

[www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

## Research Associate Summary Report

**Richard Steward**, Headteacher, Woodroffe School, Lyme Regis, Devon

# A better way?

Exploring the challenge of leading curriculum change  
at Key Stage 3

Spring 2007

## Research associate reports available in Spring 2007

### ■ **Lifting the lid on the creative curriculum**

How leaders have released creativity in their schools through curriculum ownership

Tim Burgess, *Deputy Headteacher, Holy Trinity Junior School, Surrey*

### ■ **Threads, knots and nets**

The impact of trust in leading learning networks

Ciaran Clerkin, *Former Headteacher, Selwyn Primary School, Newham*

### ■ **Getting out through the middle**

The role of middle leaders in the journey from failure to success

Jenny Francis, *Former Headteacher, Collenswood School, Stevenage*

### ■ **Hidden gold**

Schools managing knowledge capital during periods of change

Sean Heslop, *Headteacher, Tiffin Boys' School, Kingston upon Thames*

### ■ **The strength of weak school ties**

The importance of 'weak' relationships in sharing good practice between schools

Paul Lawrence, *Deputy Principal, Comberton Village College*

## Introduction and background

Following a period of relative stability provided by the national curriculum, rapid change is fast becoming the norm in the English secondary school system. The opportunity to make changes at Key Stage 3 (KS3), in particular, is attracting a growing number of school leaders, many of whom have been inspired by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) pilot study described in *A condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum* (DfES 2004). Others have been prompted by the education department's less prescriptive approach, combined with a growing dissatisfaction with the nature, scope and direction of current KS3 programmes of study. The drive towards personalisation and the urgent need to prepare the ground for greater flexibility at KS4 have made KS3 an attractive place to begin before moving on to more comprehensive curriculum change.

This study examines school leaders' impact on curriculum change at KS3 in their schools. It explores the manner in which change was instigated and implemented and considers the leadership issues that might be faced by others contemplating similar forms of curriculum change in their own contexts.

## Methods

The study focused on five contrasting secondary schools and the research was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews with headteachers and other members of senior leadership teams between June and October 2006. Four of the schools in question were outside the DfES condensed KS3 pilot programme, and one was loosely attached as an associate. The schools were deliberately chosen to represent a wide contextual range in order to explore leadership issues that might be applicable to all schools with KS3 students.

In addition, an analysis of school literature such as prospectuses was included in order to explore how the schools presented their plans to parents and the wider community.

## Findings

A range of leadership and practical issues surrounding curriculum change emerged from this study; they are grouped under the following headings:

- **Why change?** Leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of curriculum flexibility at KS3. Problems included lack of pace and transition between KS2 and KS3. The national curriculum was felt to be both too restrictive and a barrier to personalised learning, with more able students being held back and less able students discouraged. There was also increasing concern that KS3 provided poor preparation for KS4 and around the perceived dominance of the tests.
- **There must be a better way:** Corresponding themes to those above emerged across the five schools in terms of their intentions for a revised KS3: better transition; improved pace; avoiding the Year 8 dip; preparation for Key Stage 4. The school leaders were driven by a desire to innovate and in doing so creating a better offer for students of all abilities.
- **Introducing change:** Each headteacher chose an approach very carefully: team and individual meetings were used to secure the full support of senior leaders, with these in turn playing a role in securing the commitment of other staff members to the intended approach. Key issues were explored in detail at leadership team level with emphases on the impact of curriculum change on students, timetabling and the knock-on effects at Key Stage 4. This ensured that vision was underpinned by practicalities, as leaders were conscious that staff, as one deputy put it, "would go straight for the detail".
- **Communicating the idea:** Headteachers adopted a range of strategies for communicating their plans to stakeholders, for example, governors' committee meetings, parents' focus groups and school councils. The commitment and determination of the leadership team was a key lever for change; staff in particular were persuaded of the need for change, once they were convinced of the headteacher's strength of purpose. Here an interesting paradox emerged as radical change resulted in understated literature as leaders sought to play down the risks of their innovative plans.

- **Getting staff on board:** Common concerns were raised by staff across the five schools, for example, lack of knowledge of the new curriculum and issues surrounding workload. Leaders countered these largely through a distributed approach, allowing time for dialogue and providing the detail behind the plans. In some cases, opposition was more directly confronted on an individual basis. In-service education and training (INSET) was an important tool and across the five schools there was an exciting range of collaborative activity and often considerable collective enthusiasm generated by the various projects.
- **Developing schemes of work:** Leaders needed to engage fully with the practical issues surrounding the writing of the new curriculum plans and sought to empower staff to make the new ideas their own. The creation of writing teams for schemes was an important collaborative strategy.
- **Checking it's working:** Headteachers put in place rigorous checks to determine that the new curriculum was both educationally sound and effective. A range of evaluation and monitoring practices was developed and leaders became directly involved. Commitment at all levels is essential: pupils, teachers, middle leaders, school leadership teams and governors. In some schools there were measurable improvements in progress, behaviour and attendance, although the focus on skills, which underpinned many of the new schemes of work, was seen to be difficult to sustain.
- **What's next?** Change projects of the magnitude represented in this study extend over several years. There were numerous corrections and refinements to the initial plans, and leaders were keenly aware of the need to consider the impact of the new curriculum further up the school. A major preoccupation of many of the leaders was the need to ensure that they were able to sustain the change culture in order to bring about further improvements.

## Implications for others

Commitment at all levels was seen as essential: students, teachers, middle leaders, school leadership teams and governors. However, crucial characteristics comprised:

- strong leadership from the headteacher
- an effective leadership team capable of distributing tasks across the school
- middle leaders who were supportive of the changes and sympathetic to the overall vision

Common strands were noticeable in the schools studied as set out below. These may be useful to others contemplating curriculum change at Key Stage 3 and beyond.

## Moral purpose

- Leaders were clearly prepared to take risks if they felt that what they were doing was in the best interests of the school's students.
- Fear and anxiety needed to be considered and planned for. "Providing a sense of security about expectations was a key factor in persuading people," said one headteacher.
- Headteachers needed to have the confidence to deal with resistance.
- Based on the evidence of the schools in this study, leadership teams got stronger and teaching staff teams felt closer through a refocusing on the larger moral purpose behind teaching.

## Ownership

- Creating a sense of ownership of the new curriculum for all staff was vital: teachers and middle leaders need to be empowered to take over the project and make it their own.
- Innovation was bottom-up as well as top-down.

## Collaboration

- The importance of collaboration and sharing was an important message: lots of schools are working in similar ways but in isolation. The schools in this study worked largely independently and yet they followed very similar paths. Even though it became clear that schools need to develop schemes that suit their local contexts, there are clearly opportunities for greater collaboration.
- Working with primary feeder schools was really important, ensuring that the new curriculum was coherent and relevant to what had gone before.

## Self-evaluation

- Monitoring and assessment were essential both in order to check that the new curriculum was working and to ensure a coherent approach across the school.
- Targets for improvement needed to be reasonable and achievable.
- None of the headteachers thought that the Key Stage 3 tests were a significant issue and all were prepared to accept a slight fall in results.

## Managing implementation

- The involvement of the headteacher and members of the senior leadership team in the delivery of the courses was seen to be important. “Really innovative schools are the ones where the heads are hands-on,” reported one headteacher.
- It was important for leaders to maintain a strong focus on skills, as they can easily drop out of schemes of work in favour of content.
- Resourcing issues can be underestimated.

## Conclusion

Two key ideas emerge from this study which those contemplating curriculum change should, on the basis of its evidence, bear in mind:

- Despite the similarities across the schools considered here, one of the most important factors is local context. One headteacher summed it up neatly: “Curriculum change must be contextual – you can’t impose another school’s model – but the principles are the same.”
- The excitement generated by innovative practice was a powerful catalyst for school improvement. All the leaders commented on the rise in their energy levels and many noted the positive atmosphere created right across the school. The excitement of teams of teachers striving for something better for their school was felt to be almost tangible and, of course, hugely beneficial to the students in their classes.

## References

DfES, 2004, *A condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum*, DfES ref 0798-2004, Norwich, HMSO

Ofsted, 2006, *Evaluation of the two-year Key Stage 3 project*, HMI ref 2608, London, Ofsted

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are given to all those schools who contributed to this project and to Dr I Barnes of the National College for School Leadership, Kate Moorse of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Peter Dawson of Capita for their help and advice.

## Research Associate Programme

To download this publication, please visit

**[www.ncsl.org.uk/publications](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/publications)**

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:

**[www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates)**

### **National College for School Leadership**

Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155  
F: 0115 872 2001  
E: [ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

### **Disclaimer**

In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.