University of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

EXTERNAL EVALUATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

PREPARED FOR

WEST PARTNERSHIP

REGIONAL IMPROVEMENT COLLABORATIVE

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2023 Report 3

SEPTEMBER 2023

Foreword

Since the establishment of the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) in 2017 the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow has been working in partnership to evaluate impact and progress of developments. This is the seventh evaluation report and third and final report for the academic year 2022-2023. The findings from this phase of the evaluation highlight the West Partnership's contribution to and impact on the education of 35% of Scotland's children and young people, educated in over 1000 establishments across the west of Scotland.

During the RIC's short history the Collaborative has successfully navigated the effects of a global pandemic which led to the prolonged closure of most educational establishments and the suspension of national examinations, and a series of national reviews of the education system. Furthermore, the RIC continues to grapple with the implications of proposed educational reforms, challenging industrial relations and resourcing, cope with wider geo-political issues such population displacement from the Russian/Ukraine conflict, deal with the socio-economic implications caused by a cost-of-living crisis and attempt to understand and mitigate the existential challenge of climate change.

The key message from this report is that by working together local authorities, school leaders, teachers and other educators can add value to each other's work. In doing so, collectively they can enhance the learning and ultimately life chances of the children and young people they serve more than if they work in isolation. Put simply, if we are to successfully tackle the stark challenges outlined above, we will be stronger and more successful if we work together collaboratively as part of a Networked Learning System rather than if we attempt to take on the challenges alone or in siloed units.

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University of Glasgow, September 2023

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To cite this report: Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (2023) *West Partnership External Evaluation Executive Summary Report: 2023 (Report 3)*. University of Glasgow: Glasgow

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the third phase of the evaluation covering the period 2022-2023.

This phase of the study focused on addressing two overarching research questions:

1. To what extent are West Partnership (WP) workstreams and programmes being implemented in schools and classrooms? This gave insights into the reach of the partnership as well as engagement and impact at different levels.
2. To what extent, and in what ways, are the workstreams and programmes impacting on children, young people (CYP) and families? This gave insights on the nature of impact and related processes/factors.

Evidence base

The evaluation adopted a mixed-method approach. Qualitative evidence was gathered using in-depth interviews conducted between June – September 2023 with additional information collected by notetaking, face-to-face observation and online professional learning events and dialogue with workstream leads. Quantitative evidence was gathered through an online survey (n=472). The overwhelming majority of responses (85%) were from staff working in educational establishments.

Key findings

Areas of progress and strength

Within and Between Schools

The effects of the pandemic are still being experienced throughout the system, particularly on staff and CYP`s health and wellbeing and having a detrimental impact on attendance. The impact of professional learning on teachers offered by the WP facilitated dialogue and evidence-informed collaborative working with colleagues across LA`s, which mitigated the negative impacts on CYP during recovery and beyond. WP had a positive impact on supporting recovery from the pandemic.

The collaborative culture and trust established in the WP Board is reflected in the wider working of the system. This has developed over time and was accelerated through tacking the challenges of COVID-19. This collective agency has enhanced the

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functioning of the Board, fostered a culture of collaboration and promoted synergy across the local authorities.

Programmes such as Improving Our Classrooms/Departments/Schools (IOC/D/S), Thinking About Headship, Early Years activity, Pedagogy for All, and Curriculum: Learning and Teaching Cycle and the Curriculum Groups were seen as key drivers in promoting cross-authority working and school partnership.

There has been substantial progress regarding impact of the WP objectives at school and classroom level and across WP. The evaluation evidence strongly indicates that teachers' engagement with the WP has enhanced their professional learning, enabling them to positively impact on CYP`s learning and achievement.

Moreover, the learning from WP activity is being embedded in school improvement planning which is promoting the sustainability of effective practice and strategies in schools.

Beyond the School

There is evidence that practitioner and other professionals' engagement with the WP has impacted beyond the classroom, school and across local authorities.

Building relationships and engagement with parents/carers was seen as crucial to collaboratively supporting CYP`s learning.

There was recognition of the ongoing challenge of impacting positively on parents/carers and the wider community, particularly following the pandemic. However, there were examples of positive developments including family-centred work to improve transitions, attendance and wellbeing of CYP.

Key enablers to progress

- The strategic leadership provided by the Board; the collaborative culture and trust established in the WP Board is reflected in the wider working of the system. This has developed over time and was accelerated through tackling the challenges of COVID-19.
- WP activity has promoted collaboration and partnership working at strategic and operational levels in LAs and within and across schools and sectors. Importantly the WP is reported to have promoted networked learning, sharing of practice and resources across the local authorities.

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- Professional learning informed by established models of good practice. The positive impact of the WP's programmes reflects models of effective professional learning practice in the literature. The WP professional learning and resources are also based on a research-based and collaborative model of improvement that aligns teaching strategies with the needs of CYP and curriculum design.
- Data-informed systems, tools and resources. These developments across the WP have played a role in fostering collaboration and impact. This includes a focused attainment/ achievement database, and the Early Years self-evaluation tool.
- Improved partnership working facilitated by the WP has supported the mobilisation of knowledge and expertise and created networks that are informing and enhancing practice in the classroom. This mobilisation of expertise and resources is promoting systems change within and across the local authorities.
- WP activities have an emphasis on self-reflection and self-evaluation which had led to increased evidence-informed practice and greater empowerment to innovate. This activity includes Collaborative Action Research (CAR) which is offered through a number of WP programmes.

Key inhibitors to progress

- The challenge of finding time for school visits and arranging cover for teachers released from school, exacerbated by the recovery from the pandemic, its lasting impact on staffing and the needs of CYP are major disruptive factors for the WP and system change and educational improvement efforts across the Country.
- Staff are continuing to cope with illness and absenteeism and attendance at WP events is still an issue for schools across the partnership.
- Strategic leaders indicated that most teachers are aware of the WP offer. However, practitioners suggest that some colleagues perceive opportunities as being for 'others' and for school leaders.
- Varied accessibility to online resources and support across the local authorities was seen as an ongoing challenge for some establishments. Not all local authorities use Glow and practitioners also highlighted issues with internet technology.

Commentary

The evaluation findings are very positive and strongly suggest that the WP is making very good progress in supporting improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in schools and promoting positive outcomes of children and young people (CYP). The

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strategies of the WP have evolved to address the changing demands of the context in which it operates. This was evident in its rapid adaptation to meet the huge challenges imposed by COVID-19. Given the relatively modest levels of Government funding for the RICS, the added-value benefit of the WP in tackling educational equity and improvement is substantial. However, the WP, will need to continue to adapt, not only to diminishing public funding in the system, but also to the developing policy landscape.

The challenge of achieving equity also remains paramount and a strong focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap is still evident in Scottish government policy. However, following the detrimental impact of the pandemic on learner and practitioner wellbeing and learning, the focus of educational policy is increasingly reflecting health and wellbeing and wider community priorities. The importance of integrating appropriate sustainable digital infrastructure and connectivity for learning is also a government target. The WP has already recognised these challenges and its programmes now include additional health and wellbeing content. Moreover, it has been particularly innovative in the use of technology to facilitate its ongoing activity. Such developments have been acknowledged and welcomed by practitioners across the WP.

The WP's approach is founded on collaborative educational improvement principles and continues to embed evidence-informed collaborative working across its programmes. The WP's approach, with its enquiring stance, is key to ensuring the partnership is able to reflect and evolve to achieve its aims within the wider policy context. As the recommendations of recent educational reforms are actioned, the challenge for the WP will be to reflect these national priorities and translate them into action in a way that recognises regional and local context and need.

The WP is extremely well placed to support practitioners, school leaders, educational officers and partner colleagues address the priorities of the new educational and social landscape.

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