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National College for
School Leadership

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Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives

Stepping up,
stepping out:
learning about leadership

NCSL's Leadership Network in conference

Stepping up, stepping out: learning about leadership

In 2007 NCSL's Leadership Network annual conference 'Stepping up, stepping out' brought together over 500 school leaders and others in education-related roles to explore their learning about school leadership in the current context and share perspectives drawn from research, policy and practice.

This booklet summarises the contributions, discussion and ideas generated by the conference participants.

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Stepping up, stepping out: learning about leadership

About the Leadership Network

NCSL's Leadership Network is a national network for school leaders and others in education-related leadership roles, with nine regional networks across the country. It represents school leaders from all phases, as active members of NCSL, contributing to leadership learning and drawing policy issues from professional practice. It aims to bring the best of school leadership into local, regional and national debate. The Network offers opportunities to develop local solutions to national issues through membership of local and regional networks and innovative development and policy informing initiatives. It provides access to network events, publications and regular updates on network activity designed to enable network members to share in the latest thinking and practice of school leaders nationwide.

This has been an exciting year in the development of the Leadership Network which has seen its membership rapidly expand and the scope and scale of its events and activities increase. As a national network with close to 4,000 members across nine regions, the Network is set for further expansion in the coming year and hopes to reach at least 25 per cent of schools in England. As Steve Munby, NCSL's Chief Executive has made clear: *"My ambition is that school leaders working together as part of this network will help to transform school leadership at a local and regional level. This requires a fundamental belief that we have, that if we are going to transform school leadership it will be school leaders who will lead that transformation. That's why the Leadership Network is so important."*

The Leadership Network's conference

'Stepping up, stepping out' was the fourth annual conference of the Leadership Network and consisted of three supra-regional events held in north, south and central England. It brought together over 500 school leaders and others in education-related roles to explore their learning about school leadership in the current context and share perspectives drawn from research, policy and practice.

A combination of inputs and discussion forums examined new models of leadership and the associated implications for school leaders in stepping up and stepping out to leadership in the 21st century. In response to this focus, three key themes emerged as characterising the conference debate:

1. strategic leadership

2. building leadership capacity

3. leadership for 21st century learning

Using this booklet

This booklet summarises the conference presentations and resulting conversations. Each of the sections takes the ideas of key contributors as a starting point. These ideas are then followed up in more detail in the short think pieces presented in Booklet 2: Learning about leadership in perspective. The 'messages from practice' contained within each section capture the comments of conference participants, these are explored in more depth in Booklet 3: Learning about leadership in practice.

- 'Strategic leadership' on pages 4–5 draws on inputs from headteacher Dr Reena Keeble and representatives of the School Teacher's Review Body.

- 'Building leadership capacity' on page 6 summarises ideas from Professor Louise Stoll, London Institute of Education.

- 'Leadership for 21st century learning' on page 7 overviews the input from Kai Vacher, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT).

- 'Learning about leadership in practice' on pages 8–9 details the key messages put forward by conference participants for policy-makers, NCSL and the Leadership Network.

- The linked resources detailed on page 10 provide information about where you can find out more about the Leadership Network in action.

Strategic leadership

A central theme of the conference was the role and practice of a strategic leader. This section summarises some of the points raised by two inputs and school leaders' responses.

New models of leadership

Representatives from the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the School Teachers Review Body (STRB) introduced the recent independent review of school leadership by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Models of school leadership

- Traditional – made up of all teaching staff with a headteacher supported by a deputy and/or assistant heads.

- Managed – flatter management structure with senior support staff such as bursars or human resource managers on the leadership team.

- Multi-agency – borne out of the Every Child Matters (ECM) and 14–19 agendas and involving teaching staff and professionals from other agencies working together as part of the leadership team.

- Federated – collaboration between schools and sometimes between schools and other providers, with executive heads overseeing several schools.

- Networked – embracing the different roles of heads beyond their own schools, for example, NCSL National Leaders of Education.

Summary of PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007

The aim of the study was to provide a clear and robust evidence base to inform the subsequent STRB remit and wider policy development. Its focus was to identify existing, emerging and potential future models of leadership that are effective in raising standards for pupils. Some of the key findings include:

- A range of new leadership models have begun to emerge in response to policy changes. For example, there has been a shift away from the traditional model of headteacher supported by a deputy or assistant head.

- The new models have a range of features including: the formal involvement of other agencies and non-teaching professionals in leadership teams; flatter management structures; formal and informal collaboration between schools and other agencies; and system leadership where leaders work beyond their own school.

- The behaviors of school leaders have a greater impact on pupil performance than school structures or leadership models.

- There is a clear need for school leaders to distribute leadership and develop staff. School leaders generally believe they are doing this well, but feedback from teachers and support staff suggests that this is not always the case.

- There is persistence of the hero head model where headteachers are accountable and responsible for everything. This approach to leadership is not consistent with the new and emerging models and has been a constraint on distributing leadership responsibilities.

The current policy thinking with regard to school leadership at a national level is underpinned by three aims which will ensure:

1. Sufficient numbers of school leaders are in place both now and in the future.

2. Existing and future leaders have the skills and support they need to be effective.

3. Systems such as pay, conditions and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections challenge and support schools to establish effective school leadership teams.

Strategic intent

Reena Keeble, Headteacher of Cannon Lane First School and London Leadership Network Regional Leader, took part in an interactive conversation with Tony Mackay, Director of the Centre for Strategic Education in Australia, outlining her work on strategic leadership. At Cannon Lane, the school development plan is based around a series of strategic intents which Reena explained are *"quite simply, big ideas about making things better for children and their learning"*.

The six-page school development plan, called the 'school book', outlines six strategic intents which have been created by children, staff and governors. These intents are then written in child-speak into the school book by Reena and a group of children. Every year, the progress of the intents is observed by a group of children called the 'little inspectors'. Their findings are produced in a report circulated to parents and governors.

The strategic intents from Cannon Lane's 2006 school book are:

- Everyone should be using ICT in all subjects.
- The school should look beautiful.
- There should be good team spirit so that we can learn and achieve more.
- All children learn and understand because they have the right resources so that they can do it, see it, feel it and hear it.
- The grown-ups in our school are looked after really well so that they want to stay.
- Children and grown-ups think more.

Time constraints and work-life balance

Whilst the need for strategic leadership was recognised, many school leaders discussed the barriers preventing them from being strategic.

Building leadership capacity

Louise Stoll introduced the idea of using the Leadership Network as a professional learning community to exchange and build practice to build leadership capacity. As she defined it:

"A professional learning community is… an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils learning."

Throughout the three annual conference events, a variety of key messages and themes arose from the discussions of school leaders and other conference participants. Although there was some regional variance, strong overall themes emerged.

The role of governance

The role that governing bodies will play in future models of school leadership was debated. Some school leaders questioned whether governing bodies were fit-for-purpose, others called for greater education on new leadership models and distributed and system leadership roles.

Messages from practice…

"Is the current system of appointing heads fit-for-purpose? Do governors have the right amount of experience?"

"Governing bodies can be reluctant to let heads out of school. This shift towards system leadership roles isn't in job descriptions or expectations of the current role."

"We need greater education of governing bodies; they can be an obstacle to these new initiatives."

"The current model of governance is not fit for my needs."

"Our role is the strategic leader – we need to pull in all the different strands including governors – they are one of these strands."

Growing new leaders

Much of the discussion focused on succession planning and the best strategies for growing tomorrow's leaders. A broad consensus was that there is currently a large gap between NPQH and accepting a first headship. It was felt that some leadership experience was needed to increase confidence and encourage new leaders to apply for headship. Others highlighted concerns about moving people on too quickly and that careful people management is the key.

Messages from practice…

"The more you give someone the chance to do the job the more likely they are to go on to headship."

"There is a gap between NPQH and actually doing the job. You need the opportunity to step up and experience headship."

"Sometimes the things we say and the way we behave can have an impact on others in a school. I think we need to consider this when thinking about altering perceptions of entering headship."

"Headship is such a diverse role – it's hard to make the leap from subject leader to headteacher."

"It can be a balancing act. Care needs to be taken when teachers have leadership responsibilities as you can end up doing neither role effectively."

"Distributing leadership costs time and money. People need time to manage extra responsibilities otherwise we could put them off leadership and they'll want to stay in the classroom."

"I'm a head of a small primary – you have to distribute leadership in order to cope. We now give teaching assistants leadership roles because we simply have to. You have to be creative in your thinking. Performance management can be a barrier; the structures are way behind what I need them to do."

Leadership for 21st century learning

Personalising learning

Kai Vacher, Head of Innovation and Personalising Learning at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) outlined the current developments taking place on the personalisation agenda.

Kai defined personalised learning as *"meeting more of the educational needs, of more of the students, more fully than ever before"*. The nine gateways to personalised learning were outlined and how they are clustered to create access to the 'deeps':

- **Deep learning** = Assessment for Learning, student voice, learning to learn.
- **Deep support** = mentoring and coaching, advice and guidance.
- **Deep experience** = new technologies, curriculum.
- **Deep leadership** = design and organisation, workforce reform.

Research undertaken by the SSAT has shown that the leadership of personalised learning has to be at the core of a school's strategic intent otherwise it is very hard to achieve.

Kai challenged delegates to consider what the implications for the design and configuration of schools might be, if:

- Stage not age replaced year groups?
- Test when ready became a new assessment regime?
- Lessons were replaced by projects?
- Every student had a unique, personalised timetable?
- Schools were open 24 hours a day, all year round.

SSAT have identified a number of areas for next stage development and research:
- developing a culture of co-construction
- supporting middle leaders to implement personalising learning
- embedding Assessment for Learning
- developing new models of CPD
- resourcing personalising learning
- re-designing schooling for personalising learning

Messages from practice…

"Personalised learning is about adult learning alongside pupil learning. If teachers aren't involved in the strategic direction then personalised learning isn't going to be carried through in the classroom."

"Teachers need to value personalising their own learning, from NQT level upwards."

"The head can have a vision but without teacher support it won't become a reality."

"Schools who are perceived as doing well are able to take a risk. But the schools who really need to take a risk, such as those in special measures, are the least likely to take this type of risk."

"How much control can we have over personalising learning and curriculum requirements?"

The tension between standards agenda and Every Child Matters

Many school leaders expressed concerns about maintaining the current standards agenda and creating a truly inclusive and personalised curriculum.

Messages from practice…

"My concern is that if we are working towards Every Child Matters and inclusion then this is a world away from the present standards and accountability frameworks we have to work towards."

"If we are judged on SATs results alone then we will get the wrong leaders in the wrong places. We need a way of measuring ECM outcomes if you are serious about them becoming a reality."

"It's not the accountability that's the problem, but how it is measured."

Learning about leadership in practice

At a number of points throughout the annual conference events, school leaders were invited to reflect on the implications for policy arising out of their practice experiences. Contributions from the School Teacher's Pay and Review Body prompted additional lines of thinking related to conditions of employment and remuneration as they requested school leader views on the following:

- How can headship be made a more attractive option?

- How much local flexibility should there be over leaders' pay?

- Which leaders should receive the biggest pay rewards?

- How should excellent performance be rewarded?

- Are changes to the pay system needed to recognise new models of leadership?

- What professional responsibilities of leaders should be set out in the national pay and conditions document?

- Are both deputy and assistant head grades still needed?

The emerging issues and conclusions drawn by conference delegates suggested a focus for action for policy-makers, NCSL and the Leadership Network.

Messages on policy

School leaders are highly energised by their goals and tasks, but continue to express a number of frustrations. Many of these orbit around the lack of joined-up thinking across different policy strands. Structural changes were seen as lagging behind:

- Improved clarity about the demands of leading extended services that integrate multi-agency working linked with appropriate support and remuneration for the increased workload.

- Flexible pay and conditions to reflect new situations where school leaders are growing leadership capacity through offering a variety of leadership opportunities, to include a desire to be able to reward teams as well as individuals.

- Permission to properly respond to local community needs, for example linked to curriculum development and the ECM agenda.

- Freedom to balance requirements to meet national standards with more school autonomy.

School leaders were clear that an accountability model is more powerful than one based on compliance. They identified a need for adjustments to the practice of Ofsted to accord more value to:

- excellence and enjoyment as judged from the perspective of a child's experience

- change that promotes creativity, innovation and personalisation

Messages from practice…

"Please take succession management and planning seriously and look at pay, contracts and legal complications for different models of leadership… including collaborative and community."

"The developing trend in Ofsted inspections to analyse data, to drill down and identify issues is overshadowing the whole learning experience of the child. Please retain accountability and measure standards, but within the context of children's lives beyond SATs results."

"Recognise that there are a range of ways to operate in a successful school."

Challenges for NCSL

School leaders were keen that NCSL should strongly pursue its role as a key voice of school leaders in informing future policy. NCSL projects are beginning to demonstrate that desired outcomes can be achieved through flexible and diverse means. Creating the space for curriculum innovation was identified as one significant area. NCSL was asked to explicitly confirm its support for risk-taking and to promote the importance to policy stakeholders of facilitating this, for example, as has been the case in the Leadership Network's joint initiative with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) on developing a 21st century curriculum.

Other areas indicated for NCSL action were to:

- persist as a motivator of leaders and potential leaders

- continue to offer exciting and relevant development and networking opportunities, including for middle leaders

- extend the leadership debate into multi-agency working

- make connections between initiatives such as ECM and Building Schools for the Future and agencies such as Ofsted, QCA and SSAT

- assess the impact of leadership-related innovations and promote new models and ideas that are demonstrably relevant

- provide research outcomes in useful, accessible formats

- offer examples of job contracts and descriptions to fit new circumstances

- educate governors and influence their thinking about issues such as curriculum innovation

It was also felt that NCSL should extend its reach to more headteachers.

Messages for the Leadership Network

School leaders see the Leadership Network as a *"source of ideas, support, inspiration and challenge."* They are becoming clearer about how its potential might best be achieved. One highly valued element is the identification and dissemination of practice models and contextualised examples of leadership in action. A second is enabling dialogue. The balance of opinion was that personal interaction is a critical element and that the Leadership Network should pay close attention to the voice of practice provided by its members in informing the future development of NCSL's policy and provision.

Steve Munby, NCSL's Chief Executive has made it clear how NCSL and the Leadership Network are responding to these challenges: *"One of the things that I'm determined to ensure is that the College is outward-facing and listening to the realities of the role that school leaders play, so that they are empowered to help drive forward the agenda. The Leadership Network is part of the work to fulfill that aim. It will enable us to listen to what leaders are saying, to gather intelligence on the ground and feed that back, so that we understand where the good practice is and that can inform our future research and development of provision."*

This response is firmly endorsed by Sian Carr, NCSL's Operational Director for Stakeholders and Networks: *"School leaders have been working together with NCSL and each other to develop local solutions to some of the national issues with which we are faced at a system level. As the work of the Leadership Network has shown, the sort of system level change required in tackling such important national issues is crucially dependent on the active involvement of school leaders. School leaders who are prepared to look beyond the boundaries of their schools and step up and step out, lead the way in transforming school leadership."*

Linked resources

For more information about NCSL's Leadership Network in action view the DVD which accompanies this publication, or to register as a member of the Network visit

www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork.

To order a copy of this publication please email
ln@ncsl.org.uk quoting the reference number
PB232 or alternatively it can be downloaded from
www.ncsl.org.uk/publications.