



Medway Teaching
Schools Alliance

PEER REVIEW AND CHALLENGE

A strategy for school to school support for improvement

The Medway Teaching School Alliance

GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNING BODIES

Supported by Local Government Association and
Canterbury Christ Church University

1. Introduction

Peer review and challenge has been used in a range of educational contexts as a strategy for enhancing self-evaluation through external reference.

The common denominator in all models is that peers come together and spend time in each other's contexts to review practice, share expertise, recommend strategies for development and challenge each other to achieve continuous improvement.

In 2013 The Medway Teaching School Alliance piloted a model of peer challenge between schools in the alliance. The pilot was supported by funding from the Local Government Association (LGA) and was formally evaluated in partnership with Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU).¹

3 primary and 3 secondary schools were involved in the pilot, each being represented by their Headteachers. In the case of the secondary pilot, Chairs of Governors were also undertook a parallel peer review².

2. Underpinning Values

School-led improvement

Peer review and challenge is offered as one of a number of strategies to support school improvement. There is no compulsion involved and schools opt into the process if and when they believe it is useful to them. Each school chooses the issue or theme for review based on their own evaluation of their school's priorities; this ensures that the outcomes can be readily built into each school's improvement planning.

Collaborative

A key principal of the model is that school leaders support each other in their improvement by offering support and challenge. The peer review process is a collaborative endeavour, the outcomes of which derive from schools 'doing it for themselves'. It supports the development of self-evaluative and reflective skills in participating leaders and build capacity for school-led improvement.

Sustainability

Peer review is a sustainable model which does not depend upon externally commissioned or costed services; it takes 3-4 days to complete a cycle of review. The process not only provides the external challenge and evaluation required by schools but offers valuable professional development for participating school leaders. As the model gains traction in Medway it is hoped that early adopters will champion the model and support and induct new partners as they engage.

'It's all about trust'

Trust between governing bodies is an essential feature of the process. Participating bodies will need to have the confidence to share honest self-evaluation with their peers and in turn will find that the experience builds trust between colleagues who gain respect for each other.

'Every governing body can learn something from their peers'

The peer review process ensures that the benefits are reciprocal. Each governing

¹ The full report is available from www.mtsa.co.uk

² A separate guidance document is available for Headteachers

body gains from the insights of others, contributes expertise to support their peers and takes away models of practice that influence change in their own governing body.

What Headteachers said:

‘The peer review will make a difference to pupil attainment this year.’

‘... we are doing it to ourselves, rather than someone coming in and telling us.’

‘Explore, discuss, observe, challenge – its all done in a day.’

‘... we are a better school for having done it.’

‘We are going to make some significant changes as a result of the peer review.’

‘We want to invite people back and do it again’

What Governors also said:

‘... we don’t normally talk to each other...we don’t know each other that well... but it’s amazing how helpful it is to meet and discuss’.

‘.....[it gives you a] sense of being connected to something’.

The Peer Review process - At a glance

The peer review involves 3 governing bodies working as a trio. Each governing body identifies a theme or area of their development that it wishes to review through the process. The group spend a day in each of the schools conducting the review, during which they may tour the school, visit classes, meet with staff and governors, review documentation as appropriate to the theme. At the end of the day, peers provide feedback to the host Chair of Governors. Colleagues may then decide to meet again to review the impact of any changes made by the school.

Setting up a Peer Review – Top Tips

1. Establish a trio of schools
 - Consider schools that offer contrasts and are not in direct competition for pupils
 - Schools new to the process might initially work with one who has already had experience of the process
 - Peer review may not be appropriate for all schools at the particular point in their improvement journey

3. Prepare for the review
 - Commit time to meet together to plan the peer review
 - Agree the themes for review in each school (see 3. below)
 - Consider how you want to organise each day and who else to involve
 - Agree any information to provide in advance, for example data or policies relating to the focus of the visit
 - Establish agreement regarding confidentiality
 - Set all 3 dates and times in advance
 - Plan a schedule for each day, allowing time for an initial input by the host Chair of Governors and sufficient time for discussion at the end of the visit
 - Establish your expectations regarding the reports to be produced (See 5. below)

4. Choose the theme for review
 - Each governing body chooses their own theme, this might derive from the a recent inspection or from the '20 Questions for Governors' (Appendix B) or the Review of Governance framework (Appendix C) which addresses the 9 key areas relevant to governance from the Ofsted inspection framework
 - The theme is likely to be one which features within the school's priorities
 - Chairs of Governors need to be prepared to be honest in the self-evaluation and to present their peers with an accurate picture

4. Conduct the visits
 - Circulate a detailed plan for the day in advance
 - The host school may provide a brief introduction on the day, to reinforce the focus and provide contextual information
 - The host is responsible for ensuring that staff and students understand the context of the visitors who will be in the school and classes
 - Host Chairs of Governors should avoid 'showcasing' or micro-managing the visit
 - Arrange the day to allow maximum flexibility for appreciative enquiry and opportunities for peers to gain as many perspectives as possible.
 - Chairs of Governors may choose to be accompanied by a member of the

governing body, particularly if they have a particular interest in the theme of the review

- Chairs of Governors may choose to engage a facilitator for the review to assist in organising the days, facilitating discussion and recording the feedback

5. Reporting on the visit

- A verbal report on the visit and the key observations should be made at the end of each day
- A short written report may be provided either produced by the visitors or by the host following verbal feedback from the visitors
- Chairs of Governors need to be both supportive and challenging in their reflections, offering practical suggestions and balancing the celebration of positive features with notes on areas for development
- The host Chair of Governors is responsible for planning and implementing any actions arising from the visit
- The report and its contents remain confidential between the peers and are shared within the host school at the host Chair of Governors discretion
- The report may comment on the observations relating to theme but it is also useful to comment on the peer review process itself

6. Following up

- Visitors should remember to thank those involved in the visits
- Host Chairs of Governors should arrange a debrief session to inform school staff (and students/parents where appropriate) of the outcomes
- It is useful for Chairs of Governors to discuss the outcomes of the peer review with their Headteachers
- Following a review, Chairs of Governors may wish to meet again, for example 6 months later, to review and discuss the changes made in the schools as a result of the peer review and early indicators of impact.

7. Developing the model

- Once you have completed a trio, consider what your next steps might be. For example:
 - Governing bodies may want to help extend the model by initiating another trio with 2 schools new to the peer review process
 - As a group of 3 you may wish to re-visit the peer review, either on the same or different topics, regularly. However the pilots cautioned against the relationship becoming too 'cosy' and recommended that new relationships be developed as well as existing one sustained
- While the detail and contents of the reports remain confidential between the trio, the trio is invited to identify good practice for sharing across the wider Alliance

For further information and guidance on the Peer Review process, please contact:

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Schools participating in the phase 1 pilot

- **Greenacre Academy**
Headteacher: Andy Reese, Chair of Governors: Sue Butler
- **The Hundred of Hoo Academy**
Headteacher: Gary Vyse, Chair of Governors: Peter Clough
- **Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School**
Headteacher: Eliot Hodges, Chair of Governors: Michael Costello
- **Cliffe Woods Primary**
Headteacher: Tim Watson
- **Hilltop Primary School**
Headteacher: Gavin Evans
- **Wainscott Primary School**
Headteacher: Liz Edwins

Twenty key questions for a school governing body to ask itself

Right skills: Do we have the right skills on the governing body?

1. Have we completed a skills audit of our governing body?
2. Do we appoint governors on the basis of their skills, and do we know how to find people with the necessary skills?

Effectiveness: Are we as effective as we could be?

3. Do we understand our roles and responsibilities?
4. Do we have a professional clerk and run meetings efficiently?
5. What is our training and development budget and does every governor receive the support they need to carry out their role effectively?
6. Do we know about good practice from across the country?
7. Is the size, composition and committee structure of our governing body conducive to effective working?
8. Does every member of the governing body make a regular contribution and do we carry out an annual review of the governing body's performance?

Strategy: Does the school have a clear vision?

9. Have we developed long-term aims for the school with clear priorities in an ambitious school development plan which is regularly monitored and reviewed?
10. Does our strategic planning cycle drive the governing body's activities and agenda setting?

Accountability of the executive: Do we hold the school leaders to account?

11. Do we understand the school's performance data well enough to properly hold school leaders to account?
12. How effective is our performance management of the headteacher?
13. Are our financial management systems robust and do we ensure best value for money?

Engagement: Are we properly engaged with our school community, the wider school sector and the outside world?

14. How do we listen to and understand our pupils, parents and staff?
15. How do we report to our parents and local community regularly?
16. What benefit do we draw from collaboration with other schools and other sectors, locally and nationally?

Role of chair: Does our chair show strong and effective leadership?

17. Do we carry out a regular 360 review of the chair's performance?
18. Do we engage in good succession planning?
19. Are the chair and committee chairs re-elected each year?

Impact: Are we having an impact on outcomes for pupils?

20. How much has the school improved over the last three years, and what has the governing body's contribution been to this?

External Review of Governance

Although designed specifically for schools requiring improvement, the review framework offers a useful self-review framework for any governing body.

The review is based in the nine criteria for the effectiveness of governance as laid out in the School Inspection Handbook, Ofsted, September 2012. The nine criteria are mapped across to the 20 questions from the all-parliamentary group (Appendix B).

1. How well governors ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
2. How well governors contribute to the school's self-evaluation and understand its strengths and weaknesses
3. How well governors support and strengthen school leadership
4. How well governors provide challenge and hold the Headteacher and other senior leaders to account for improving the quality of teaching, pupils' achievement and pupils' behavior and safety
5. How well governors set performance management systems, including the performance management of the Headteacher, to improve teaching, leadership and management
6. How well governors ensure solvency and probity and the financial resources made available to the school are managed effectively
7. How well governors operate in such a way that statutory duties are met and priorities are approved.
8. How well governors engage with key stakeholders
9. How well governors use the pupil premium (PP) and other resources to overcome barriers to learning, including reading, writing and mathematics.

The full framework, guidance and action planning templates can be found at <http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/docinfo?id=178223&filename=framework-for-external-reviews-of-governance.pdf>