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School Leadership

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Making a Difference

A study of effective middle leadership in
schools facing challenging circumstances

Full report

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Introduction

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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.

NCSL's work around learning-centred leadership (NCSL 2004; 2005) illustrates how this kind of research is conducted in practice, particularly among middle leaders, 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 purpose of this report is to add more detail about the characteristics and strategies illustrated in the Making a Difference discussion report, including many more examples and quotes from the case study schools.

Project aims

The aims of the project were to:

- identify current effective practice by 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 specific outcomes identified for the project were to:

- investigate the nature of effective learning-centred leadership among middle leaders and its contribution to the creation of successful schools and departments

- analyse and describe the practice of learning-centred leadership and its influence in bringing about change and improvement in the professional practice of others in greater detail than previously

- examine the processes involved in creating 'learning and teaching schools' and departments in which such leadership can be developed, supported and sustained

- enhance the practical and theoretical knowledge-base pertaining to middle leadership

- disseminate project outcomes to a wide range of participants, policy-makers, and other academic and practitioner audiences nationally and internationally in order to inform current thinking, policy and practice in educational leadership

- build research capacity in schools and increase the pool of practitioner-researchers in the field of school leadership in England

Project methodology

Seven research associates were appointed to support the work of the project. Each research associate is a practising middle leader and has been involved as a key participant, bringing a practitioner-research dimension to the project.

The research associates received training at NCSL and conducted case study work in 20 departments.

The case study work was carried out using a combination of interviews with middle leaders, heads, deputy heads, other teachers and pupils and through documentary analysis and observation.

Summary

Five characteristics emerge from the departments visited:

- a focus on learning (by all)
- consistency (across the school and department, in all interactions with pupils, in everyday processes)
- care (between staff and pupils and also between staff)
- commitment (from staff in extra-curricular activities, and parents)
- high expectations (of staff and of pupils, of the department and of the school)

These characteristics are reinforced and consolidated by a range of strategies:

These middle leaders:

- lead by example
- know what is going on
- use conversation to develop understanding about learning
- use conversation to influence colleagues and pupils
- build rigorous systems and structures
- make continuous professional development (CPD) for staff a continuous activity
- attend to staff retention
- build a positive culture

These characteristics and strategies form the basis of the structure of this report. While these can be seen as distinctive elements, it is their interdependence that characterises the highly effective middle leaders.

Characteristics

A focus on learning

All the departments had a clear focus on learning and as a result of this focus many of the strategies, systems and structures subsequently discussed in this report took place.

Everything was aimed at supporting the learning process and the achievement of the pupils was of paramount importance. Every department spoke of its priorities for the department, the school and the pupils.

Learning and achievement was top priority for the departments, but each was mindful of the situation that the pupils were in. As a result, the focus on their achievement often extended beyond the individual department to the development of the whole child.

In one school, the headteacher and assistant headteacher both stated that the strong pastoral team put great emphasis on *"every child is an individual"*. In another, a classroom teacher talks of wanting *"the best for the kids"*. When asked about what her department was tight on, the head of department (HoD) commented: *"Personal achievement for staff and pupils."*

In one school, a teacher commented on his HoD: *"He's hot on achievement … Learning is the priority. We do whatever we can to support the learning."*

Another said: *"We have very high expectations for everyone [at our school]. Our goal is that all students will become well-informed and highly skilled learners."*

In one school, the HoD was asked what she was really focused on, and said: *"Learning – that's the most important thing in all our meetings and conversations and not just in the classroom. I am a firm believer that everyone is someone's child and they should not be short-changed by the teaching."*

Consistency

In the department studied, consistency permeates every level of life, from the way pupils were greeted and behaviour policies implemented through to ensuring teachers in the department could cover for one another if a teacher was off work. Consistency was evident in the planning processes used in some departments through to the seating policy in others.

Expectations and consequences were always clear and carried through. One teacher commented: *"Why are you surprised? You know we always do it this way."*

Another started the main part of a lesson with: *"These are the rules."*

Staff in the departments were very aware of the context and talked about the importance of consistency for the pupils in the school.

In one school, this consistency started from physically entering the department and all team members make it a high priority to be in the area to meet and greet the pupils. The pupils enter the room in a very orderly manner and the pupils proceed to their allocated seats where they prepare themselves for the lesson.

In one school, consistency of approach was a factor considered important for achievement in a school where pupils needed and responded well to stability: *"The focus is on raising value-added levels of achievement for our pupils. We focus on what we as teachers can do for them. It's very important that we show them consistency in our approach. They do not like change."* (HoD)

"Continuity is the key." (Special educational needs co-ordinator – SENCO)

In one school, this consistency started from physically entering the department and all team members make it a high priority to be in the area to meet and greet the pupils. The pupils enter the room in a very orderly manner and the pupils proceed to their allocated seats where they prepare themselves for the lesson. Social discourse stops as they approach the room.

In another school, one head of year (HoY) explained how during each meeting with her form tutors she always includes reminders about consistency, especially for punctuality and attendance and monitoring and evaluation of PSHE.

Students also complete evaluation sheets every term about the work covered in PSHE lessons.

This was commented upon by the headteacher and deputy head: *"The vast majority of staff will uphold the policy. If they are only upholding because they are expected to rather than if they've bought into it, pupils will know."*

The school not only has a consistent approach to managing behaviour but also to the delivery of lessons. All HoDs carry out their own book scrutinies ahead of the school's senior management team (SMT) scrutiny and Head of Year (HoY) scrutiny. This is to ensure consistency and shows a high level of accountability.

> "
> We found some differences in departments rather than across departments so we have needed to standardise within the department first before we can initiate a new marking policy for the school.
> "

The information collected from the SMT scrutinies is being used to inform the school's marking policy: *"We found some differences in departments rather than across departments so we have needed to standardise within the department first before we can initiate a new marking policy for the school."* (Key Stage (KS) 3 manager)

Another system used effectively in one school to ensure consistency was a daily briefing sheet so that everyone was kept up to date and felt well informed.

Also key to consistency is ensuring that the pupils remain with the same staff. In some departments, the pupils once placed in a form retain the same form tutor for the duration of school life. In another department, staff keep the same class across a whole key stage:

"There's consistency year on year for our pupils who don't like change. It works well. There are no excuses. They've only got one book to bring. The teacher has a constant overview of progress, homework and so on. There's no scope for playing one teacher off against another." (Teacher)

"I hate walking into a different department for a cover lesson; you don't know what to expect." (Teacher)

In another school, there is a whole-school policy as part of the framework for learning. The department uses this system with its barriers to learning very consistently. This means that pupils know exactly what is expected of them in any design and technology (D&T) lesson. A Year 8 pupil was overheard in the playground saying: *"Come on, we can't be late for D&T".* When asked: *"Why not?"* his response was: *"She's strict".*

Consistent monitoring is applied across the departments from monitoring of behaviour through to monitoring of results.

In one school, an electronic monitoring system was used for attendance and punctuality. One Year 10 boy admitted that his attendance had been poor in the past and he had regularly missed the start of the lesson, but recognised that this was affecting his learning: *"There is no escape now and when you are shown your attendance record on the computer you can't argue with it".* (Teacher)

HoDs are consistent in the way that they address, engage with and teach pupils. They are consistent in the way they implement policies and carry them out. They are consistent in the way they engage in dialogue with members of staff in the department. They are consistent in the way they plan and deliver lessons, in the way they use data to identify how each pupil is progressing and consistent in the way that they undertake action. The HoDs are modelling this consistency at every level and in every interaction and are setting an example for colleagues and pupils alike.

Good practice is shared as a matter of course and high levels of trust mean that the departments are open places where support of one another allows consistency in practice to permeate every level of school life.

The HoD makes sure this is happening by constant monitoring of pupil and staff performance. The HoD knows what the data says about the pupils and ensures all staff know too. From this, action is undertaken. One department was asked what it was that it did that led to such excellent results. The comment reiterated in the technology team meeting and in individual interviews was: *"We plod, but it is consistent plod."*

Care

Care is something that features strongly in the case studies. The schools are acutely aware of the situation that the pupils are in and the impact that this may have on their learning outcomes. The teachers really care about their pupils and their well-being.

They demonstrate care in every interaction with pupils in the way they speak to them and in the way so many give up their own time to help the pupils. This is in the form of homework clubs, opening early in the morning so that pupils can come in and work and other extra-curricular activities. This care extends beyond the pupils to each other. These departments are built upon strong teams who value one another and actively rely on one another to carry out their roles effectively.

The HoD is instrumental in leading this team, and in modelling the qualities of good team members.

They do this by walking the talk, by not being afraid to ask for help, by being passionate about the job, by caring for the pupils, and by believing that the department can make a difference.

"We have gone out of our way to appoint people into positions where they would make a difference, where their capacity would develop and make a difference to the school." (Headteacher)

Staff really care about the pupils and their ability to be effective learners. They want to make a difference: *"Kids are given the opportunity to do the courses they want to. The school turns out young adults who are literate and numerate."* (Teacher)

"Traditionally (the pupils') life chances have not been great because of low aspirations and socio-economic factors that dominate the area, and I think the school is making a difference." (Deputy head)

"Our school is situated in an area of cultural poverty and deprivation. Parents are supportive but are not forthcoming; pupils have role models with very little experience of further education. My vision for the school is to enrich our children's lives and the PE and vocational dimensions that the department offers do exactly that." (HoD)

The HoDs model this behaviour in the positive way they talk about the pupils. For example, one HoD challenged staff to look at how they can *"add value to any pupil who walks through their door"*.

In another department, the head of faculty (HoF) saw his role as: *"contributing to school improvement by leading a successful faculty that is well respected and liked by students."*

But his principal role was to ensure that each pupil: *"receives their entitlement and feels that they are wanted."*

This was reflected in the way the HoF built in a range of learning opportunities outside the classroom environment: *"Some need space to learn, some need help to learn."* and: *"School is on their side, if they ask we'll give them what they need."*

The focus for Year 11 is obviously exam preparation but also development of the person: *"The job is to get your results and help you grow up into a nice person."* (Pupil)

One department also offers a family learning experience each week, at which family members are encouraged to take part in lessons similar to those their child would experience.

Staff-pupil relationships are excellent. In many of the departments, there was a real feeling of staff and pupils working together so that pupils can learn. Pupils and staff like each other and enjoy spending time together.

"The teachers care about us." (Year 7 student)

"I get lots of support from my teachers." (Year 10 student)

One teacher summed up the school philosophy: "We don't give up on anybody. And if we get someone with talent they're exploited!"

In some departments, an awareness of the lack of resources for individual pupils has led to the department loaning tools to pupils. For example, in one school, equipment (including pens and pencils) is loaned where pupils have none. Well-motivated pupils are also encouraged to borrow faculty equipment.

The caring ethos applies equally to staff. An newly qualified teacher (NQT) stated that he found the HoF very easy to work with: *"He works with you to get things done. He is always looking out for me, he puts his head around the door every lesson to check everything is okay. I feel very lucky to work in this department; other NQTs are struggling in less supportive departments."*

One department offers a family learning experience each week, at which family members are encouraged to take part in lessons similar to those their child would experience.

In another school, an NQT said: *"I've actually changed. I used to close the door but now I leave it open. If they make a noise, I used to think they might not hear it outside, now I leave the door open so someone will come in."* and: *"As soon as you know [the HoD] is there you feel as if you've got your arm-bands on."*

On classroom management, a HoD commented: *"At the moment we have a member of staff who is finding classroom management an issue. Three members of staff have supported him in his planning, delivery and classroom organisation."*

In one school, the HoF took time to go and relieve her staff during her free periods if they were having a particularly stressful time. She took jobs from them if they were under pressure. The philosophy is to support the pupils and each other. This was also witnessed in lessons where the care and nurturing of pupils was evident: *"The pupils are at the heart of everything we do."* (HoD)

The sense of care that characterises these departments breeds trust. High levels of trust are evident in every department or team that the project investigated. This manifested itself in everyday interactions and working practices. This trust permeated every relationship in the teams and was instrumental in establishing the effective team working that was evident in each department visited: *"She lets us get on with it as professionals."* (Classroom teacher)

"(The HoD) allows me to use my initiative, yet I can always go to him for advice or support on a variety of issues." (Department deputy)

Speaking about their HoD, teachers commented: *"It feels like there's no hierarchy. It feels that we all muck in. It's not dramas, it's respect actually."*

And a HoF remarked: *"I let him run the department so he can enjoy the professional freedom to develop the department where he is the expert as head of department."* (HoF)

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Commitment

Something that is evident in every case study school is the commitment that staff have. There is a commitment to providing the best learning opportunities for the pupils they teach, and this is manifested in the hours staff work, in the clubs they run and the activities they organise, the last two being run outside school hours.

This care is infectious and because the pupils care about their learning, they take part in extra-curricular activities. Similarly, it is no good having committed pupils who want to engage in extra-curricular activities if the staff will not put in the extra time or go that extra mile.

Teachers in the departments are generous with their time both in school and outside school hours. For example, in one school, when a member of the team was absent due to illness, other teachers in the department gave up their non-contact time to take the lessons or put two groups together: *"It's much better for the students if they have a teacher rather than just doing cover work from a textbook."* (Teacher)

But commitment is perhaps best demonstrated when looking at the extra-curricular activities. One school offers a range of out-of-hours learning clubs which run at lunchtimes and after school. This includes an ICT club every lunchtime for all year groups, a music club four lunchtimes a week and a range of extra-curricular sporting activities after school. A homework and ICT club run after school to encourage those pupils who need support (especially pupils who speak English as an additional language) to stay and receive help in a friendly environment which is enhanced by the range of computers available to the pupils: *"We can come into school and have the opportunity to work somewhere quiet."* (Pupil)

It's much better for the students if they have a teacher rather than just doing cover work from a textbook.

In another school, in addition to the teaching strategies that took place in the lessons, the staff had the reputation of being available to help the pupils after school. Pupils really appreciated being able to come to the department after school for help.

Another school has worked hard with parents to change their perceptions of learning: *"Often parents do not know how to help their child so we support them in this."* (Deputy head)

The school has set up parent groups for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and for gifted and talented (GAT) pupils, which have proved very successful. The change in attitude has led to increased attendance at parents' evenings and also when dealing with parents and pupils on behavioural matters. The extended school status has also helped in breaking down these perceptions, with parents and pupils attending evening and weekend sessions. The school also writes to a pupil's home or phones parents frequently to let them know when their child is doing well.

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High expectations

High expectations were evident in every department from the wording in the handbook in some, through to the pupils' articulation of them in others. High expectations and the constant striving for improvement were high on the HoDs' agendas.

These departments value achievement in its widest sense and promote the academic, personal and social development of each individual.

The HoD sets high expectations and standards by leading by example. They talk about improving all the time. They use data to monitor performance, both of staff and pupils. They look at what works well and make sure everyone celebrates this. Poor performance is not tolerated. The HoDs inspire others through the high expectations they set. They set high expectations of themselves and their staff and expect no more of them than they are willing to do themselves. In many cases: *"We want to be the best."* (HoD)

In one school, the HoD talks about their role as being: *"to lead the department by example, provide quality experiences for our pupils that raise their aspirations and self-esteem."*

The HoD's constant hard work and incredibly high standards she sets for herself encourage the other members of staff always to give their best in the classroom: *"I know what she expects of herself and I try to live up to that. She is so good I'm inspired to do the same."* (Teacher)

"(The HoD's) attitudes, principles and day-to-day small decision-making all show her professional high standards and expectations. She demands high standards. She provides challenge and support in equal measure, for kids and staff. She achieves a good balance." (Headteacher)

"We all know (the HoD's) expectations. She has very clear, very high expectations." (Teacher)

"Expectations of staff are incredibly high. People do live up to it. It's invigorating, rewarding, that performer thing. They make it all happen." (Deputy head)

One school evaluates everything it does and constantly reflects on this. All staff look for ways of continually developing and improving the quality of their lessons and the experiences for their pupils. One KS3 manager had just carried out some research where pupils in all year groups had been asked to reflect on the type of teaching and learning they came across in their subjects, and this had been analysed and presented to the leadership team and the teaching and learning group in order to plan future school training needs.

Strategies

Modelling

Leading by example is a key theme in each case study, and is acknowledged in every department by the HoD as something they are actively doing. In many of the departments, staff refer to the HoD as modelling what they wish to see happening in their classrooms and around the department.

Staff speak highly of the HoD and talk about what the HoD expects of them. Everyone knows the vision and values of the department, but, more importantly, believes in them. And this appears to be the case because of what the HoD does and says.

They are committed, passionate, and driven. Some are described as quiet people while others are dominant. And the behaviours and actions they undertake as noted by themselves and also staff include being:

- mindful of people's workload
- consistent in their approach to staff and pupils (in the way they behave and also speak)

- very positive
- supportive
- excellent communicators
- collaborative
- inspirational

and:

- praising staff and pupils
- empowering others
- only ever asking people to do things they have themselves undertaken or would be willing to undertake

They:

- are considered excellent practitioners
- set high expectations for themselves, staff and pupils
- share good practice
- monitor rigorously
- plan systematically
- are visible and accessible

Staff speak highly of the HoD and talk about what the HoD expects of them. Everyone knows the vision and values of the department, but, more importantly, believes in them. And this appears to be the case because of what the HoD does and says.

> "

I want to lead the department by example, provide quality experiences for our pupils that raise their aspirations and self esteem.

> "

"The department is a reflection of the HoD. I do like to set a good example. I am always here and always available." (HoD)

"(I want to) to lead the department by example, provide quality experiences for our pupils that raise their aspirations and self esteem." (HoD)

A member of staff said: *"I know what she expects of herself and I try to live up to that. She is so good I'm inspired to do the same."* (Teacher)

"She is very aware of what we are all doing." (Teacher)

In another school, all aspects of the HoF's practice confirm leading by example. Her less experienced staff look up to her: *"She wants us all to be fantastic teachers. She shows us stuff all the time without explicitly showing us stuff."* (Teacher)

"(Our HoF) is a model of good practice. It's her enthusiasm. All the official side of things is there as much as the fun side. Organisationally everything is always ready. She's always ready for anything that might happen (in lessons)." (Teacher)

The influence of the HoD in developing this enthusiastic, engaging, positive teaching and learning culture came through from observing lessons where the HoD's way was evident.

"Well done", *"thank you"* and *"Brilliant"* are phrases that the HoD uses frequently, but sincerely and her department members respond very positively to this: *"(The HoD) works really hard for the pupils and staff, he spends quality time in getting to know the pupils and teachers, he's really good with praise, always saying "thank you", and he won't ask you to do something that he wouldn't do himself."* (Teacher)

Monitoring

Monitoring is central to the success of the departments in this study and is deeply embedded within the culture of each department.

The HoD is instrumental in establishing a climate in which monitoring (particularly of staff) is viewed as supportive and developmental as opposed to threatening and blaming. Monitoring happens at every level of departmental life. It encompasses pupil activity from attendance through to exam results, and the use of data in this gives the process credibility. Effective systems and structures support all of these processes.

Monitoring of staff is rigorous too. Accountability is evident in each department, and each member of staff is clear about their role and responsibilities. Pupil data feeds into this process, but monitoring in this case is often informal and embedded to the level that in one department staff spoke only of support and never of monitoring. Monitoring happens both formally and informally.

One of the features of monitoring staff is the trust that is evident in each of the departments. Staff are open and willing to share their strengths, but perhaps more significantly are willing to be open about their development needs. These are identified through lesson observations and dialogue and staff look to one another to address their needs. This links to the section on care as monitoring processes reveal care in all interactions and especially in the way staff support one another. But trust is significant here in the way that the HoD implements monitoring as an activity that applies to all and is undertaken by all but which is viewed as supportive rather than threatening.

In one department, as in many of the departments, an open door policy exists. Lesson observations are supportive and are used by the HoD to prioritise training and development needs.

Data is used to inform teaching. Across all the schools, a range of data is provided for the departments.

In one, the HoD works with individual teaching staff in the department to arrive at targets for the pupils. Each member of staff keeps a teaching group for the year, so there is no rota system as there are in some subjects: *"Keeping the same class with the teacher for a year gives greater accountability."* (HoD)

The HoD watches each member of the department teach once a term, ie three times a year as part of a whole-school review system.

The HoD has set up a data system for the department and discusses individual pupil targets with each member of staff. The half termly progress checks provide the HoD with a more formal overview of progress across the department. Discussions will then occur with individual staff over the progress of particular pupils or a teaching group as a whole. The HoD takes responsibility for the analysis of mock SAT papers and produces a list of key topics to include in revision.

In one department, as in many of the departments, an open door policy exists. Lesson observations are supportive and are used by the HoD to prioritise training and development needs.

Tracking pupil progress seems to be the significant factor underpinning another department's success. The current level of work for every pupil is recorded in the departmental office and can be studied by the HoD or any member of the department at any time. Pupils who are not making adequate progress are highlighted immediately and parental support is sought in encouraging the pupil to attend an after-school clinic in order to catch up.

In one school, in order to support staff in raising standards, the head is working towards all staff using internally produced data on pupil levels to inform their teaching: *"I want to be sure that staff know what level pupils in their groups are working at, so they can adapt their work to best meet the needs of the pupils in their groups."* (Headteacher)

In another school, faculty monitoring is strongly based on modular tests. The HoD uses a data spreadsheet to compare current and past performance:*"I act when I see things are not going well. Generally I don't ask to see everyone's planners, but we discuss planning. There have been times when I've needed to say to someone: 'Things aren't going right. I need to see your books and lesson plans', but this is when the data shows something's going wrong.*

It gives us the ammunition to say to these kids: 'This is where you are at, this is where you could be at or this is where you have gone to or where you could get to'. The kids like it when you tell them; they've got something to aim at."

Dialogue

Dialogue about teaching and learning takes place inside and outside the department both formally and informally. Professional dialogue is something that is discussed in every case study. It is modelled by HoDs who are talking about students and learning all the time and who ensure the department is a place where staff can talk both formally and informally about teaching and learning.

This builds upon the caring environment that has been cultivated that is conducive to discussing issues that relate to the core purpose of their role.

As time is often short, informal dialogue about teaching and learning takes place during breaks or over lunch.

There is a fish and chip Friday lunch for all the members of one department: *"It's amazing how much planning, curriculum discussion and reflection takes place at a Friday fish and chip lunchtime gathering."* (HoD)

Another HoD lunches with the members of her team daily and the talk is almost exclusively about lessons, examinations and strategies for improvement. Talk of work, syllabuses, exams, planning, observations etc continues throughout the day over coffee, lunch and after school.

In all of the case study departments, conversations outside lessons were related to learning, rather than to difficulties with individual pupils.

In one school, the culture of the department is such that staff feel able to discuss teaching and learning issues freely. This in turn builds up trust among colleagues and makes the team more cohesive. This is modelled by many of the HoDs in the way they operate an open door policy where staff can pop in and see them. The HoF is clearly the catalyst in this respect: *"It makes it easier to approach colleagues where there might be a problem if you already have a good relationship with them."* (HoF)

He uses this time among his own team to create a team spirit and encourages staff to share ideas and problems as well as complete certain administrative jobs so: *"We don't waste valuable department meeting time."* (HoF)

"We discuss [teaching and learning] a lot with [the HoD] and we discuss it a lot with him without realising it's about [teaching and learning] all the time. It's just the sort of department it is, we're always sharing worksheets, always sharing resources at meetings and so on." (Key stage co-ordinator)

Minutes of meetings and meeting agendas highlight that the focus of department meetings is learning and teaching and achievement rather than management and administration.

In one school, assessment for learning is changing school dialogue. The deputy head said that this had brought about the biggest change in culture in the staffroom, with staff talking about teaching and sharing good practice.

Structures and systems

One of the things that runs through every case study in various forms and that is crucial to the smooth running of the departments and essential in its contribution to the learning process is the effective use of systems and structures. HoDs use a whole array of different systems and structures to underpin and support the work of the department.

Nothing happens by accident. Everything is well documented, shared widely and understood by all members of the department, and this ranges from behaviour policies through to lesson plans.

Structures and systems used by every department include:

- effective meetings
- lesson plans
- observation schedules
- marking policies
- handbooks
- seating plans
- communication strategies
- behaviour policies
- rewards and praise systems

There are many more, but a few are discussed here. The HoDs were rigorous in their planning processes, meticulous in their detail of policies and modelled the use and the implementation of these systems and structures.

In one school, the HoD said: *"I plan and prepare more thoroughly now than at any time in my career."*

"The whole department is well run and that must be down to the HoD. The main thing is because it is structured, there's no nonsense." (Learning support assistant, LSA)

When discussing how the department made a difference to the pupils, the HoD noted: *"By the high quality of teachers' planning and preparation. No matter how difficult the pupils are when they are in front of us, what I have said to the team is we can all get the planning right and be prepared."*

Factors helping this are:

- department handbook
- schemes of work
- data available for staff to enable them to target classes appropriately in terms of level of work
- staff being very aware of the high standards required in a lesson in terms of content and pace
- use of LSAs to help make and prepare sets of resources
- confidence given to the LSAs to be a genuine part of the team
- county science consultant
- time funded by the Leadership Incentive Grant to release staff
- planning ahead by the HoD in terms or reports, organisation of extra lessons etc

> " We insist on high standards for each pupil. Each pupil is different. We don't mark them down if they have reached their highest standard. "

Staff were seen to be consistent in their use of:

- lesson structure
- high expectations and a can-do positive approach
- classroom management
- respect and a way of talking to pupils
- behaviour management
- classroom display

"We teach in similar ways because we share ideas at meetings. Everything is shared and it leads to consistent practice. It's had a huge impact for us." (Teacher)

Communication is key to the successful running of the departments. This is illustrated time and time again in the case studies.

In one school, the structure of the school day allows 30 minutes for lunch. Staff do not have the same time-slot for this, so to keep communication active, the HoD produces a regular mathematics memo sheet.

Items give information about any whole-school and maths activities that are going to take place. They always end with a *"Thank you for all your efforts"* and a reiteration of the department's priority: good teaching and learning with excellent discipline.

In another school, good communications are seen as important and good use is made of the internal ICT network which means staff: *"can communicate much more easily, effectively and efficiently, eg all data is accessible to all, minutes are circulated, school policies are on the network and staff use the network for day-to-day communication."* (Senior leadership team (SLT) member)

Lesson structures and schemes of work and the importance of these are evident in many of the case studies. This is to enable consistency in lessons and to ensure a focus by all on learning in lessons. In one school, all the schemes of work are on the network for students and staff to access.

The units are broken down clearly into expectations, homework sheets, worksheets and help sheets. Data files, tip sheets, staff notes and lists of useful websites are also included and many of the sheets are hyperlinked for quick access. The learning objectives were revisited, time reminders were given and lots of positive affirmations about learning. There was a high proportion of teacher engagement with the pupils, either as a whole class, groups or individuals. There were continual links between how the pupils were learning and the task.

Marking policies are common in many of the schools, and are important in their contribution to consistency.

In one school, all the classrooms displayed the department's assessment and marking policies, written in pupil speak, and which pupils in KS4 used to evaluate their own work. All areas use the same grading criteria so that a 10 in food is equivalent to a 10 in resistant materials.

In another school, the marking policy is adhered to but no grades are given, only a comment which is designed to help pupils improve.

Self-evaluation has been introduced by the HoD and is being used effectively by pupils in KS4: *"We insist on high standards for each pupil. Each pupil is different. We don't mark them down if they have reached their highest standard."* (HoD)

In another school, the marking policy is adhered to but no grades are given, only a comment which is designed to help pupils improve: *"You can't tell a pupil they are doing really well and then give them an F or G. We tend to focus our comments on strategies to improve."* (HoD)

In one school, all staff have a department handbook that includes:

• job descriptions

• departmental policy documents

• results analysis and improvement plan

• schemes of work by year group

"Whilst I appreciate that maybe getting policies together is not a priority, what goes on with the kids has got to be the priority, but it is still important that everyone knows where you're going and this is how we do things." (HoD)

Organisation in the departments is essential for things to run smoothly. All the departments are well organised and many of the staff comment on the organisational skills of the HoD: *"The whole department is organised, so everything is in order. All the worksheets are printed for you, you don't have to arrange to print them. They are all done for you and filed in sections in the cabinet for each unit of the scheme of work. It is all very easy to find things."* (Teacher)

Behaviour policies and the consistent implementation of them are evident in every department. Poor behaviour in these departments was not allowed to detract from the learning process.

Pupils know what is expected of them, and if they misbehave they know action will be taken. The policy and expectations of behaviour are well known and given a high profile. Staff are rigorous and consistent in their approach and are not afraid to ask for help when implementing this policy.

Poor behaviour is not the main topic of conversation in the departments: pupil learning is.

Each department had a different policy but what was common to them all was a strict and consistent implementation that ranges from SLT involvement, removal of pupils from classrooms, use of school support centres and the involvement of parents.

One school had a very clear system of behaviour management which built on the assertive discipline model. The head does not want to be seen as the only one who sorts out problems, a 'super hero'.

Instead, the school has implemented an effective tracking sheet system, which is reinforced by form tutors on a weekly basis. This has led to zero exclusions in the last two years as pupils who are seen to be getting it wrong are picked up quickly and use is made of the inclusion system (internal exclusion) or alternative programmes: *"Behaviour is a big issue. I try and behave as a head of year and there are always consequences for a pupil for poor behaviour. I encourage staff to use all the tricks in their bag before they come to me. I use all my pastoral tricks and the pupils know that. The staff feel supported and the pupils know there will be a come-back."* (HoD)

Retention of staff

In a large number of the departments and schools, active retention of staff was taking place. In some cases, the head or deputy head is responsible for this and in others it was the HoDs. In all cases, growing their own leaders by providing effective CPD and training opportunities to staff from when they first join the school is important.

In many of the case studies, staff have joined the school and not left. They have progressed their careers and in some cases moved out of the department but stayed in the school. This nurturing of staff and getting the best out of them reinforces several of the key themes emerging from the work.

Retention of staff is crucial to consistency. Keeping the same staff reinforces the consistent learning experience that all the departments strive to achieve.

Retention of staff is crucial to care. Being motivated and nurtured and giving staff opportunities is important in establishing a culture of care. This is driven by the head or HoD.

And as with everything that happens in these departments, this does not happen by accident. Opportunities to promote within, to nurture effective teachers and to encourage staff to achieve their full potential are carefully planned and monitored by the HoDs.

In one school, the head actively encourages staff to apply for particular posts: *"I have individual targeted discussions and also discuss with line managers, as well as looking at results."*

This is how he is able to retain his excellent teachers like the head of history: *"I accept that she will move on eventually but if I can keep her for another year by creating a development opportunity, then I will be happy."*

Another said: *"Retention and recruitment are difficult as maths is a difficult subject. A key issue for a HoD is keeping people and looking after them. It is the small things you do as well as the big things that are important."* (HoD)

Professional development and training

All the case study departments exhibit a strong commitment to their staff in terms of professional development opportunities. As discussed earlier, retention of staff is high in these departments and this is in part due to CPD which recognises talent, grows tomorrow's leaders and pushes people to reach their potential.

The HoDs look to develop their staff through delegation, on-the-job training and by giving them additional responsibilities. Everyone can attend training that is relevant to their work and, where possible, learning outcomes are shared with everyone in the department. One school handbook states: *"Staff should be able to demonstrate how the professional development fits with school, departmental or pastoral targets and how the opportunity will benefit the pupils. When a course is attended, staff should make arrangements to disseminate and share the knowledge and skills they have learnt."*

Often there was a combination of both internal and external professional development opportunities. The HoDs in these schools strongly embraced the idea that each member of staff had a lot to offer the others in terms of their own personal skills. To this end, many of the internal training sessions consisted of members of staff training other members of staff in an area of their own expertise (eg interactive whiteboard training). Where external expertise was needed, this was made available as long as there were clear links to development planning. In several of the schools, staff were involved in the Leading from the Middle programme and others were working towards the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH).

CPD was seen as being crucial in each of the departments visited. It was central to retention of staff and promoting from within.

In one school, much of the training was delivered in-house. Professional development funding is delegated to departmental heads who draw up an entitlement plan for each member of their team, identifying training needs and showing how this supports the individual's professional development and teaching and learning within the school.

Developing subject knowledge and skills is not left to chance. In one school, there is a degree of formality in the way the team develops its skills and expertise. This is built in at the development planning stage. This links with lesson observations where key areas are identified and the strengths of the team are used to support the rest: *"I've learned a lot here. An example is about thinking skills led by the head of maths. We also did questioning skills training on a whole-school basis. We also have intermittent IT training. The school really keeps up to date with current thinking. They are very proactive about in-house training."* (Teacher)

CPD was seen as being crucial in each of the departments visited. It was central to retention of staff and promoting from within. The HoDs were central to ensuring effective CPD opportunities took place regularly and that the results of the CPD could be seen in the classroom: *"As a middle leader I can decide the priorities for the team, I ensure that staff receive the type of training that will aid them in their personal development but will also have an impact within the classroom."* (HoD)

"

Staff should be able to demonstrate how the professional development fits with school, departmental or pastoral targets and how the opportunity will benefit the pupils.

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Culture

The culture of the departments in many respects was almost tangible. In some cases it had been inherited and built upon and in others created from scratch. Common to all of them was that it was something that everyone adhered to and worked towards.

It was a culture of achievement, celebration, praise, hard work, high expectations, trust, openness, inclusiveness and learning-focused. And it was a culture that is carefully cultivated and sustained by the HoD. Through consistent and careful modelling, the HoD lives out the culture of the department through every interaction that takes places both with pupils and staff.

One school talked about a culture of achievement; a culture within school where it was seen as cool to succeed. Pupils encouraged each other. For example, a Year 10 student had written her mock exam results down in her planner (an A grade in chemistry) and written next to that 'Whehee'.

Although the school believed that exam results were important, this was never the prevailing message. Both staff and pupils felt that *"to be the best person you can"*, as one head described it, was the most important achievement.

In terms of establishing her own culture and climate, the HoD in one school was very keen to ensure all staff *"get [the pupils] to see that they can achieve"* and illustrate a can-do attitude in all lessons. One Year 10 pupil commented that *"maths is easier now that I have more confidence"*. In another school, the culture and climate that is strived for within the school is present in the department and a classroom teacher commented that: *"the rest of the school is trying to live up to the D&T department"*.

In one school, there was a real can-do culture within the department. The whole team has the pupils at the centre of everything it does: "We want the best for the kids", as one classroom teacher put it.

There is also a real culture of praise and respect within the department. The HoD shows delight in the successes members of the team have, and makes sure that the teacher and the team are aware of the excellent work that is going on: *"Congratulations to (teacher's name) for outstanding success in the (X) initiative."* (Minutes of a departmental meeting)

In one school, if staff have an idea, they know that the team will listen and take it on board just as they know that if they are having a problem the team will support them. When asked why it was like this, one classroom teacher said: *"It's just a culture that has developed. It's just the way it is."*

In another school, the values of the HoD are reflected in the way staff approach their subject and the type of language they use when speaking to pupils.

The HoD does not allow negative comments about pupils and he challenges staff to look at how they can: *"add value to any pupil who walks through their door."* (HoD)

There is a sense of corporate unity, with everyone pulling in the same direction, which in turn gives the pupils a clear sense of purpose and direction. The HoD does not have to say very much as he knows they are all aiming for the same goals: *"To make ourselves employable we have got to deliver the goods. The width and depth of our results has made us safe which enables all the team to teach securely."*

The HoD has created a culture where all are equal and have a place, including the LSAs: *"He makes you feel that your have a role to play and that you can make a difference to the pupils."* (LSA)

There is a sense of corporate unity, with everyone pulling in the same direction, which in turn gives the pupils a clear sense of purpose and direction. The HoD does not have to say very much as he knows they are all aiming for the same goals.

In one school, the headteacher says of the HoD: *"She has built a tradition, inducted people in the department. She's very clear about appropriateness. She will and has taken staff on. She's prepared to stick her neck out … She expects students to reach a professional standard in all that they do. She won't put on a production of something like Grease just because it's relatively easy. She wants to push the boundaries for kids and staff in all they do. Children are keen to perform a range of music even though it often has no street culture. They are well received by other children when they do. The culture has been built."*

In one school, developing a culture is through: *"having a clear idea where you're going. As you develop work, the ideals are constantly reiterated. We're constantly presenting a vision of where we're going. A constant and consistent message to staff about what we're doing and why. We're still on the same path … to improve what we're doing."* (HoD)

Conclusion

For further details of the case study departments and examples of the structures and systems that they use to make a difference in their departments, visit **www.ncsl.org.uk/middleleadership**

A discussion of these themes and their implications for schools and school leaders can be found in the *Making a Difference* discussion report.

We're constantly presenting a vision of where we're going. A constant and consistent message to staff about what we're doing and why. We're still on the same path ... to improve what we're doing.

References and acknowledgements

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