

# Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances



Research undertaken with and for the  
National College for School Leadership  
*by*

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## The purpose

The aim of this small-scale research project was to contribute to the knowledge base concerning effective leadership but with a particular emphasis upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. The schools that participated in this study were all in the category of schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). This category is designated to those schools in which 25 per cent of pupils, or less, achieve five or more grades A\* to C at GCSE. This also includes a number of schools that achieve above 25 per cent but where over 35 per cent of their pupils receive free school meals.

The research design used a multiple methods approach (Denzin, 1979). It comprised of a review of the literature concerning effective leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances and in depth case study data collection in 10 schools facing challenging circumstances.

## Intense and complex

The research findings highlight the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in schools facing challenging circumstances. All the headteachers in the schools investigated shared high expectations and a determination to achieve the highest possible standards. They placed a high premium upon personal values and focused upon cultural rather than structural change. As Day et al (2000) note:

“In rapidly changing times, technical-rational approaches to leadership may be beguilingly attractive, yet in reality are unlikely to result in improved schooling unless accompanied by both a professional and moral dimension.”

Many of the heads were often quite modest about their own leadership but there was strong evidence that leaders were values-driven, optimistic about children and developed a consistent instructional focus at all levels of the organisation. They were highly pragmatic people who talked openly about courage, resilience and the capacity to create schools where staff worked positively for rapid and deep change.

## Main findings

**The three main findings from this research are:**

- effective leaders in SFCC are constantly managing tensions and problems directly related to the particular circumstances and context of the school. The main leadership task facing them is one of coping with unpredictability, conflict and dissent on a daily basis without discarding core values.
- effective leaders in SFCC are, above all, people-centred. The leadership practice of headteachers in this study was underpinned by a set of personal and professional values that placed human needs before organisational needs.
- effective leaders in SFCC are able to combine a moral purpose with a willingness to be collaborative and to promote collaboration amongst colleagues, whether through teamwork, or extending the boundaries of participation in leadership and decision-making.

The most important aspect of leadership for all the heads in the study concerned establishing the kinds of relationships in which their leadership could be best expressed. Being a head in a SFCC was clearly not a ‘desk job’ but rather it was about displaying people-centred qualities and skills. The heads worked long hours, were constantly on call and spent large parts of their time in face-to-face meetings with a range of stakeholders.

The overarching message about leadership in SFCC is one of building the community of the school in its widest sense, ie through developing and involving others. The headteachers' behaviour with others was premised upon respect and trust and their belief in developing the potential of staff and students commonly held.

Their ability to invite others to share and develop their vision was frequently commented upon by staff and students alike. Alongside these qualities however, were examples of heads being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards) and on occasions, being ruthless. They shared high expectations and a determination to achieve the highest possible standards. This sometimes meant pushing themselves and their staff to the limits. The way they interacted with others was the common denominator of their success. They were able to convince all those within the school and the community it served that their vision was worth sharing and pursuing.

## A picture of leaders in SFCC

In summary it was found that effective leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC):

- believe that all children can learn and succeed.
- offer leadership that is value-driven with a strong moral purpose. They are deeply concerned about the welfare and the educational experiences of all pupils in their care.
- build community and shape culture. They signal to others what is important and focus on building confidence and capability in those they lead.
- are strategic. They take a broad view of change and development by focusing on the bigger picture.
- have the confidence to be contentious and to deal with conflict.
- have no singular leadership style, but there is a greater emphasis upon forms of leadership that are people-orientated, transformational and empowering.

- use a range of leadership approaches and are adept at selecting the approach to match or fit the growth-state or developmental stage of the school.
- are highly pragmatic, resilient and determined individuals who work towards changing negative attitudes towards and within their school.
- establish coherent communities within their schools as well as a sense of a responsible community beyond and around the school.
- place educational concerns over management concerns. They create schools that are culturally tight but managerially flexible.
- are primarily concerned with helping people understand the problems they face rather than solve them.
- take advantage of external opportunities (eg OFSTED, EIC, EAZ) to generate change and to encourage staff to innovate.
- place an emphasis upon models of professional development that impact directly upon classroom practice.
- invest in the learning of staff and pupils.

## Full report

To download the full report of this study, go to [www.ncsl.org.uk/research](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/research)

