

Joining the dots to share knowledge for benefit of all

ANDY Burnham's central argument for regionalism is that power and resources should be brought closer to the people they affect, enabling regions to integrate services and respond to local needs rather than be subject to priorities imposed from Whitehall.

For decades I have advocated a cohesive regional response to developing our schools, not another layer of bureaucracy or regional strategy directed from Whitehall. Schools are stronger when connected to the knowledge, expertise and leadership around them.

Newcastle United supporters constantly debate how the manager has set up the team: 4-4-2, 4-3-3 or 5-4-1. Formations matter, but none will succeed if players do not understand one another or share a purpose. Remember teammates Bowyer and Dyer fighting on the pitch in 2005? We lost 3-0.

Having talented individuals is not enough; without relationships, shared purpose and collective responsibility, the team can become less than the sum of its parts.

Education is much the same.

We spend inordinate amounts of time debating academies, local authorities, trusts and governance. All matter, but structures are only as effective as the relationships between them.

The question for the North East is therefore not simply who runs what? It is how do we get the whole education system working together for our children?

I believe three things fundamentally matter: connection, shared knowledge and leadership.

■ 1. We need to connect the system

Our diverse education system includes schools, local authorities, academy trusts, universities, professional organisations and partnerships.

Diversity can be a strength. Fragmentation is not. A cohesive regional response should connect organisations around a common ambition for every child, not create another bureaucratic tier.

And at its heart must be a simple moral principle: "Equity, inclusion and the success of every learner is a collective responsibility. Being included is not enough. We need to feel we belong."

A strong regional approach could ensure that every school benefits from the North East's collective

Former Tyneside headteacher and senior education adviser **LES WALTON** asks what makes an education system effective?



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strength and receives support before problems become crises.

■ 2. We need to share what we know

There is another simple truth: "The human race has survived because it has learned. It has thrived because it has learned collectively and shared learning."

Across the North East, teachers solve problems, headteachers transform schools, trusts develop successful approaches, local authorities build expertise and universities undertake research.

The problem is that we do not always know where that expertise is, whether it works, or how to make it available to others.

Collaboration therefore cannot be left to chance. We must identify and validate what works, then enable others to learn from it.

But this is not simply about copying. Success in a Sunderland school, say, cannot simply be transferred to Northumberland. Context matters. We must ask why it worked and what others can learn. We need to 'translate' successful practice so it can be relevant to different contexts - not simply 'transport' it.

■ 3. We need to develop leadership

The third requirement is leadership. Leadership today cannot simply mean overseeing an organisa-

tion. Increasingly, we need people who can use their knowledge and influence to improve outcomes beyond their own institution.

Professor Andy Hargreaves describes this as "leading from the middle."

It is about people and organisations accepting responsibility for the success of the wider system.

System leadership can operate within a family of schools or a school network, but its scope should not be confined there. The system leaders we now need must be able to engage beyond individual schools and networks, working with wider intermediary organisations, including local and regional authorities, universities, inspectorates and professional bodies, to align effort across the whole system.

■ Where does this leave us?

I believe the North East has an opportunity to do something distinctive.

Not another reorganisation. Not another centrally imposed structure. And certainly not an attempt to make every school the same.

Instead, we should create a cohesive regional approach that connects what we already have: schools, trusts, local authorities, universities, professional organisations and regional government.

We should judge any future reform against four straightforward questions:

Does it connect people and organisations?

Does it help knowledge and skills travel?

Does it strengthen professional capacity?

Does it develop people capable of leading improvement across the region?

And there is one final question that matters more than all the others:

Will our children be better off?

If the answer is yes, we are strengthening the education system.

If the answer is no, we may simply be rearranging the furniture.

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