Introduction

The Improving Schools: Raising Standards in Welsh Education Conference was held at Cardiff City Stadium on Monday 18 March 2013. The focus of the conference was implementation of the Improving Schools Plan launched in October 2012 as the basis to improve literacy, improve numeracy and reduce the impact of deprivation on educational outcomes.

Two hundred delegates came together from across the education system in Wales: about a third from schools, half from local authorities or regional consortia, and the rest from central government and partner organisations. A further 440 delegates joined the conference via the webinar on or following the event. The conference programme included plenary presentations from expert speakers, group discussions, panel question-and-answer sessions, and interactive workshops. The plenary inputs and presentations captured some of the current challenges with implementation in Wales and are available on the Learning Wales website.

The Minister for Education and Skills opened the conference and set the scene by talking about the school improvement journey in Wales since 2011, emphasising the move from theory to practice, progress made so far and setting high expectations for the journey into the future. Sir Michael Barber put this journey in context both in terms of the current economic challenges faced globally, what we know the best education systems in the world are doing and the implications for the improvement journey in Wales. David Carter gave some practical examples of the changes he has made at school level with a particular emphasis on tackling disadvantage and narrowing attainment gaps. Finally, Robert Hill drew out some key implications for Wales, based on the evidence cited in the presentations throughout the day and his own evidence gathering as part of the review of the future delivery of education services in Wales.

The main strands of discussion during the conference closely followed the themes of the Improving Schools Plan: effective learning and teaching in schools, effective leadership at all levels in schools, effective partnerships around schools and implementation across the education system. This report aims to sketch the main strands of discussion during the conference and the conclusions reached.

The discussions at the conference highlighted both the commitment of the system to raise standards in Wales and to share ideas on how to do it. We hope that this report captures these discussions and acts as a further catalyst for implementing the Improving Schools Plan.
“Improve the quality of teaching and the amount of time learners are exposed to it.”

Sir Michael Barber stressed during his plenary session the importance of investing in the quality of the school workforce and drew parallels between the reforms underway in Wales and in other countries. There was a strong commitment to supporting vulnerable learners and how, if you can really focus on the quality of teaching for the most vulnerable, they will benefit and so will everybody else. If you can increase the amount of time vulnerable children spend on task in school you will affect their lives and will narrow gaps.

Discussions during workshops built on this. They emphasised the importance of actively engaging the whole-school workforce, including support staff, in the delivery of the improvements outlined in the Improving Schools Plan. They outlined what effective staff development looks like. One idea to emerge was moving away from ‘out-of-school courses’ towards more in-classroom approaches, such as coaching, to improve the quality of teaching and learning, such as the Improving Teacher Programme.

Practical elements of improving learning and teaching were explored in more depth during the workshops. David Carter built on his plenary input and explained in more depth how his School Federation had improved internal consistency and teacher development as part of a drive to ensure 85 per cent of lessons were at least good or outstanding. Discussion focused on the following aspects: setting aspirational targets, regular feedback following lesson observations, the use of ‘learning walks’ and ‘lesson drop-ins’, each with an emphasis on the progress of the most vulnerable learners.

David also described the broader work to support vulnerable learners and emphasised the importance of the team around the child which included access to support such as speech and language and education psychology support, and the use of parent forums to engage the hard-to-reach.

“For devolution (of resources to schools) to work you need really good headteachers which means training and developing the future generation of headteachers in Wales and it means connecting and enabling the headteachers in post to learn from each other.”

Delegates discussed the important role of middle leaders in schools and the wide range of professional development available at the moment – the challenge was to ensure that professional development was consistently of a high quality and allowed participants to gain knowledge of different schools through opportunities such as between school secondments. Setting expectations for the role of executive heads, leading more than one school, also featured strongly – the importance of coaching and networking roles for example were stressed over it just being seen as a ‘super or figure-head’ role.
“There is a real opportunity to get the system functioning in an aligned way that could make big progress.”

Throughout the conference it was clear that implementation of the Improving Schools Plan requires a system-wide effort from Welsh Government, through regional consortia and local authorities, to schools and into the classroom. The system is currently in transition as the Department for Education and Skills strengthens its own role on delivery and local authorities implement regional consortia. Discussions focused on the system and how it is not quite working collectively and together as one at the moment – relationships and links along the delivery chain need constant work to ensure they are clear and strong, especially during this period of change. They also need to be of the highest quality and based on the best practice from around the world. Also, with the implementation of new initiatives such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) underway, discussion focused on ensuring roles for implementation were clear to prevent duplication of effort and to ensure a focus on what happens in classrooms and ensuring greater consistency between classrooms.

“‘Systemness’: system can be a huge bureaucracy that gets in the way or it can be the key to bringing coherence to a set of reforms . . . I see Wales on the brink of getting ‘systemness’ right.”

The Improving Schools Plan sets out an important and ambitious reform agenda – there is real clarity about the goals, and there is a plan and coherence in the way the agenda is described.

The themes of the Improving Schools Plan follow what we know about what makes a great education system – a need to ensure the plan is implemented effectively and seen through. This means resisting implementing new initiatives and not making the common mistake in thinking that getting the policy right is 90 per cent of the task and 10 per cent implementation. The reverse is true – getting the policy right is the easy bit and getting the implementation right is 90 per cent of the task.

There is momentum and this is too often a hugely underestimated quality in the change of public systems but momentum by definition needs to be continued to be effective.