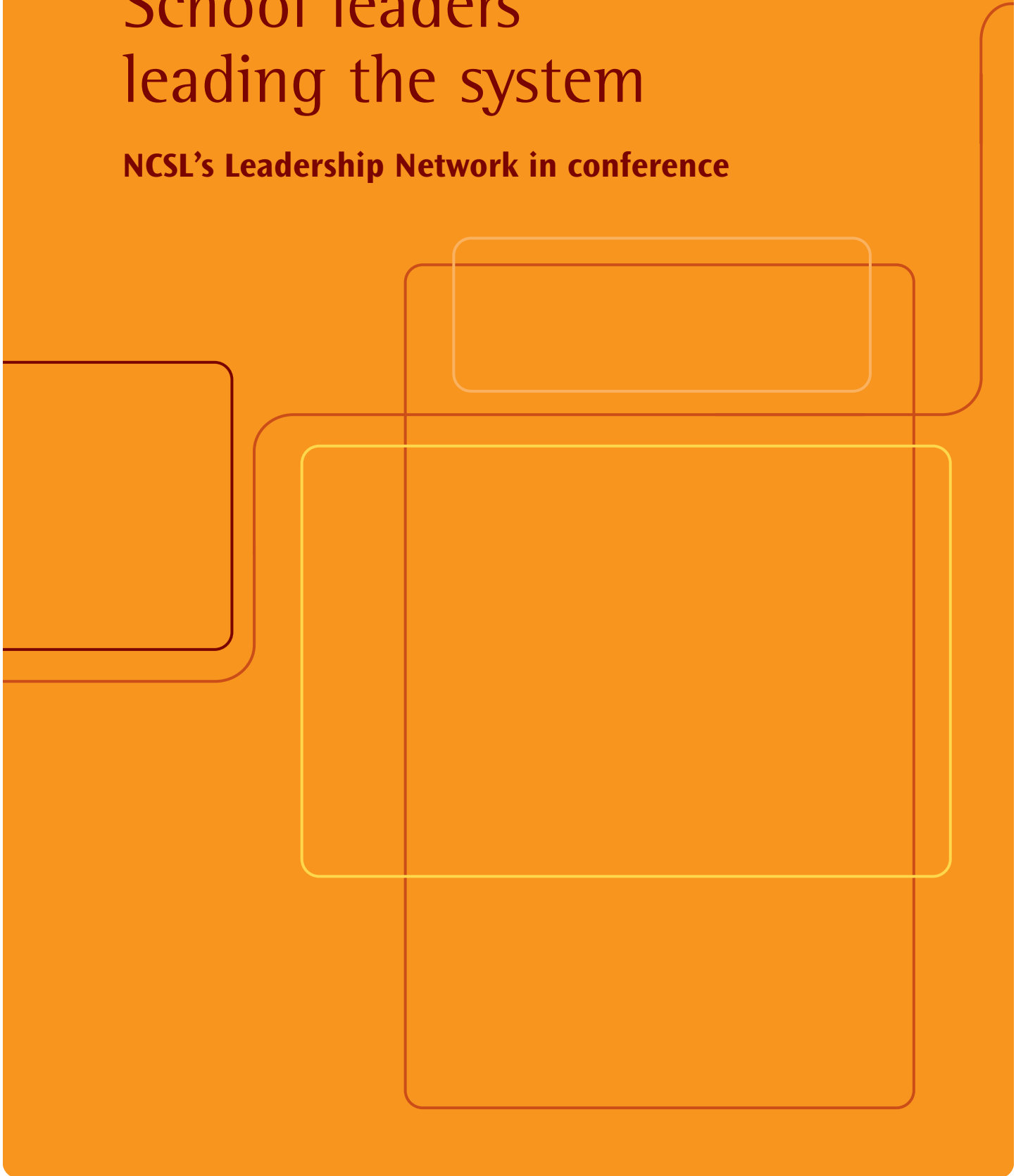


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School leaders leading the system

NCSL's Leadership Network in conference



In the increasingly complex world of 21st century education, school leaders in England are faced with new and different accountabilities as they work towards addressing both Every Child Matters (ECM) and the standards agenda simultaneously.

As a consequence, the development of multi-agency partnerships and collaborative working have come to characterise local responses to system level issues which currently challenge all school leaders. This requires a new form of leadership which focuses the energies of school leaders not just on leading within their own schools, but beyond their schools on behalf of the wider system within their locality and beyond.

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is committed to supporting the development of headteachers and other school leaders in rising to the challenges this presents. Growing school and system leaders for the future is therefore, a key priority in supporting the development of an education system which is increasingly responsive to the needs of young people.

In 2006, NCSL's Leadership Network conference took 'School leaders leading the system' as its theme. At the conference, the debate about system leadership was shaped by three questions:

1. What motivation is there for school leaders to help generate developments beyond their school?
2. How can headteachers be agents of wider change?
3. How does system leadership benefit learners?

Edited by Karen Carter and Tricia Sharpe

With thanks for the contributions made to this publication by Julie Nightingale, Heather Ditch, Jill Ireson and all of the participants and contributors to NCSL's Leadership Network conference 2006.

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This summary gives a flavour of the contributions, discussions and ideas generated by conference participants.

School leaders leading the system

The Leadership Network

The Leadership Network aims to represent headteachers from all phases, as active members of NCSL, contributing to leadership learning and drawing policy issues from professional practice. The Network is considered to be unique in its composition and its ability to link policy to practice. Its aspiration is to bring the best of school leadership into regional and national debate. For many members it is the national scope of the Network which gives it its distinctive appeal:

“Meeting with other heads is always useful and there are other opportunities to do that, but being part of the Leadership Network is crucial for its national breadth. I can meet heads in my local area every week, but I also like to meet people from across the country to get that national perspective. I’d like to see even more meetings nationally – the national aspect is so very important.”

Network headteacher

The Network’s projects

More than 480 headteachers are currently involved. Network activity nationally and within nine regional groups is co-ordinated by practising school leaders with a quarter of Network members participating in one of the Network’s four ongoing research projects.

1. System leadership

School leaders have the potential to be agents of change and help generate excellence both within and beyond the school. Project members are looking at new models of headship, including executive headship, to widen understanding of what system leadership looks like in practice, and are disseminating their findings through regional events.

2. Curriculum for the 21st century

In partnership with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 60 primary and secondary schools from the Network have been working on the Curriculum for the 21st century project since last October. It is examining ways to revise the curriculum with fresh approaches to organisation and delivery, and including an exploration of different ways to measure success in learning. The project is supported by five NCSL Research Associates.

3. Within-school variation (WSV)

Within-school variation has been pinpointed as a significant barrier to children’s progress, with variation in performance within British schools four times greater than that between schools, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The WSV project has been widely praised, with many schools managing to reduce the differences in how pupils perform in different subjects in a short time. The project is backed by the DfES and the Innovation Unit, with more than 50 Network schools involved since 2003.

4. Personalisation

Ten research associates from the Network have examined the DfES’ five components of personalised learning. Professional learning has emerged as key, with schools positioning themselves as learning organisations in which workforce development is seen as an integral part of raising standards.

Participation in these projects has been shown to provide many benefits to Network members and their schools:

“It’s an opportunity to do action research and to investigate new ways forward, but with added academic rigour in terms of planning and evaluating you can only get from a national college. Through the projects we have been involved in there has been a double benefit. There’s research in the school but you also pick up ideas from others.”

Network school principal

System leadership in perspective

The Network's conference

'School leaders leading the system' was the third annual conference of the Network. In addressing the theme of the conference Michael Fullan described this approach to leadership as moving ever more centre-stage given recent attention to headteacher vacancies and continuing concerns about system under-performance. In his view: *"One way to address these two challenges is to develop forms of leadership that will redefine the very role of headteachers"*.

Ray Tarleton, currently the Leadership Network's National Co-ordinator, expressed the conference's value as offering *"a combination of hands-on experience and theoretical grounding."* The structure of the day reflected this model with keynotes from Michael Fullan and Ben Levin focused on reform in Ontario and implications for system leadership, and from John West-Burnham proposing system leadership as a seventh standard of headship in the UK. Workshops offered insights from both Canadian and UK strategy and practice.

Using this summary

- 'System leadership in perspective' on pages 2-3 draws on the keynote contributions.
- 'System leadership in practice' on pages 4-5 pulls together points from leading conference themes and identifies the implications for practice.
- 'System leaders in action' on pages 6-7 highlights the impact of the conference on participants' thinking, outlines their proposed actions for the future, and invites you to 'Pause for thought' on the issues raised.
- 'School leaders shaping the system's future' on pages 8-9 presents the key messages identified for future thinking and practice in the Network and provides information about NCSL's commitment to support its development and expansion into the future.

Michael Fullan, Ben Levin and John West-Burnham offered critical analyses from Canadian and UK perspectives.

Building capacity – the key to system leadership

System-wide reform and the leadership it demands were examined in close-up by Michael Fullan, an international authority on education reform, and Ben Levin, Ontario's Deputy Minister for Education.

Capacity building was identified as a keystone of successful change, defined by Fullan as anything done by way of strategy and action to increase the effectiveness of a group. This is increasingly seen as an essential component of the types of system leadership now emerging in the UK and elsewhere.

The Ontario reform programme has focused on specific areas, including building positive partnerships in the education sector, focusing improvement on under-performing schools and putting an emphasis on professional development. There is a commitment to improve child care and a broad approach taking in the safety and health of children, alongside education matters such as breadth of curriculum.

In Ontario, schools had actually been ahead of the Government in recognising the importance of capacity building as a lever of school improvement, and were sharing good practice as a matter of routine. Now capacity building is also explicitly linked to targets which are set in consultation with staff and other stakeholders.

Levin described how the new strategy has been influenced by research and practitioner experience with input from education leaders and staff, parents and communities. Emphasis has been put on the education department working closely with school boards, building capacity by creating leadership teams at all levels and creating more professional learning opportunities for educators.

Two years into the process and there are improvements in results consistent over that period. Significantly, teachers are reporting improvements in teaching and learning skills in schools, as well as in test results.

In Levin's opinion, leading in a world shaped by the political agenda demands specific qualities including relentless optimism and an ability to stay focused on what matters – the children – *"There's also a need to stop seeing politics as something that is 'done to' heads and schools. Being a victim is never good."* Levin called for those system leaders who work in education to educate themselves more thoroughly about politics and what drives a political agenda.

System leadership – setting a new standard?

Revised national standards for headteachers were published in 2004, outlining heads' roles and responsibilities and covering elements of headship. Is it now time to make system leadership the seventh standard of headship?

This was the argument put forward by John West-Burnham, Senior Research Adviser at NCSL and an authority on leadership development. His keynote speech to the conference outlined how system leadership could enable leaders to respond more effectively to the challenges now facing them.

Existing ways of working no longer apply, particularly with the advent of Every Child Matters and the Children Act. These new agendas for school and system development expand heads' responsibilities and give them influence well beyond the boundaries of a single school.

West-Burnham believes a change to 'community leadership' may be one way of responding to demographic changes in the UK and the shortfall in candidates for headship. Orthodox ideas about leadership are also challenged by the proposed shift from school as provider to the school responding to the needs of individuals under ECM and the personalised learning agenda.

System leaders will need different skills and qualities including being adept at building networks, facilitating dialogue, being comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. They will have to identify ways to demonstrate the impact their work is having. Their own sphere of knowledge will have to expand: they will need to understand how policy development works, grasp the strategies to enable system transformation and understand new educational thinking and research.

In West-Burnham's view, all of these changes take headship beyond the range of skills and responsibilities codified by the existing national standards: *"Adding system leadership to the list of national standards would signal acceptance that headship today is about more than leading a school – which is what the existing standards are focused on – and that it has a dimension which is providing leadership above and beyond the school."*

Messages from practice...

"I was especially interested to hear the initial keynote about some of the freedoms the teachers have in Ontario, having learnt lessons about over-prescriptive leadership. As a special school leader I have always had the courage to work that way because I knew it was right for the children. It confirmed my beliefs."

System leadership in practice

The conference workshop sessions sought to identify and better understand the meaning and potential of system leadership.

What does system leadership look like?

System leadership was seen as vital to the fulfilment of the Every Child Matters agenda. In one workshop session John West-Burnham outlined the growing need for heads to develop the leadership capacity of their schools then allow the influence of that to spread beyond the school gates. He cited the DfES Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: *“As we put more emphasis on those in the system leading reform, we will increasingly need leaders (and leadership teams) with the creativity, imagination and inspiration to lead transformation.”*

In another session, David Jackson and colleagues from NCSL’s Networked Learning Communities programme, explored with delegates the meaning of system leadership and the relationship between network participation, network leadership and system leadership. In building an idea of what system leadership means in practice, the notion of ‘what it is not’ is as important and ‘what it is’. Replies from delegates described clearly that they did not see system leadership as being ‘bureaucratic’, ‘stagnant or formulaic’ nor ‘about being a super-head’.

Replies were equally clear on the range of feelings about what it does mean: ‘vision and direction’, ‘influence and capacity building’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘collaborative’. There was consensus that system leadership begins with a framework for leadership inside the school and grows out beyond.

Messages from practice...

“System leadership means you have a vested interest in ensuring positive outcomes for the school down the road.”

Networks as fundamental to system leadership in action

So how does a system leader evolve? NCSL’s *System leadership in action* (2006) research puts network membership and collaborative opportunities first in the system leader’s journey – with network leadership described as ‘the proving ground’ for system leaders.

Practitioners at all points in their career can benefit themselves, develop their capacity and better serve their school and community through these leadership opportunities. The act of being part of a network alone cultivates a desire to share, explore and extend influence. Novice practitioners access the knowledge, experience and support of colleagues. Experienced practitioners see beyond their familiar setting, explore the broader influences of issues within the school and identify with a wider community to share their insight and practice.

Delegates suggested that, as their involvement in networks grew, they could no longer imagine trying to resolve issues within their school alone and they see that as important in fulfilling their role in addressing the Every Child Matters agenda.

Messages from practice...

“Networks provide a model for effective, sustained and highly motivating professional learning. Those who learn in networks can’t conceive of a return to previous models, in which schools learnt alone and experts from the outside told them what they needed to be doing better.”

System leadership through partnership: tackling inclusion

One workshop explored the idea of developing system leadership through partnership – examining the changing roles of mainstream and special schools and the partnerships that can make or break the learning experience for children with special educational needs.

Diane Reynard, headteacher at John Jamieson School in Leeds described a partnership between her special school and other services in the area to deliver a comprehensive service to the children they collectively serve. The Specialist Inclusive Learning Centre (SILC) brings together the school, the Hospital and Home Teaching Service and the Physical Difficulties and Medical Services. It's a partnership that facilitates learning in schools that pupils and parents choose, rather than ones they're forced to attend through lack of choice.

"To a large extent this has been about addressing the detail of school management, like defining roles and embedding system leadership into people's work. We recognised that among our greatest challenges was the need to change expectations of the principal's role, to manage that change without managing all the people, and then to manage service provision without managing all the providers. That's been dependent on handing over autonomy, which isn't easy, but has been a key objective in how we've developed our system leadership."

They have created roles within the school and partner services to support that transition and their needs beyond that. An assistant headteacher has responsibility for the climate, ethos and innovation of the SILC, for example.

"We have a higher-level teaching assistant who looks after all of the teaching support staff and the site management team and an assistant headteacher who manages the hospital and home tuition service. It means that whole school responsibility exists throughout the school and roles cross boundaries to cement a real partnership between organisations."

Messages from practice...

"I very much enjoyed the session on system leadership in action – we saw some good modelling of how to use excellent research material. It helped me to consider what collaboration is worth being involved in, what will make a maximum effect."

System leaders in action

The following reflections give a sense of some of the actions that Leadership Network members are intending to take forward from the conference in addressing their roles as school and system leaders.

Developing system leadership confidence and skills

"It helped me to gain confidence about where I am as a system leader and gave me pointers on where else I could develop my leadership skills."

"I feel validated in my early thinking on system leadership and have been encouraged to move forward and discuss the ideas more widely."

"This has reinvigorated me to return to the complex, unclear and stressful work of creating a new vision and approach with two currently separate staff teams. The conference has suggested ways of approaching conflicting perspectives. I don't have answers, but I have ideas."

"Working in the executive leadership group has developed my thinking. I do feel I am working towards being a system leader, working locally, county-wide, nationally and internationally – I have lots of ideas to take back with me."

Pause for thought...

- In what ways do you see yourself as a system leader?
- How well developed are your ideas and skills for taking this forward and what support might you need?

Remodelling the system to build capacity

"Releasing power and control can be scary but it is the best way to move forward. I'm going to consider the design of our distributed leadership model within our federation of schools."

"It's been really affirming, but we need to retain clarity of focus on succession and sustainability. I feel renewed energy and enthusiasm – I'll be reviewing what we're doing and how."

"I'm a newly appointed headteacher and we are due to expand in 2007 with a view to becoming a fully extended school. I'm going back with many ideas and principles that I can base my planning on."

"I plan to go back and follow up on cross-sector working and making our school the centre of a range of children's services. I also want to change our CPD programme so that we are more able to spot talent early on in a teacher's career. I'm going to adapt job descriptions to include behaviours and encourage the kind of qualities that reflect our school ethos and the ECM agenda."

"I'm going to work with governors and the governors' unit to look at how we can move governors to have an area/city-wide/regional view instead of just an institutional one. I'm also going to work with the DfES via pathfinder work on collaboration to address some of the blockages that prevent a flow in the system leadership agenda."

Pause for thought...

- How equal is the capacity of your school or network to the demands of system leadership?
- What would benefit from remodelling or development in your situation?

Acting on specific system-related issues

“I’m going to look into encouraging a student voice. I especially like the idea of taking some students to another school to gather ideas on how we could move our own school forward.”

“I’m going to investigate learning in a social context – is it compatible with personalised learning? Does it complement it? Is it an essential part of it? I’m going to revisit successful changes before developing personalised learning plans.”

“The conference will influence my practice in planning our roles as the local leaders of the ECM agenda. I want to engage the student voice in lesson evaluation, and I want to partner subjects and encourage peer collaboration to address in-school variation.”

Pause for thought...

- What areas would benefit from focused research in your context as one step towards a system leadership strategy?
- What are the specific system issues which pose the greatest challenges in your context?

Disseminating system leadership practice

“Within my own role, aspects of the day will influence my own practice in delivering leadership CPD activities within the local authority. We have some excellent practice through networks which will continue to be disseminated.”

“I’m going back with a greater commitment to developing opportunities for collaborative support for leadership through our role as a Leading Edge school.”

“Today has confirmed a lot of the things I’ve been considering and encouraged me to be more open with the leadership team about these agendas in future. Taking an analogy that was used in one of the workshops about the system leaders’ perspective, I now feel I have a responsibility ‘to be on the stage, on the balcony and outside the theatre!’”

Pause for thought...

- What existing practice could contribute towards developing more effective system leadership in your situation?
- How might it be built upon?

School leaders shaping the system's future

"One of the criteria for joining the Leadership Network is a commitment to working outside your school boundaries. The Network needs to see itself as a force for system leadership so that heads are connected and not isolated or confined to their local area. It should be a place where they can find support and can support others."

Leadership Network National Co-ordinator

Leading the system into the future: reflections from the conference

Bringing discipline to practice

The Network, with its focus on combining research and practice, has a continuing role in creating operational images of effective leadership which bring disciplined innovation to the forefront.

"I need to reflect on what really matters and engage with others in my networks to help them avoid expending too much energy on other matters."

"I think we need to bring discipline and coherence to our practice so that our work doesn't become cluttered and over complex."

Growing confidence to influence and challenge

The future challenge to school leaders is to increasingly work beyond the boundaries of their schools and in partnership with others across sectors, create connected strategies which will influence system change:

"Today has confirmed my views that system leadership must be the way forward if we truly believe every child matters. It gives me the confidence to continue to challenge opinions which put barriers in the way."

"There seems to be a growing confidence to engage in influencing what should happen at a strategic level, but I don't recognise a great deal of consensus amongst leaders in different phases about how we should try to influence."

Building collaborative capacity beyond the school

The Network has been challenged to consider the ways in which it might build upon the collaborative capacity of school leaders, and how other partners might be involved in the development of the collective strategies required to tackle the ECM agenda:

"It's a time of great change. We need to work with other headteachers to support our development in schools. Collectively, we are a strong voice and we should use this to move schools into the 'wrap around care' that gives children an education provided for their needs rather than a system they need to fit into."

"The conference themes have linked to my thinking on ECM. I think we need system leadership thinking. It's highly relevant as a nursery school developing as a children's centre in partnership with the local social services, but there's still a question-mark over how we engage leaders in other disciplines and professions in the debate."

Measuring the impact of system leadership

Another key message was recognition of the need for developing connected ways of measuring the impact of system leadership efforts:

"Within our team the common language is based on the five outcomes of ECM – I would suggest that measurements of the outcomes of each of these can make the process of measuring the impact of system leadership more manageable. I intend to look at this aspect, maybe developing a shared view on measuring the impact of our activities."

We are developing and designing a ‘school within a school’ curriculum for 200 of our most vulnerable young people. This multi-agency work is impacting on our operation as a school and it needs monitoring.”

This suggests that the Leadership Network should give serious attention to evaluating the impact of its activity at a system level. As one member put it:

“If our work in the Network isn’t having an impact on the lives of children – their attainment, achievement and well-being – then I wouldn’t want to be a part of it. This is the central reason for being involved.”

NCSL’s commitment to supporting school and system leaders into the future

Having established itself as a major contributor to the College’s programme of research, the Leadership Network is expanding. *“The expansion is part of the College’s commitment to involve members more intimately in developing its activities and direction”* explains Steve Munby, NCSL’s Chief Executive.

“One of the things that I’m determined to ensure is that the College is outward-facing and listening to the realities of the role that school leaders play, so that they are empowered to help drive forward the agenda. The Leadership Network is part of the work to fulfil that aim. It will enable us to listen to what leaders are saying, to gather intelligence on the ground and feed that back, so that we understand where the good practice is and that can inform our future research and development of provision. The principle is that we are not looking to take people out of school but rather to expand the role of headteacher to wider system leadership.”

Sian Carr, Operational Director of Stakeholders and Networks at NCSL describes how future plans aim to build on the excellent work done by the Leadership Network so far:

“As the Network moves into a new phase, this is a great opportunity to ensure its relevance to heads leading their schools. I’m particularly keen to explore how, through the Network, we can draw in those leaders who have not yet engaged with the College. The more the Network develops and expands in terms of confidence, activity and numbers, the more leaders will feel that they have ownership of the College and a voice in what it does. The College too will be more connected to the realities of leadership.”

For more information about joining NCSL’s Leadership Network visit
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