

The background of the entire page is a collage of images related to education. It includes a man in a yellow shirt gesturing while speaking, a woman in a white lab coat interacting with students, and a close-up of a person's hand holding a pen. The collage is overlaid with a grid pattern and various geometric shapes in blue and yellow. The University of Manchester logo is in the top left corner.

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# **THE PLACE OF AREA- BASED EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS IN ENGLAND**

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Belinda C. Hughes and Paul Armstrong  
Manchester Institute of Education  
September 26, 2023

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## ABSTRACT

Despite successive government initiatives with the declared intent of addressing equity and inclusion within the English education system, significant numbers of children and young people remain marginalized within, or excluded from, schools.

This indicates a need for locally coordinated efforts to promote equity in education. One response to these issues is Area-based Partnerships (ABPs) which are collectives or groups of schools working with other stakeholders operating in localised contexts to support school improvement initiatives and provide professional development and training.

In this article, [Dr Belinda C. Hughes](#) and [Dr Paul Armstrong](#) outline their study investigating these partnerships and make policy recommendations for their governance and accountability.

- ✦ University of Manchester researchers investigated several ABPs in a study analysing their implication on local coordination within education systems.
- ✦ These partnerships can lack formal governance structures, and formal regulation and they can add further complexity to the education system.
- ✦ Governance structures of these partnerships should be formalised through a Local Authority presence.



## AREA-BASED PARTNERSHIPS AND OUR RESEARCH

These partnerships have emerged in response to the discontinuation of funding for local authority education services, specifically for school improvement. This is part of a longer standing reduction in the use of intermediaries of the local education authority in England. This absence has necessitated school leaders to fill the gap left in provision with formalised collaborative arrangements in particular areas. Such partnerships comprise local Head teachers, or Multi-Academy Trust Chief Executive Officers and in many cases Local Authority officers such as Directors of Children Services.

It is against this backdrop that colleagues from the University of Manchester were commissioned by the Staff College to investigate eight of these partnerships across regions of the English school system. The study aimed to investigate such partnerships in a bid to discover:

- ✦ What conditions facilitate the establishment of ABPs
- ✦ How do they operate and what are the benefits of such partnerships
- ✦ What barriers do they face and how are these being addressed?
- ✦ What are the implications for the creation of effective forms of local coordination within education systems?

The two-year small-scale project involved identifying area-based partnerships operating in different geographical contexts (urban and rural). We looked at both well established and relatively new ABPs, those who were working directly with their local authority counterparts, those overseen by LA and those who operated exclusively beyond LAs. Initial scoping exercises revealed their foundations, aims, and status, how they were funded and how they were governed. Some were public limited companies or registered as charities for example.

Several involved maintained schools, faith schools, academies, and multi-academy trusts. Thirty interviews were conducted with colleagues directly involved in running the partnerships including head teachers, Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) CEOs, Councillors, and Directors of Teaching/development hubs.



## LOCAL CONTEXT MATTERS

The research project arranged for focus groups to share initial findings - culminating in the publication by the Staff College of *Turning the Tide Report: A study of place-based partnerships*. Empirical evidence from the study revealed locally coordinated efforts to promote a more equitable based education are vital – and that social and political capital are key factors in the success of ABPs.

The findings suggest that the local context of these area-based partnerships matter, tackling issues at the local level where a deeper understanding of communities and their complexities is key. Whilst inequity amongst young people remains a major problem for schools and policy makers, area-based partnerships have a potentially important role to play in ameliorating challenges particularly when working with Local Authorities.

## A LACK OF GOVERNANCE

Other findings reveal partnerships lack formal governance structures. Some operate independently of any local authority presence and are founded and financed in different ways, thus adding further complexity to the education system. There was little evidence to suggest that the Regional Department for Education Directors have any partnership involvement.

The success and sustainability of these partnerships relies on the presence of locally situated key players and funding based on membership fees. In areas where the local authority capacity has declined, there is a concern surrounding who will act as the conscience of the school system in these areas. Area-based partnerships have the potential to occupy this role but funding will be required for this to happen effectively and comprehensively.

Our research findings indicate that ABPs should be led locally and work with other community stakeholders including the LA to support wider issues surrounding children's' mental health, attendance and learner's needs. This would mean policymakers should consider a radical redefining of the place of schools within the wider civic society.

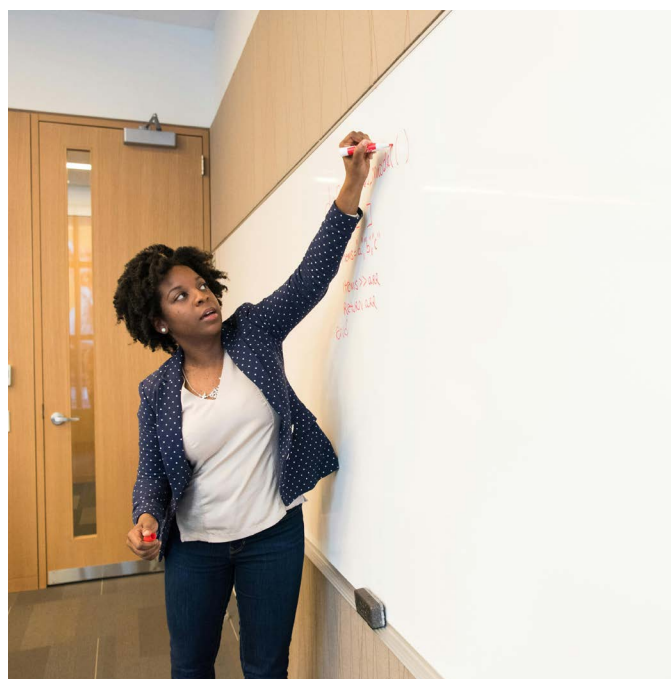
The Department of Education should also establish a clearer role for Department of Education regional Directors to have more detailed oversight of these ABPs.

## FURTHER POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The lack of formal governance structures found by the study points to the need for a system of evidence-based professional accountability, coordinated at the local level. This implies a move away from a heavy reliance on external accountability, such as Ofsted, towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. This would have implications for a redesign of the current inspection system where the moderation of local accountability processes operates.

- ✦ National and local policymakers in education should also consider:
- ✦ Headteachers/CEOs of multi-academy trusts need to have a broader understanding and training of their roles as key partners with local authorities for which both can significantly impact on the lives of children and young people.
- ✦ Education policy should encourage school leadership to adopt a more outward looking approach that considers the wider needs within communities and the importance of investing in broader outcomes than just educational performance.
- ✦ Funding linked to wider community resources needs to be formalised and targeted to ABPs with LA oversight.
- ✦ Agenda setting should occur within the ABPs themselves.

We also advise that more research needs to take place on the many partnerships operating across England to gain a more detailed picture of their effectiveness.





# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## DR BELINDA HUGHES

Bee is a Senior Lecturer in the Manchester Institute of Education lecturing in educational policy and leadership. Her research interests centre on leadership of multi-academy trusts, education policy, school collaborations and the work of Hannah Arendt.

Her most recent publications include a book chapter entitled Leading in a crisis of public truth: how school leaders are navigating lying in politics.

Bee was a school leader in Hong Kong and the UK for over twenty years before working at the University of Manchester



## DR PAUL ARMSTRONG

Dr Paul Armstrong is a senior lecturer at the Manchester Education Institute. His research interests concern contemporary forms of educational leadership and management, in particular the means by which schools as organisations are managed and resourced. He is also interested in collaboration within and between educational settings and how such activity is informed and influenced by policy.



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