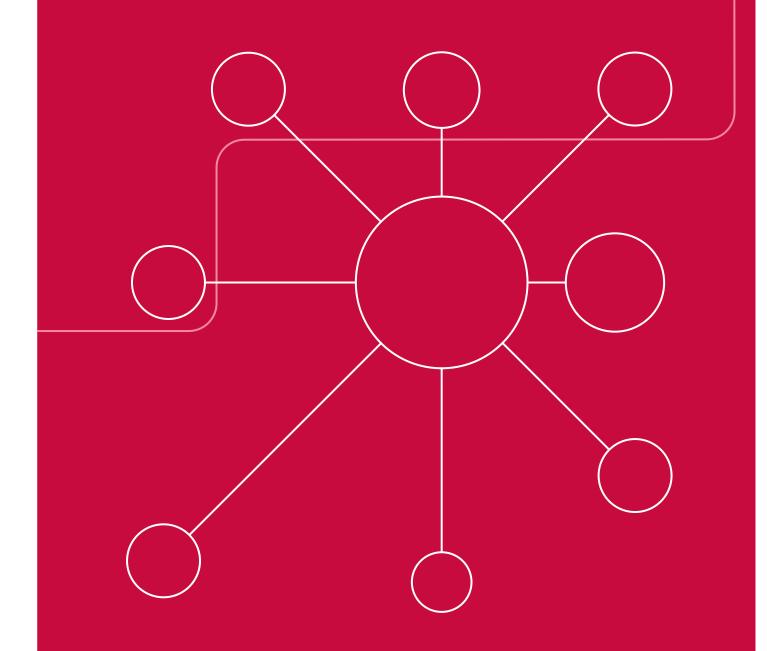# School leaders leading the system

System leadership in discussion

Key ideas

System leadership for capacity building

System leadership, according to Ben Levin, emphasises that educational leaders are operating in a political world. In his view, this form of leadership needs to be characterised by a strong vision and a focus on goals. These can act as a filter and a driver for policy reform and contribute to building the system's capacity for change.

Michael Fullan also frames system leadership in terms of capacity building, which he defines as *"anything done by way of strategy and action to increase the effectiveness of the group"*. He sees this approach to leadership 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"*.

Identified strategies employed to build capacity include:
- Developing the skills of leadership through methods such as coaching, co-facilitation, or learning groups.
- Developing opportunities to expand the number and experience of leaders through distributed leadership and networks.
- Introducing new support mechanisms such as executive headship and School Improvement Partners (SIPs).

"We are starting to understand in practical terms that system leaders are leaders who build capacity within their own schools and also work beyond their school on behalf of all children in their locality…They are moved to make a difference – and to do so across a local system and in partnership with others."

Ballantyne et al, NCSL, 2006

System leadership in networks

Networks provide a multi-agency vehicle for reform and can be capacity-building in so far as they are able to produce new knowledge and mutual learnings that can then feed back and inform public policy. In networks a key indicator of impact at system level is increased capacity for change. Integral to this, is a shift in attitude towards more rigour in questioning existing structures and practices.

Emerging evidence suggests that networks are creating environments in which school leaders are responding to the challenge of leading and learning beyond their own schools. As a result, networks have been described as 'the proving ground for system leadership'. They create joint work arrangements that are developmental of leadership, making leadership more widely available and developing system leaders. (NCSL, 2006)

"I don't think you can develop system leaders in practice unless you have networks. I don't think by being part of a network, you become a system leader, but if you don't have networks, where will you ever gain that experience?"

John Baumber, NCSL, 2006

"Networks grow leaders – and not just that, but leaders with values that relate to wider system effects and who care beyond their classroom or their school. Most reform networks provide numerous opportunities to learn new roles, establish relationships and engage others in ideas about how to facilitate for learning. In important ways leadership involves both back-stage and on-stage work for those in formal network positions as well as those who learn through their participation in the network."

Ann Lieberman, NCSL, 2006

System leadership in partnership

Bond, Farrar, West-Burnham & Otero propose that the achievement of the aims of Every Child Matters requires system leadership in which school leaders collaborate with other schools, agencies and the wider community. Educational leaders are well placed to provide leadership of this sort and schools are well placed to act as hubs and/or catalysts for collaborative leadership activity undertaken in partnership with others.

A key feature of system leadership identified in this regard, is that of 'partnership working', where it is recognised that school leaders are increasingly being called upon to exercise their leadership capacity in the context of collaborative working with others 'beyond the boundaries' their schools.

"Every Child Matters creates a new landscape for system leadership. It means that schools need to look at community involvement completely differently. If they continue to see themselves as providers in a contractual public service arrangement, there is little hope of engaging others as true partners in wider nurturing and educational processes. Leadership with this community dimension calls for a re-think of approach."

Bond et al, NCSL, 2006

Strategies for bringing about this change of approach are:
- building social capital through promoting relational trust and dialogue
- building on and/or creating networks that increase the opportunity for distributed leadership
- modelling behaviours and approaches that are authentically collaborative and adaptive

System leadership for learning

Carter, Franey & Payne focus on the need for system leadership to adapt to achieve optimal conditions for student learning: *"Local interpretation involves school leaders shifting from a 'one-size-fits-all approach', to one where the system flexes around the needs of pupils and the challenges of local context."*

System thinkers, says Michael Fullan, have a relentless focus on learning. Sustainability, he argues, requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising. This, he suggests, requires 'deep learning', and deep learning means collaborative cultures of enquiry that alter the culture of learning so that leaders together can solve difficult or adaptive problems. As one network headteacher describes it: *"The biggest challenge is how to keep pedagogy at the heart of everything we do."*

Two of NCSL's research and development projects have involved school leaders in working together in just this way – using enquiry processes to problem-solve and develop local solutions to system-level issues. Project outcomes have begun to indicate the potential of new approaches:

- Personalisation: Looking at the role of technology in transforming teaching, models for the use of interactive and creative forms of learning facilitated by 21st century media, the development of individualised programmes and assessment for learning.
- Within-school variation (WSV): Variation in performance *within* British schools is four times greater than that *between* schools. Schools involved in the project report greater levels of pupil engagement, improved achievement in specific areas and significant teacher learning and culture change.

Reflective questions

- What is your assessment of your organisation's own capacity in relation to what you want to achieve?
- Where are the strengths and where are the weaknesses?
- What is your process for growing leaders of the future?
- How do you spot talent?
- What opportunities are you using to stretch individuals?
- How are you supporting individuals' development?
- What is your vision for your own role as a system leader?
- How are you developing your own skills and capacity as a system leader?
- Are there any areas where you would benefit from external support or a 'critical friend'?
- How can you access this?

Examples from practice

Coaching for schools facing challenging circumstances
The experience of being a Consultant Leader provides insight into one of many system leadership roles open to headteachers. Working with the headteacher of a local school in a coaching capacity proved to be beneficial when one head was having a tough time restructuring and building capacity to focus on teaching and learning within her school: *"As a consultant leader and coaching colleague I was able to challenge people at the school and ask some hard questions – so that they would 'buy in' to the new leadership team. There were tangible differences – people were smiling."*

"Discourse is not like a conversation – not two way – I felt that I'd broken the convention of social interaction – I never talked about my coach's school or what she had been doing…but together we planned successful pieces of work – in fact, we achieved impact in both schools."

Erica Pienaar & Lesley Day, headteachers

- What does your own experience of networks tell you about system leadership?
- What would be your dos and don'ts?
- What skills would you say are key to system leadership in networks?
- How do you measure up in terms of these skills?
- How might leadership development opportunities be provided through networked activity in your situation?
- If you were to review the networks (internal and internal/external) that contribute to your organisational system, what assessment would you make of their effectiveness, integration and reach?
- Are there any unmet needs?
- How will you lead on this?

What do network leaders do?
- Network leaders lead from the outside-in…thinking about strategy from the point of view of their students and community stakeholders.
- Network leaders mobilise disparate supplies of energy, resource and conversation…providing a structure for conversations, not a recipe.
- Network leaders foster trust and empower others to act …recognising that not everyone will always agree.
- Network leaders help people to grow out of their comfort zones…using shared activity to encourage understanding.
- Network leaders are lead learners not all-knowers… making a point of not having all the answers.
- Network leaders nurture other leaders.

Paul Skidmore, Demos

- What strategies have you in place to engage with and influence the context of your learners?
- Are they sufficient? What is your evidence?
- What community-related structures and approaches do you believe will work best to achieve the aims of ECM?
- What do you have in place?
- How will you need to develop further to meet these demands?
- How do you see your own role with regard to community leadership and to Every Child Matters?
- To what extent do you think a system leadership approach would support your work in partnership with other schools, communities and agencies?
- In what ways do you sense you will need to develop your capabilities as a system leader in this community context?

Meeting community needs
Montgomery High School is a full service extended school. A new family centre is due to open May 2006 to include sexual health, mental health, health education, family support, Connexions careers and advisory service and provision for the visually impaired.

"Community leadership involves following and not leading. As heads we need to listen to others, parents, other services. It was important to have a sense of what other community services are available locally. There was an opportunity to figure out what services should be offered and bring these together. The approach to leadership was to involve others to embed improvement and change. The change required courage and commitment and a resistance to the pressure of the standards agenda. It has been fiercely difficult and rewarding."

Paul Moss, Leadership Network headteacher

- How effective is your school at focusing on the learning needs of staff and students as individuals?
- What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of your strategies?
- What is your leadership approach to securing changes where needed?
- To what extent is within-school variation or personalisation an issue for your organisation?
- What lessons might be learned from the research and practice of others in tackling these issues?
- How could you build a culture of enquiry in your situation?
- What opportunities do you have access to, which would enable staff to develop local solutions to system-level issues?

Within-school variation: learning about system issues
The WSV project identified four areas that need to be addressed in order for a school to begin tackling its variation challenge:

- systematic and consistent use of data to inform practice
- high-quality teaching through the continuous professional development of teachers
- high quality middle leadership by year heads and subject heads
- curriculum provision and pathways

Promoting cultural change within school and effectively utilising 'student voice' also appear to be important in identifying and addressing factors that contribute to WSV.

Ray Tarleton, Leadership
Network National Co-ordinator, 2006

Executive headship

Do…
- redefine roles and responsibilities very clearly in your own school before you start
- keep close to learning
- be as visible as possible to have an impact on parental perception, for example, being at the school gate
- give time to align your values to the new situation
- communicate, communicate, communicate!
- make sure governors get the pay points right

And don't…
- think that you can or should do everything – it's hard to resist the hero model
- allow the task to take your vision away
- be all things to all people – give responsibility to others
- forget you need a life out of school.

Leadership Network headteachers

Developing tomorrow's leaders

What are the signs of capacity for promotion?
- the ability to build relationships
- whole-school thinking
- personal feedback
- showing initiative, risk-taking and curiosity
- being given opportunities by more experienced colleagues
- getting things done – showing others you were good and effective

What are the key professional experiences as preparation?
- having experience of both pastoral and curriculum
- working with people and leading your first team
- role models, positive and negative – experience of good line leadership
- challenging professional development

Tony Smith, headteacher & Iwan Davies, deputy headteacher

Leading a multi-agency network

Sue is network co-leader of the Organic Learning Network and a SureStart manager. She believes she has learned important lessons about how to broker relationships between the different groups who contribute to children's education and development.

"I've learned by shutting up and listening. You do learn an enormous amount by observing. I think it is underrated as a leadership skill. We've also done a lot of talking…We've found that the language we use is critical in terms of sharing basic understandings. When we've brought health colleagues and social care colleagues and education together, we have to go back to the drawing board and find out what simple terms like diversity and inclusion mean for all professional colleagues."

Sue Egersdorff, NCSL, 2006

Networks as a 'proving ground' for system leadership

Graham was a deputy headteacher when he became co-leader of the Warwickshire Inclusion Network. He credits the network with giving him a unique opportunity for leadership development and the confidence to take on a new position as acting headteacher of a failing school.

"Sometimes I think – how am I going to make this work? I have learnt, though, that to improve this school I will need to get the leadership right at all levels, and work towards allowing strong leadership to become self-replicating. One of the most compelling leadership lessons I have learned is to try to engage the negative people, rather than ignore or dismiss them. I think: How can I persuade you of the moral purpose of this mission?"

Graham Tyrer, NCSL, 2006

Creating a culture for community-wide collaboration

Many extended schools have facilitated some form of visioning event to support the development of a collective vision. Such days can draw attendance from a range of potential partners including community groups. They can help promote a sense of mutual ownership and build relationships.

Once partners are identified, experience shows that investment in time for discussion to establish values and vision is essential to secure engagement. This gives an opportunity to understand aspirations and work out how the school can support these. Targets and priorities can then be realistic and mobilise all partners. Celebrating success brings resisters on-board and provides the impetus for new work. Ensuring students are involved in all initiatives is important in promoting the longer-term viability of joint working.

Andy Coleman, NCSL, 2006

Community involvement in strategic leadership

"We're part of a full service extended school, so it's important that our partnership network brings together a whole host of representatives for the schools and other agencies in the area. Our partnership chair is a local vicar…We also have representatives from the primary care trust (PCT) and health and social services departments on the partnership board.

I'm interested now in developing a leadership partnership across agencies…Our leadership team consists of non-academic staff like our site manager, our office manager and the FSES co-coordinator (an employee of the PCT). What's important is that we have school-to-school partnerships that engage with the community rather than head-to-head ones, and that means everyone has to be involved."

Leadership Network headteacher

Extending learning opportunities and services

A secondary school in London: *"We are a school in special measures and this has prompted major changes to staff and activities. There are now breakfast and after school clubs, parents clubs for numeracy and literacy and other classes for adults and parents. We've set up holiday activities, lettings for study support and the MEND project around child obesity. There is also study support with Millwall football club. None of this is part of an entitlement. This is made up as we go along and done on the basis of raiding budget and sweet talking. We've just been successful in a bid to build a full extended school."*

Mark Elms, headteacher

The Rossendale Virtual School: *"Rosendale schools are improving outcomes for hard-to-reach learners. We aim to create a coherent programme of curricular and personal development. The Virtual School provides any pupil who has to be away from school with a personalised curriculum to ensure that they do not fall behind with their work and reduce the risk of their having to attend a PRU."*

Iain Hulland, NCSL, 2006

Connecting up the curriculum 14-19 across a local area

South Cumbria Secondary Learning Innovation Network consists of five secondary schools, one 6th form college, one College of Further Education and one Pupil Referral Unit who work together across a geographically dispersed area on the Furness peninsular. The network directs its work through a 14-19 development group and has developed the following strategies to tackle the issue of 14-19 curriculum provision:
- Establishing a shared vision across the region for the 'Furness learner' and planning a joint approach to the provision of 14-19 learning in the area.
- Developing a shared focus for network activity on raising boys achievement, the promotion of student voice, and a co-ordinated enterprise learning entitlement for all students.
- Moving towards collective provision of applied GCSEs, joint INSET, and common timetabling across the network, which with limited funds could not have been achieved on an individual school basis.

Wendy Allen & Brian Wood, network co-leaders

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 of 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 of 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.

This publication in NCSL's *School leaders leading the system* series explores the theme of 'system leadership'. It draws upon keynote presentations, think pieces and accounts of practice generated by participants of NCSL's Leadership Network annual conference 2006. Those who participated in the conference did so in order to explore and better understand what emerging theories of system leadership might mean to them in practice.

Edited by Karen Carter and Tricia Sharpe

Using this discussion tool

The content of this booklet – which is designed as a discussion tool – reflects the presentations, discussions and observations of the conference participants. It includes reflective questions taken directly from their conversations and examples from practice drawn from conference contributors.

Key ideas

This discussion tool is structured around four themes which emerged from the conference debate to reflect key ideas about system leadership:

1. system leadership for capacity building

2. system leadership in networks

3. system leadership in partnership

4. system leadership for learning

When taken together these four dimensions of leadership provide a basis for exploring and understanding the potential nature of system leadership in practice in an educational context.

Reflective questions

The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about the systems, processes and leadership practices that exist in schools, networks and communities which enable system leadership to be developed.

Examples from practice

The examples from practice illustrate how school leaders and others in leadership and support roles in education are beginning to develop system leadership approaches in their work.

This booklet draws together key ideas about system leadership with examples from practice, and includes reflective questions to challenge your thinking and promote discussion and dialogue with others.

Linked resources

1. For more details on system leadership in community settings or to download the publications detailed below please visit: **www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership**

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *ECM Why it matters to leaders*, Nottingham, NCSL

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Working Together: Helping community leadership work in practice*, Nottingham, NCSL

2. For more details on system leadership in networks or to download the publications detailed below please visit: **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Nexus Special Edition: School leaders leading the system*, Nottingham, NCSL

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *System leadership in action*, Nottingham, NCSL

3. For more details on NCSL's Leadership Network projects or to download the publications detailed below please visit: **www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork**

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Personalising learning*, Nottingham, NCSL

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Narrowing the Gap: Reducing within-school variation in pupil outcomes*, Nottingham, NCSL

4. For more details on NCSL's research on school and system leadership or to download the publications detailed below please visit: **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications**

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Lessons From Extended Schools*, Nottingham, NCSL

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *New Models of Headship*, Nottingham, NCSL

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