationships is sometimes with one circle over there and a couple overlapping. But the model [here] is one stacked on top of the other, kind of like an ever-winding circle. And that has threats, that essentially [the Teaching School] have, in the teaching school alliance, replaced the local authority's secondary school improvement arm, and they're charging us thousands of pounds to get stuff that we used to get for free. And they are gaining – and we are part of that.

Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding



I think there's a difficulty in trying to help a school-led system where you don't know where the leadership of the school-led system is; I think that's really hard. Because I don't really know where it's supposed to sit. It sits with us, is what we keep being told, but I've got no authority over other head teachers in the city and they can either listen to me or not, it's up to them.

Head, maintained primary, Ofsted Outstanding



Four perspectives on how these changes impact at the local level

'Tri-level' reform: local authorities encouraged & enabled to align with national/ provincial priorities, & to support individual schools on this vision

Local agency fatally diminished in the face of **centralization & data surveillance**. 'Unbalanced' governance and 'highly centralized system steering' (Ozga, 2009)

Scope for local agency, des
centralization – as power moves away from traditional democratic structures, local can be remade by new & existing actors.

New models of **'middle out'** change emerging – collaboration between multiple players to exchange knowledge & innovations (e.g. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2018).

Equity
Coherence, effectiveness
& legitimacy of local
systems
Leadership



New local models in England... ?

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Leading middle out change

Highly collaborative, accountable and supportive **partnerships provide a powerful vehicle for school improvement..** (but) we may end up replacing autonomous and isolated schools with autonomous and isolated clusters... We are also in danger of **losing [a] sense of 'place'**... It is **the responsibility of leaders** to shape the culture and to ensure that, although they take account of the external national accountability requirements, they develop an internal, collective accountability system that leads to the right outcomes.

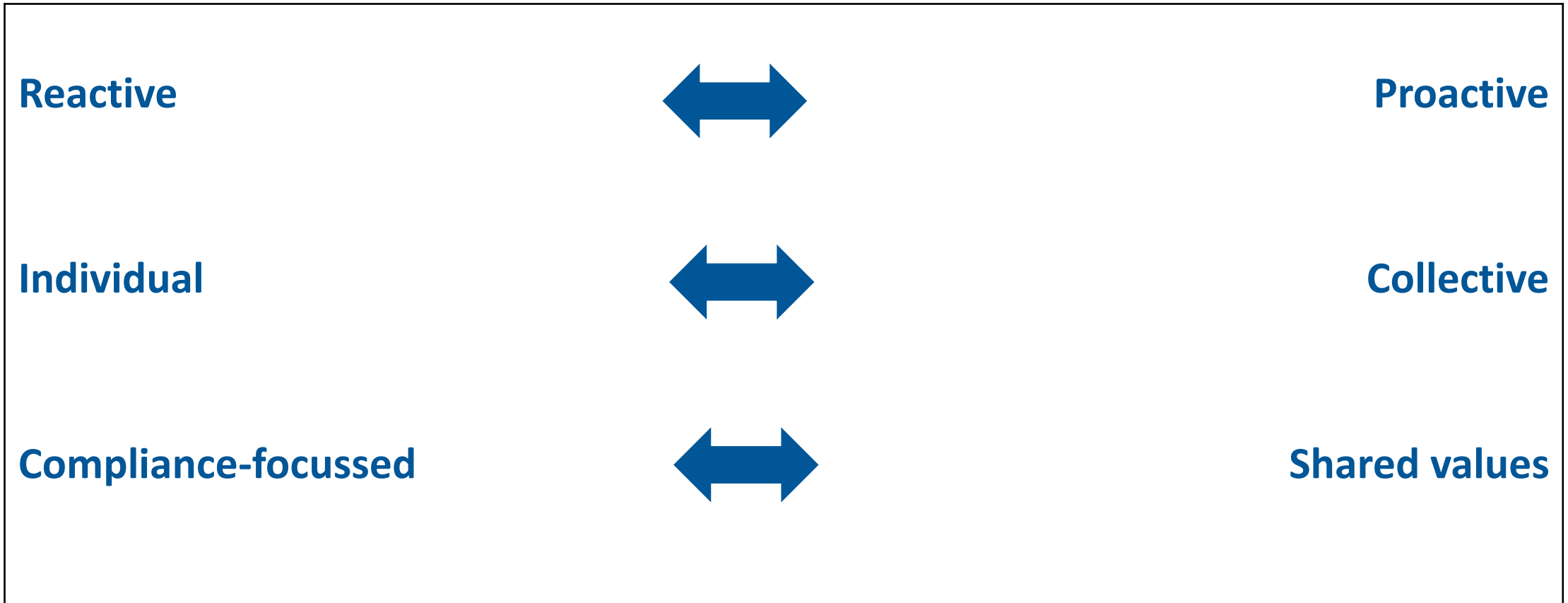
Michael Fullan and Steve Munby (2016) Inside-out and downside-up, EDT

Differences between 'leading-in the-middle' and 'leading from the middle':

- LitM - middle as connector and buffer between the top and the bottom.
- LftM - moral purpose, collective responsibility, active role in initiating, not just implementing, change

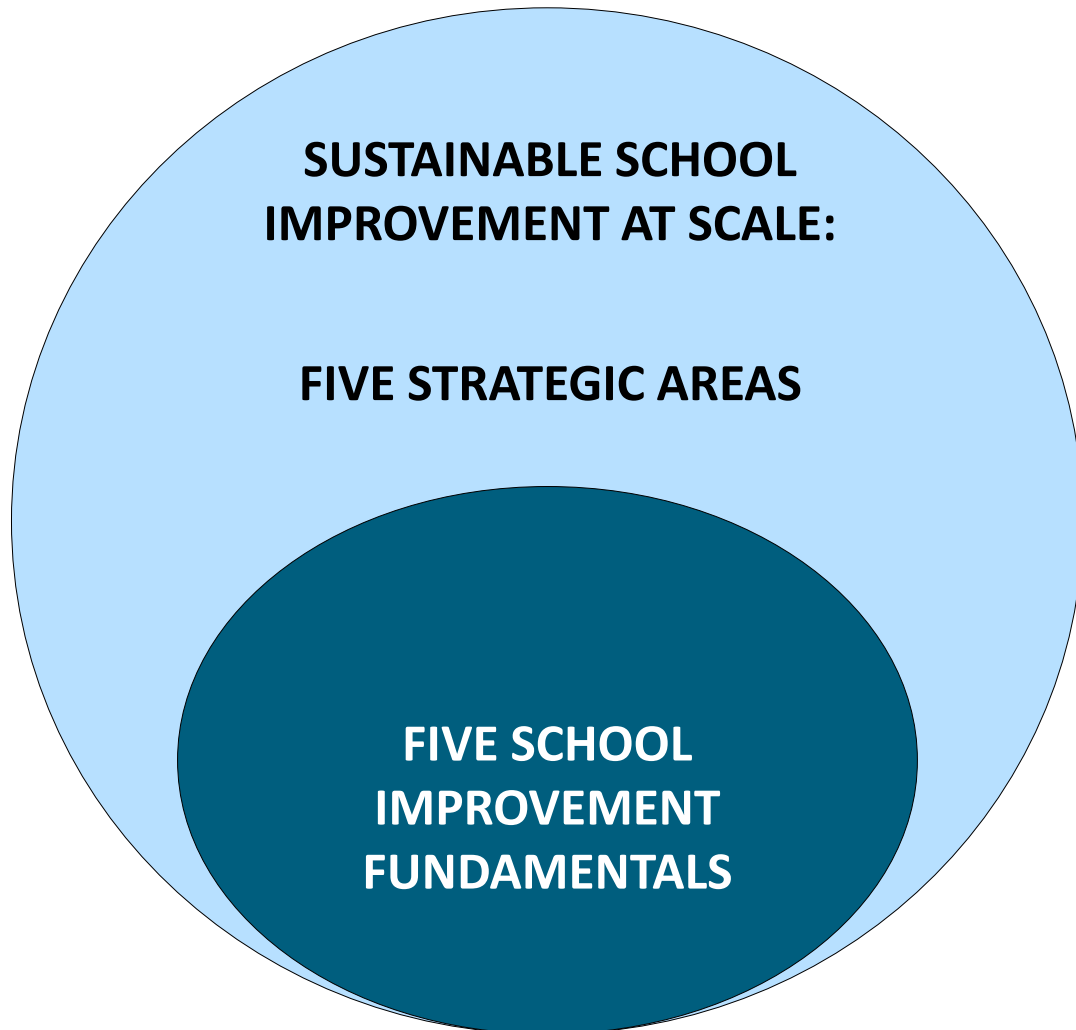
Hargreaves et al (2018):

Leadership agency remains unevenly distributed





How do MATs and federations sustainably improve schools?



Five Strategic Areas for Sustainability

- Vision, values, strategy and culture
- People, learning and capacity
- Assessment, curriculum and pedagogy
- Quality assurance and accountability
- A sustainable learning organisation

Five School Improvement Fundamentals

- Establish sufficient capacity
- Analysis of needs
- Deploy and support leadership
- Access to effective practice and expertise
- Monitor improvements in outcomes



Four dimensions underpinning successful school groups

- 1. Purpose:** are the vision and values distinctive, meaningful and embedded?
- 2. Participation:** are key stakeholders engaged and included in decision-making?
- 3. Performance:** is there a clear and sustainable focus on enabling staff and pupils to learn and improve?
- 4. Process:** is the operating model clear, flexible and effective in securing continuous improvement at all levels?



Institutional Darwinism (Philip Reeve)?



Tour de France?



“We have not inherited this world from our ancestors. We have been loaned it by our children”

Native American Tradition





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Thank you.

