

# On setting the agenda

## Whole School SEND as a model of system change

April 2018



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### Introduction

The 2016-2018 Department for Education school SEND workforce contract hosted by London Leadership Strategy ends this week. The evaluation report is close to completion and consistent feedback has praised the project's reach, impact, value for money and implementation. This is of massive credit to all involved and – while there is still work to do and, as always in a healthy review, a lot of 'even better ifs' – I am massively proud.

One of the reflections from a colleague a few weeks ago was that Whole School SEND – the project in part funded through the contract – had been an overnight success reaching a scale in 18 months that many struggled with over several years and with greater funding.

And this made me think. Because it wasn't. A success yes. Overnight far from it.

One of the things I often say to those I work with is that if you are waiting for the fund to come out to support the change that you want to make you are too late. Determine your vision and make funding work for you. Or – my father's best advice – luck is just preparation meeting opportunity.

This essay outlines some of the thinking behind Whole School SEND. From the aim to improve outcomes for learners with SEND through workforce development; to the identification of the system barriers and through to the model we adopted to address these system issues. It doesn't pretend to be an academic piece or an evaluation but rather a way of capturing the thinking in a process to influence a system.

### To first principles – when did the work really start

Whole School SEND didn't start when the DfE released the ITT for the tender in early 2016 – it started in 2012 when some of us were reviewing the ongoing challenges with inclusion and improving the outcomes of learners with SEND and was a response some of the key barriers we had identified in building school capacity to support learners with SEND.

### Summary of some of key barriers developing the skills of teachers and school leaders to support learners with SEND

- Much of knowledge to unlock better outcomes for children with SEND existed within the system, within schools – mainstream and special but there was nothing to connect these

schools together. This didn't feature in the school led system and models of school to school support

- That while traditional top down models of awareness and training had some impact (and DfE had funded to tune of c£25million plus) unless SEND was embedded into models of school improvement then wider school performance would be seen as the school priority and teachers would struggle to take the training into practice (this fits with wider evaluation of what works in teacher CPD)
- Charities and other experts had much specialist knowledge to bring to schools but schools often did not commission well or match commission to need
- There was inadequate investment in taking things to scale. The Cabinet Office communications spend ban was preventing spend on anything that had dissemination, marketing or communicating in its title and most projects saw the publication and launch of the final resource as 'the end' rather than the start of the bedding in. Evidence from communities of practice and movement theory in system change in business, the NHS and other sectors was emerging as impactful and had a direct read across to education, but this was not widely understood.
- We could not – in business terms or indeed in terms of how we worked with kids – have so many competing charities pushing impairment specific solutions into the school context. It ignored the fact that many children did not neatly fit into one diagnosis aligned to the charity split (i.e. autism, dyslexia, etc.) There needed to be some more effective collaboration and delivery built around needs of the child not the individual funding needs or service delivery models of each charity.
- But counter to this we had growing concerns about where specialist advice and support was to come from as it was becoming increasingly hard to find and fund.
- **Most of all there were growing concerns that the changes to education structures and accountability frameworks were going to impact on children with SEND at least as much as the actual SEND Reforms themselves and that this had been ignored by policy makers.**

## The barriers in more depth

While much DfE grant and contract funding (over £25million by 2012) had been invested in high quality CPD and evidence informed resources the corresponding investment in routes to take these to scale was marginal. This had ever been the case but the 'communications spend' ban by the incoming government meant that anything that looked like marketing, dissemination or "sharing" had to pass through the Cabinet Office checks and was limited.

More widely even when monies available the question of how to move knowledge to action was one that was being debated and the jury was out on how to scale 'what worked'.

There was also a growing concern that the structure of the lobby – being as it was broadly based around specific conditions – was not reflecting the reality of children and young people; many of who, particularly at a young age, do not easily fit into a diagnosis. Those impairment specific organisations with a more powerful organisational brand/funding were able to get more attention and funding and could secure policy change. This was often disproportionate to the data on prevalence.

This was and is not to decry the need for structures and support based around particular conditions or specialist input – and indeed it is really pleasing to see for example Development Language Disorder getting the profile and evidence base of what works. But rather it was running the risk of training support for teachers being based around the label attached to the child rather than the need that the child was presenting with. This was both wasteful – dyslexia training has significant overlaps with autism training which has significant overlaps with DLD training etc. And it ran the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and assuming a homogeneity amongst those who shared a label. Teachers and school leaders were asking for help to navigate the information in a different way.

However, while these were important issues they were not the largest concern. Charities were reflecting the growing import of ensuring that their work was positioned in the context of ‘what OFSTED wanted’ and the school improvement agenda – increasingly engaging with schools was becoming challenging for anyone working in the SEND field without responding to the question of what this would do for ‘league tables.’

On one hand responding to this was simply a matter of a pragmatic approach to help schools meet their agenda – demonstrating for example how supporting learners with dyslexia support progress and grades etc.

**But it was becoming clear that something more insidious was starting to happen.** The obsession with data, on the ‘catch up’ narrative and the increasing marketisation of education and the resulting breakdown in both LA and other support services were starting to impact on a system level on the outcomes for, and inclusion of, children with SEND. While the SEND reforms were in their infancy with some emerging issues, many of us had much wider concerns about the shift in the wider educational landscape.

It was clear that a model was needed that would work in this new world order and perhaps more importantly present some challenge.

## **Developing the concept**

The RSA have a concept of ‘act like an entrepreneur – think like a system’ and creating a working model meant having the reactive and nimble approaches of building a business while trying to understand how to impact on a complex eco system.

And this was the approach adopted to build Whole School SEND.

One of the mistakes people often make in affecting change is to attempt to start from a blank sheet – to assume that nobody has ever done it before. We’ve all done that. But in truth we stand on the shoulders of those who come before us and learn from those who work alongside us. Curiosity is an essential for system change – wondering who does what; how and why. Who has a piece of the puzzle; who holds the levers for change.

So those of us addressing this took on work that allowed for development of an understanding in the new school system; in knowledge mobilisation and evidence into practice and in how to build new collaborations and for me in continuing a lifelong obsession with how we support the inclusion of the 500,000 most vulnerable children and young people. Moreover, there was an active attempt to

find new voices and bring new talent to the table – the SEND lobby had been static for a decade and – while these individuals were, and are, leading lights – new problems needed new thinking.

And so, what did we decide?

## Our solution in summary

Having explored the barriers to helping school leaders and teachers develop their skills to support learners with SEND; and having explored the work of others, our solution was to:

- Develop a **community of practice** based around schools but in partnership with all who shared the vision
- **Embed the work in school improvement practice** – to learn from it but also to challenge the prevailing narrative that good ‘scores’ could not go hand in hand with inclusion. To empower school leaders of system leader schools to talk about how they achieved for all children and young people not just the ones who could be nudged to catch up or into a c grade.
- Create a **shared set of values** ([the WSS manifesto](#)) that people sign up to (which they did by [joining WSS](#))
- Develop an **open-ended review-based approach**. (see the [blog by Philip Garner](#) for why we chose this and evidence for same)
- **Support schools to carry out Reviews themselves and with each other**
- **Signpost them to solutions** for things that they couldn’t address within the school e.g. to special schools with expertise; to paid for or free third party SEND Reviews; to third sector; to other mainstream schools etc. While not the only vehicle we chose to partner with NASEN to make best use of the NASEN Portal, a digital repository for solutions (as well as their wider networks and expertise)
- **Deliberately undertake influencing activities** that prioritised SEND/SEND Reviews in schools and that placed SEND in prevailing wider school policy narrative e.g. academies, school to school support, outcomes etc. We commissioned a **Zeitgeist Report from LKMCo** that helped us understand the influences on SEND in the system and formed a baseline for our work.
- **Invest in people within the community of practice to create new system leaders** – to build on existing SEN SLEs but also to invest in SEND Reviewer Training; create the SEND Advocates programme; develop MAT Leader approach and build new training for Directors of SEND in MATs.
- **Celebrate success but also to hear the real stories** - to fund our own conferences to celebrate success and build community and create online community via social media that reached into parents and other stakeholders
- **Use feedback from schools and discussions with community** to inform future developments – e.g. **the TA Review, Preparing for Adulthood Review, AP, MAT Review** etc.

## Our choices in more depth:

**Approaches to SEND needed to be embedded in a leading school improvement body.** Early attempts to work in a new Academy Trust and with one of the other organisations to fall out of the London Challenge failed. London Leadership Strategy however presented with the ethical leadership of Professor David Woods and had already done some work on shaping the notion of an SEND Review approach. It was therefore both a natural home in terms of its brand and capacity but also

placed this work right in the eye of the storm; being run by Heads with a close eye on data, league tables and OFSTED.

**That a values-based approach was needed** – we drew heavily on movement theory and core to this was creating a shared sense of values and principles of working. The manifesto was at the core of this and people signed up to be part of Whole School SEND as a movement and network rather than an organisation per se.

**That schools needed help to know what it is they knew/didn't know** - in a system where schools were increasingly isolated – or at least had less support around SEND from either central or local government – it was clear that school leaders needed both a prompt to focus on SEND (compared to a well-funded and advocated pupil premium agenda from which we drew inspiration and learnt from). They also needed nudging and support to prioritise a focus on learners with SEND.

In 2015 we secured a DfE grant to codify the work that LLS had done on helping schools review their practice and this formed the SEND Review. This was – in counter to prevailing wisdom in many previous charity programmes – made available free and as a whole label approach allowing schools, LAs and others to brand and contextualise the review to their setting. A key learning from what works in sharing evidence was the import of local ownership and context and this continues to underpin all the Review models built by Whole school SEND; as was the drive to build local system leaders.

**That is needed to be school led but partnership run** – the third sector, parents and others had a wealth of expertise etc but this needed to be drawn in from schools in response to their own Reviews and assessments of needs – we needed to support schools as commissioners whether that came from within the school, from third sector or commercial providers, from parent and – a particular focus of the work – from other schools. The Consortium we developed to run this work formed a strategic partnership between school led (LLS) and charity leaders (NASEN) and rapidly pulled in parents, other school networks (Whole Education), exceptional special schools and ethical and bold system leaders such as Malcolm Reeve and Simon Knight.

**That models to take to scale were key** - we drew on a strong evidence base of what worked alongside professional judgement from leading practitioners but what mattered was how to spread this further. As well as the Review approach we drew on both movement theory and the creation of a community of practice. We followed closely the work of EEF, Centre for Inclusive Education and work coming out of NHS to draw on what worked best in knowledge mobilisation.

**Capacity needed to be built into system** - in part this built on the school improvement model; mirroring training for NLEs and SLEs and creating a cohort of SEND Reviewers and eventually MAT level Reviewers. But it was more than this. There was a specific effort to emerge new talent and new voices – to give champions of inclusion working in schools and succeeding a place at the table to inform policy and practice across system. We recruited 10 exceptional system leaders in an open process and paid for their time and development. We also – based on work that had already been done at A New Direction in cultural education – developed a SEND Advocates programme. Recruiting - again in an open process – over 30 teachers and other experts to skill them in policy, fundraising, impact measurement and advocacy. This investment in the people is a core part in helping the movement to spread but was to add frontline voices to the pro inclusion agenda.

**Proactive plan to embed this into the system.** This was key. This was a programme of system change. There was a specific workforce contract to deliver for Department for Education and this was done effectively and to remarkable standards in sometimes challenging contexts. But to deliver this contract and to address the barriers to change we had to work hard on understanding the blocks and levers in the system.

## **Did it work?**

In terms of delivering the DfE SEND contract – absolutely. We built an exceptional team and the contract outcomes were delivered even beyond the ambitious expectations of the DfE and bid team. And in terms of impact on individual schools the evaluation report shows some promising responses – the scene is well set to embed the work over the two years ahead and the WSS team will write separately on this.

### **But in addressing the challenges we saw 5 years ago?**

Certainly, some promise.

As a model for taking ‘what works’ to scale we have seen over 4,000 schools engage with the work and whole MATs and LAs adopt the approach as their own. Early reports on changes in practice are promising and the Education Endowment Foundation has funded a trial of the TA Review/school to school model as part of work combining it with Maximising Impact of Teaching Assistants Knowledge Transfer approach in a project led by Centre for Inclusive Education with LLS.

The SEND Advocates has created a cohort of new local system leaders and a network able to self-organise and impact on change. SEND and MAT Reviewers has developed individuals able to better reflect on their own practice and start to support others with theirs. And the MAT Directors of Inclusion Programme and SEND Leaders have allowed some exceptional system leaders to have a platform to lead in their Trusts and nationally.

And the model as helped the move back against a system that – as predicted increasingly isolating children and young people with SEND. Creating a movement with a moral core and led by schools meant that we added voices to the mix that demonstrated that inclusion was not at the expense of good outcomes. And in creating a system embedded in the school improvement we anchored these to the wider ‘zeitgeist’. There is no doubt that Whole School SEND – through its conferences, its work and the networks it has created and emboldened - has helped the shift.

The approach has undoubtedly started to change things at a system level. We have seen a notable shift in thinking and leadership at OFSTED around SEND and the Review based approach and work of WSS has had a clear impact. Strategic School Improvement Funds are focusing on SEND projects at a significant level and RSCs and MATs are prioritising outcomes for learners with SEND – these are notable shifts in funding and practice priorities. EEF have started to talk about the shortfalls in their evidence for SEND and are looking to consider how they can evaluate the SEND evidence base.

There are the green shoots of increased co—operation between condition specific groups to start to look at areas of overlap but this could usefully be something for further development. Similarly, one

of the unexpected but welcome outcomes of the work was in the collaboration between mainstream, special and alternative provision and this is something to build on.

## **Even better if?**

System change is challenging. It is messy and can challenge traditional power structures. More time on helping those that governed this work to understand this – and to embrace rather than fear it – would have been useful.

Similarly, collaboration is hard – especially in a time of increased competition and marketisation. More work on exploring the tension between cooperation and competition is essential for entire system.

## **What next?**

The next two years of the DfE SEND workforce contract will usefully build on that already created. But the contract is – in many ways – just a means to an end. An important funding stream and central government endorsement of the work but is important to see this a mechanic rather than as the mission.

So, what next both for the system and for those of us working as agents of change?

As the government continues to create a model where all funding is bid for through grants and contracts (and we would argue that this needs challenge) we must have a proactive movement to ensure that no funding is awarded without checking how the work will support and include our most vulnerable children and young people. The value of funding awarded in grants and contracts dwarfs that which is dedicated to SEND. Every single TLIF and SSIF bid, every MAT Development Fund, each phonics grant, every ITT contract must each be assessed to ensure that their content, approach and the hosting organisation is fit to deliver support for learners with SEND.

We need to consider carefully public health models for commissioning. I have written previously on the Challenges with the [Communication Trust](#). The fragmentation of procurement – splitting ‘specialist’ support from ‘universal’ provision cannot continue. In speech, language, reading and writing we need models of procurement that recognise that good targeted and specialist support is linked to universal provision. Commissioning for example a whole model of Literacy support without mention of dyslexia or other SEND is a nonsense and yet the slides from the recent market warming exercise of literacy hubs suggests this to be the case.

We must find the missing specialists – so having made the point that good universal and targeted provision works for most children with SEND most of the time this support draws down from the specialists. Where are our speech and language therapists, our educational psychologists, our dyslexia teachers; how are we supporting and funding our special school estate and dealing with special school recruitment. This requires a co-ordinated programme of work and this is one of the areas I am working on over months ahead including a piece around ‘releasing the special from specials’.

More though – the challenge for the next 5 years will undoubtedly be the growth of the attainment and outcome gap. And necessarily we are shifting out language from attainment (which while useful is a narrow view of outcomes focusing as it does on a thin wedge of measures around academic qualification) to outcomes – that includes health, well-being, financial security and being valued as a member of society. Whole School SEND can make a significant contribution to this, but the definition of movements is that they continue to move. There is an ongoing job of work to do.