SPRING 2003

Does Size Matter?

Distributed leadership in small secondary schools

This research reflects upon the successes of five small secondary schools.

Mike Kimber, Deputy Headteacher, Oaklands School, Bethnal Green, London

NCSL
National College for School Leadership

Introduction

This research is based upon interviews with 20 senior and middle managers in schools which were chosen to illustrate a range of types, locations and contexts. The report describes the nature of leadership found in the schools visited and the practical steps that have been taken to build capacity.

What is a 'small secondary school'?

There is no generally accepted definition so for the purposes of this research a decision was made to define a 'small secondary school' as being a school with fewer than 700 pupils on roll. Twenty-two per cent of all secondary schools are therefore 'small' (DfES, 2001) and, although this number has declined over the last 10 years, small schools remain a significant, if rather diverse, constituency.

Does size matter?

For many years there has been a debate about what is the optimum size of a secondary school. Large schools have been regarded as offering a wide and varied curriculum, and being cost effective, whereas small schools are perceived as being more personal and community based. But perhaps this debate rather misses the point. In England there are a variety of types of schools and within this multiplicity many small schools will continue to thrive. The questions we should be asking relate to what makes a successful small school and how such success can be maintained.

The only significant research into performance and school size in England (Spielhofer et al, 2002) found that: 'performance improved with size up to a certain school size, then declined. The best results were obtained in medium sized schools (with a cohort of approximately 180-200 pupils), and the worst in the very small or very large schools.' However, they cautioned that 'the observed impact of school size, although statistically significant, is quite small'.

Distributed leadership

In small schools there are the same kind of leadership posts as in larger schools, but there are fewer of them, and those holding them will be leading smaller teams and often be paid less. There is also a real temptation for leadership to be centralised. A strong charismatic leader could quite easily dominate and run a successful small school, though such success is likely to be fragile. Developing distributed leadership in small schools is as important as it is elsewhere. All of the schools in this study stressed a commitment and desire to move further in this direction.

Small school inclinations

This research has highlighted small school inclinations relating to leadership and the ability to build capacity. It is not being suggested that the leadership of smaller schools is somehow inherently different from leadership in larger schools, but the teachers in this study did generally feel that the context of a small school did bring with it certain qualities, tensions, restrictions and opportunities. An awareness of these inclinations may lead to a better understanding of what leadership within a small school context really entails and how leadership is experienced by those who take it on.

The full report describes in detail these inclinations, the opportunities they offer and the restrictions they place on small schools:

■ Leaders are more hands on

They really know what is happening in the school and are more accessible. However, 'doing' can overwhelm strategic thinking and planning. There are just as many jobs to do as there are in larger schools but fewer people to do them.

■ Leaders wear many hats

Leaders have more opportunities to take on school-wide leadership roles but can struggle to balance several different responsibilities. Leaders experience 'task overload' and could become less effective.

Leaders have to cope with limited finances and resources

Leaders have to look for creative solutions to develop resources, and to recruit and retain staff. The curriculum can be restricted and teachers may have to teach outside their area of expertise.

Teams are smaller and more cohesive units

Smaller departmental or year teams can be more flexible and take on change more quickly. However, one or two person departments can become isolated and professional dialogue limited.

An individual leader can become a 'big fish in a small pond'

Key leaders can be very influential and move the school forward but individuals can feel straight-jacketed and if key leaders leave they can be difficult to replace.

Relationships within the school community are usually good

Leaders know the pupils and other staff better. It is harder for staff and pupils to break out of ways of acting.

Communication is easier

Leaders can 'pop in' and sort things out. Communication and support can be more personal. There is a lack of formal systems.

Professional development is crucial

Leaders need to develop a wider knowledge of educational issues. There are fewer departmental role models for emergent leaders.

Although the schools visited work within a variety of contexts, it was clear that the fundamental approach of their headteacher and leadership teams was very similar.

Learning-centred leadership

All the headteachers in the schools visited had a strong vision directly related to learning and to achievement, and therefore there were considerable efforts made to ensure that the main focus of any activity was teaching and learning.

People-centred leadership

It was obvious that in the schools visited leadership was inclusive rather than exclusive. The emphasis was on collaboration, teamwork and enabling middle managers, in particular, to take on responsibilities. With this sharing of leadership, there was a clear expectation that staff had to deliver on their responsibilities. It was accepted that there would be robust intervention if things went wrong; strong leadership styles were observed. Positive relationships were valued, there was a 'praise' culture and the importance of humour was recognised.

Building capacity

A feature which all the schools shared was a commitment to embrace change and aim for continuous improvement. To achieve this, the schools are developing a variety of strategies to build capacity.

A school's capacity can be described as 'the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning of teachers and the school itself for the purpose of enhancing student learning'. (Stoll, 1999)

Strategies to build capacity relate to:

- developing more effective leadership teams, and incorporating the relatively new post of assistant headteachers

- involving more staff in the leadership of the school by establishing an extended leadership team

- supporting and enhancing the role of middle managers as key players in school improvement

- considering what part advanced skills teachers might play in moving forward the teaching and learning agenda

- nurturing the leadership of teaching assistants and other support staff

- establishing meaningful and powerful school improvement groups

- extending the range of professional development activities

- evolving more rigorous and developmental departmental self-evaluation

In the full report each of these strategies is illustrated and key issues highlighted. They are not a menu for other schools to follow, but they do offer ways forward to building a successful small secondary school.

References

DfES, (2001) **Statistics of Education,** Schools in England 2001 edition, The Stationery Office

Spielhofer, T, O'Donnell, L, Benton, T, Schagen, S and Schagen, I, (2002) **The impact of school size and single-sex education on performance,** NFER

Stoll, L (1999) **Realising Our Potential: Understanding an Developing Capacity for Lasting Improvement,** School Effectiveness and School Improvement 10 (4): 503-532

Acknowledgements

Research Associate Reports Available in Spring 03

Different Approaches to Sharing School Leadership,
Marian Court, Massey University, New Zealand

Does Size Matter? Distributed leadership in small secondary schools, Mike Kimber, Deputy Headteacher, Oaklands School, Bethnal Green, London

Inclusive Leadership; Leadership for Inclusion,
Judy W Kugelmass, New York State University

Issues of ICT, school reform and learning-centred school design, Simon Gipson, Headteacher, St. Michael's Grammar School, Melbourne, Australia

Reservoirs of Hope: spiritual and moral leadership in headteachers, Alan Flintham, Headteacher, Quarrydale School, Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire

Were You Prepared? Findings from a national survey of headteachers, Tim Bright, Headteacher, Bourne Westfield Primary School, Lincolnshire. Nick Ware, Headteacher, The Priory School, Orpington, Kent

Summary and full reports of these and previous research associate studies are available from the NCSL web site at **www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates**

03
SPRING

The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associateship Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, to engage in enquiry and to impact on practice. The programme includes:

- Study visits

- Team enquiries

- Bursaries

- Researchers in residence

- University project attachments

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associates Programme. For details, please contact Martin Coles by emailing martin.coles@ncsl.org.uk

For an information pack and application forms, please contact amanda.hatchett@ncsl.org.uk or telephone 0115 872 2040.

Printed on environmentally friendly paper