



National College for
School Leadership

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HEADS **OF YEAR**
HEADS **OF FACULTY**
SUBJECT **LEADERS**
CURRICULUM
CO-ORDINATORS

Making a Difference

A study of effective middle leadership in
schools facing challenging circumstances



Executive summary

Introduction

The effective leadership of learning is increasingly recognised as critical to school effectiveness and improvement. Research has also shown that middle leaders are pivotal to any strategy to develop learning-centred leadership in schools, but little is known about how it operates in schools facing challenging circumstances.

It is apparent that some secondary schools facing challenging circumstances are much more successful than others and that within these schools, some departments are more successful than others. The project described here attempted to explore what happens in some of these successful departments.

The project explored the practice of 20 departments across the country. This work was carried out by NCSL research associates who are themselves practising middle leaders. The aims of the project were to:

- identify current effective practice in middle leaders in successful schools facing challenging circumstances
- develop detailed portraits of effective practice that can be used by practitioners and inform policy-making and leadership programmes
- explore the conditions for such practice
- develop guidance for leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances

The project identified a set of characteristics that tell a story about the way in which staff in these departments do things. The strategies that have been identified through our learning-centred leadership work (April 2004, March 2005) and that are reinforced through this project tell us how they do things. These are described below.

Characteristics of high-performing middle leaders

These characteristics came through strongly in every department visited and were noted in almost all interactions that took place. The head of department (HoD) modelled these characteristics to set an example to colleagues and pupils alike. There was:

A focus on learning

- strong emphasis on achievement and high expectations
- a genuine focus on the individual
- a commitment to educating the whole person
- learning for both students and staff

Consistency

- public and explicit expectations
- established routines, systems and procedures
- monitoring and review – evidence based
- follow-up and consequences
- “We plod, but it is a consistent plod”
- middle leaders exemplify consistency

Care

- focus on high-quality relationships
- sensitivity to students’ social environment
- positive regard: student-student, teacher-student, teacher-teacher
- caring relationships between pupils and staff
- middle leaders model care
- “We don’t give up on anybody”

Commitment

- help and support over and above formal requirements
- responding to student needs
- creative and innovative strategies
- middle leaders lead by example

High expectations

- “We want to be the best”
- HoDs set and model high standards
- High expectations in every aspect of school life
- “Expectations of staff are incredibly high. People do live up to it. It’s invigorating, rewarding”

Strategies

These strategies describe how the middle leaders and others in their departments made a difference to pupil learning. These strategies were used consistently in all the case study departments.

Modelling

- leading by example
- “committed, passionate and driven”
- sharing good practice
- the department is a reflection of the leader
- “I am very focused with very clear priorities”

Monitoring

- accountability clear and understood
- explicit and agreed criteria and protocols
- monitoring of student and teacher effectiveness
- evidence-based review and decision-making

- “We have policies implemented as practice which involves following through with everything”

Dialogue

- focus on students and learning
- open, transparent and supportive
- continuous, formal and informal
- focus on improving practice, sharing strategies
- conversation to develop everyone’s understanding about learning
- conversation to influence colleagues and pupils
- “We discuss learning and teaching a lot with [the HOD] without always realising it’s about learning and teaching”

Structures and systems

- meticulous and detailed planning
- handbooks, schemes of work
- sophisticated student data systems
- reinforcement of consistent approaches

Retention of staff

- high trust
- empowerment
- positive regard
- “A key issue for the HoD is keeping people and looking after them”

Professional development

- classroom focused
- primarily in-house
- HoD as lead learner and developer
- “Growing people gives the school a sense of pride. We develop the person, not the subject”

Culture

- high aspiration, celebration
- focus on growth, development
- “We’re constantly presenting a vision of where we’re going. A constant and consistent message ... to improve what we’re doing”

Implications

This project gives an insight into how these departments in challenging circumstances focus on learning as their core purpose. The project identifies a set of characteristics and strategies that explain what effective head of departments do and how they do it.

The project also highlights important evidence about how staff in these departments work together to create a community of practice in which trust, care and relationships are of paramount importance. This is instigated and cultured very carefully by the head of department, who is modelling the behaviour that is inherent within this community of practice. In other words, the head of department creates the conditions for effective relationships to be built and sustained, which in turn creates a working environment among the staff that allows the focus on learning to take place.

Alongside this, a culture for learning is created among the pupils. This culture comes from the focus on learning within the department and the various activities which support and sustain it.

In addition to this, we can draw the following conclusions from the data.

- In most of the departments, the focus was on the learning of individual students rather than the teaching of the subject.
- The personal qualities, leadership strategies and management skills of middle leaders are often the most significant variables influencing departmental effectiveness.
- Successful middle leaders have the ability to combine personal engagement, professional credibility, a range of leadership styles and systematic management.
- Heads of department are highly visible, open and available, and work in a transparent way.
- The most effective middle leaders observed were able to combine personal and organisational imperatives and to balance high trust and directive intervention.
- The most effective departments displayed a high level of consensus and alignment on principles and practices.
- It is possible to have high-performing departments in challenging circumstances working in isolation from other departments in the school.

These conclusions are important because they reinforce the importance of the middle leaders in their role as leaders of learning. They are key to the success of the department and to the success of the pupils.

References

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