

S P R I N G 2 0 0 4

Improving Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances:

Perspectives from leading thinkers

David Ansell

General Manager Operations, The Smith Family, Australia

How would some of our leading thinkers improve schools facing challenging circumstances?

Schools facing challenging circumstances are understood, in this report, to be schools located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. They are likely to have children from homes in which issues arising from social and economic disadvantage are common. They are by no means all 'failing' schools; some are very successful, though for a variety of reasons, a large number have serious weaknesses or are 'underperforming'.

Introduction

In recent years schools facing challenging circumstances have become the focus of political and public attention. The twin political forces of expectation of value for money and expectation of success for all, have put increased pressure on these schools. The school effectiveness literature suggests that leadership is the most important factor leading to improvement and sustained success of schools. For those appointed to schools facing challenging circumstances, the leadership challenges are disproportionately hard, in both professional and personal terms. It is no surprise that some evidence suggests that there are not enough educators applying for leadership positions in such schools. If this situation is to be resolved an alternative solution or strategy is required.

I set out to discuss the practical issues around schools facing challenging circumstances with leading thinkers in the field, to examine issues, such as the problem of recruitment, that create barriers for sustaining high quality education in such schools, and to determine whether there is a consensus around some solutions.

Fourteen people regarded as successful or eminent in areas relevant to this inquiry were interviewed. Experts in schools systems, successful leaders of schools facing challenging circumstances and leaders of public sector reform were interviewed. Successful leaders from the business world were also interviewed in order to acquire an external perspective on the issue.

| Person Interviewed | Position |
|--------------------|--|
| John O'Donnell | Business Consultant |
| Tony Howarth | Chief Executive Officer, Challenge Bank plc |
| Hugh Mitchell | Head of the International Directorate, Shell plc |
| Chris Yapp | Education Director, Microsoft |
| James How | Manager, RAC Insurance |
| Dame Jean Else | Headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances |
| Sir John Jones | Headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances |
| Tony Colley | Headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances |
| Andrew Morley | Headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances |
| David Bell | Chief Inspector, Office for Standards in Education |
| David Jackson | Director, Networked Learning, NCSL |
| Professor Mel West | Dean, Faculty of Education, Manchester University |
| Charles Leadbeater | Futurist, Author |
| Tom Bentley | Director, Demos think tank |

The people interviewed described two overlapping phases in the development of schools which required significant improvement:

- an initial phase of improvement to restore functionality of a school when it had serious weaknesses
- a longer phase of sustaining good performance

Strategies for the early stage of improvement

Those interviewed suggested that in the first phase of improvement the school leadership team needed to implement good systems and processes (eg behaviour, finances, attendance, environment), to restore a positive school culture and gain the confidence of both the internal and external school community. Some key actions were mentioned by a number of interviewees:

- Engage people or organisations with a high level of knowledge about improving schools facing challenging circumstances to provide advice throughout the process of improvement. This is critical to success.
- Select a new headteacher if possible. This is the best way to bring about the rapid cultural change that is required in this situation. Interviewees noted that problems may not always be the fault of the previous headteacher, but that there was something cathartic about changing a leader that would assist with improvement.
- If possible, select an experienced headteacher with a demonstrated capacity to improve a school facing challenging circumstances who would also have a long-term commitment to the school. If this is not possible, select a headteacher with strong intrapersonal and interpersonal skills who will be accepting of external support and team solutions.
- Conduct a thorough planning process to identify the school's key weaknesses and to devise strategies to correct them. Involve key stakeholders. Develop a context-specific vision of what the school could be like, and use target setting in core areas to set benchmarks for improvement.
- Be clear about the role of the headteacher and others in the school leadership team in this phase. Have clear behaviours, tasks and targets. This will usually involve the headteacher displaying confidence and being ever present with students, staff and parents.

- Consider using external personnel for key tasks – a leadership support team. These may include financial management, procedures for non-performing staff, curriculum analysis or implementation of new programmes. All actions taken by such a support team should build the leadership capacity of the school, not replace it. An external support team should not be seen as performing a leadership role in the school, rather as assisting school leaders with directed tasks.
- Monitor the implementation of the plan carefully and hold regular reviews of progress.

The challenges in this phase are about executing clear plans well, rather than creating and carrying out complex plans. Supervision of staff, performance management and mentoring are key tools that could assist a leadership team in doing this. The purpose of using external personnel in a support team is to accelerate the initial improvement phase, to add expertise and capacity, and to create a supportive framework to reduce the isolation and pressure on the new headteacher. The team would withdraw in a planned manner when foundations for sustaining change having been put in place, or would retain an involvement through the governing body, partnership work or mentoring arrangements.

The bigger picture: strategies for sustaining improvement

A number of interviewees recognised that there have been significant social and educational changes that have altered the environment in which schools facing challenging circumstances now operate – changes in wealth distribution, family structures and school system environments. A very significant factor has been the exposure of schools to market conditions. Interviewees suggested that while schools facing challenging circumstances may have improved since the implementation of major changes to the school system in the late 1980s, in general, they said, the gap between schools facing challenging circumstances and other schools was still growing.

However, the majority did not question the foundations of the 'market' elements of the school system (league tables, parental choice, inspection). Most focused on ways that would help schools facing challenging circumstances compete better in the current educational environment. It was accepted that it was unlikely that major changes to the schools system would be made to remove market conditions, but most commented that there needs to be greater levels of co-operation between key organisations in the school system to help schools facing challenging circumstances.

The respondents agreed with a recent study that described a 'strong downward pressure' on school management in schools facing challenging circumstances created by socio-economic disadvantage, by the scale of the task, the accountability expectations, and the high visibility of these schools. They commented that if the school systems can find ways of recognising this and compensating for it, then the quality of leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances should improve.

There was strong support from the interviewees for the following strategies:

- External support to make the task of leading such schools more manageable, along with additional incentives for leaders to take up leadership positions in schools facing challenging circumstances. For instance the out-sourcing of non-core functions by schools had the long-term potential to reduce the magnitude of the leadership task in schools facing challenging circumstances, and hence make the role more manageable.
- The establishment of collaborative groups – school federations/clusters/networks, LEAs, NCSL – to support an effective leadership talent development and management programme, inclusive of some type of succession management programme for headteachers of schools facing challenging circumstances. For example, schools should meet targets for providing opportunities to staff to develop leadership skills, or should develop 'apprenticeship' positions in such schools.
- The establishment of a special category of employment, combined with a network of schools facing challenging circumstances (eg an urban teaching service), for enticing staff to teach in such schools. Such an arrangement might offer staff special conditions and provide opportunities to implement talent identification and leadership development strategies.

- The establishment of an organisation that could consistently provide high quality external support to schools facing challenging circumstances. For instance a national unit which could advise on process, key strategies for improvement and work with external supporters, and might help to develop the plan for improvement. It was suggested that LEAs could provide a brokerage service for schools facing challenging circumstances, connecting them with people or organisations that could provide quality advice on issues specific to their needs.
- The establishment of 'federated' schools. Federations were described as groups of schools that form formal structures or informal partnerships effectively to operate as one organisation. Placing advantaged schools in federations with schools facing challenging circumstances could have the potential to provide sustainable improvement for both schools – maintaining a contest without promoting powerful competition.

Conclusion

It is important to record that many of the people interviewed stated that the way schools are measured, using 'norm referenced' measures of performance and standards models of schooling through inspection, meant that there would always be less successful schools, that is schools considered to be under-performing compared to others. The multiple problems faced by schools in challenging circumstances meant that it was almost inevitable that a large number of these schools would fall into this 'less successful' category. A number of the interviewees called for a change in the way we measure the success of schools facing challenging circumstances.

The main theme emerging from the interviews is that external leadership support offered significant potential to improve and sustain the effectiveness of schools facing challenging circumstances, to build sustainable capacity and to make headteacher posts more attractive. The interviewees suggested that external support, combined with strategic planning and determined actions could rapidly accelerate the restoration to functionality of those schools facing challenging circumstance that were failing, and that the conditions in which schools facing challenging circumstances sustain their effectiveness might be improved by external support in the form of networks and federations.

Research associate reports available in spring 04

The School as a Professional Learning Community: Perspectives from Tasmanian and English schools on the essentials for creating a community of learning in a school, Annette Hollingsworth, Principal of Cressy District High school, Tasmania, Australia

How are English Secondary Schools Interpreting their Freedom to be Different, David Loader, Former Principal of the Methodist Ladies College, Victoria, Australia

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

The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associates 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
- Individual enquiries
- Researchers in residence
- University project attachments

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

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

To order a copy of this publication please email research@ncsl.org.uk quoting ref. RAS/ANSELL

04

S P R I N G

£2, when charged for

National College for School Leadership
Triumph Road
Nottingham
NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001

www.ncsl.org.uk

Printed on environmentally friendly paper