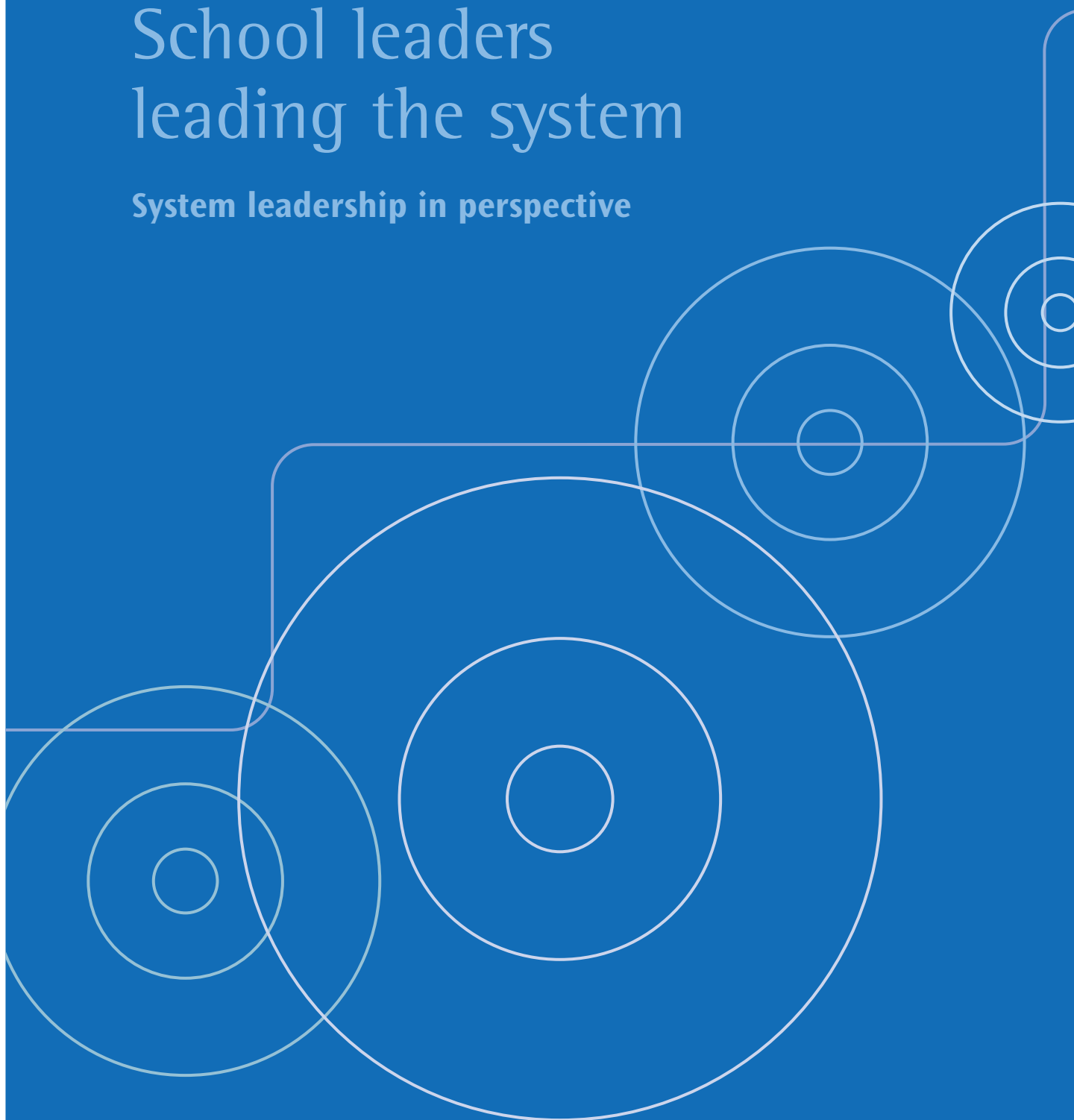
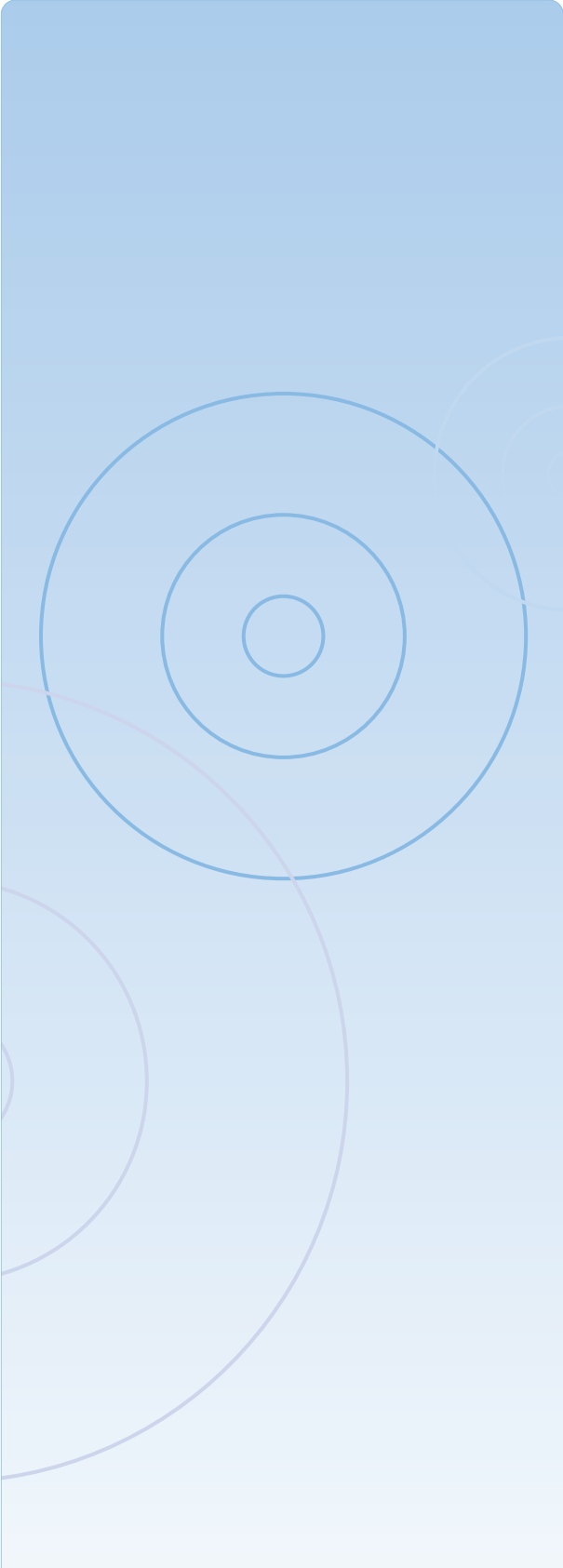


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School leaders leading the system

System leadership in perspective





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.

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 development 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 to the think piece authors: Ben Levin; Kate Bond, Maggie Farrar, John West-Burnham and George Otero; Karen Carter, Trish Franey and Gene Payne for their contributions to this publication and to all of the participants and contributors to NCSL's Leadership Network conference 2006.

This booklet explores system leadership as a response to the public policy agenda. It contains three think pieces which illuminate emerging thinking on system leadership and invite you to 'pause for thought' on the ideas or issues raised.

Government and politics: leading in a political world

Ben Levin

In this think piece, Ben Levin from the Ontario Ministry of Education calls for school leaders to adopt the mindset of educational leadership to engage with public policy. He suggests that leaders should seek to better understand the dynamics that drive policy development and evolve system-wide strategies to influence and address its demands.

Education leaders in many settings tend to see government as a force that is at best neutral and at worst highly negative in affecting their ability to do their work. Heads of schools and managers of school systems are likely to complain that governments issue too many directives, that the directives are often unrealistic, and that the total set of directives tends to be incoherent if not actually contradictory. The result is that educators may see governments as an exogenous force that is mainly making their work more difficult.

This perspective may help us feel better but it is not helpful to achieving our educational purposes. Education is important to countries both economically and socially, which means that governments will continue to set educational agendas and determine resource levels. Rather than complaining about governments, or attributing decisions to 'political factors', it is important for educational leaders to understand the dynamics that drive governments, and to see themselves as having an important role both in influencing and responding to government initiatives.

Space does not permit any substantial discussion of the ways that governments work. Interested readers can find a fuller discussion including references to some of the very substantial literature in Levin (2005). However it would be important to emphasise a few points:

- Governments are driven by a range of factors, but a few of these are primary, namely what they promised to do when elected, and what they feel is desired by, or at least acceptable to, voters. If this is what is meant by 'political

factors' it is hard to object; we would not, I think, prefer governments that were uninterested either in what they had committed to do or in what we, as citizens and voters, prefer. It is always tempting to want governments to do something unpopular when it is something we personally favour.

That is what we often call 'political will'. On the other hand, our reaction is quite different if the unpopular thing being proposed is something we ourselves dislike; then we are likely to call it 'ideological'.

- It is very difficult for policy to be coherent because governments are inevitably trying to deal with many complex issues and many divergent and competing interests all at the same time. Moreover, situations can change rapidly through unpredictable events making previous plans and positions unsustainable. A certain amount of incoherence in government policy is inevitable, even if troublesome, just as teaching and learning practice will vary within a school even after considerable effort to create consistency.

"We recognise that this (inclusion) is educational policy at its most political... We have somehow to engage in that debate and demonstrate how we've made inclusion work through partnership."

Network headteacher

I draw two implications from these realities for schools and school leaders, one about influencing political events and the other about dealing with political decisions.

One changes the decisions governments take primarily by changing what people ask their governments to do. In the case of schools, government policy choices are generally driven by political actors' views of public and parental opinion much more than they are by opinions of those in the education system. Schools can influence these processes primarily through their ongoing communication with parents and citizens.

School leaders need to remember that every interaction with a parent or a community member has, in the longer term, an influence on public attitudes towards schools and therefore, on the views of politicians. Such elements as information flow to parents, responses to complaints, and outreach to the broader community are all important here. School leaders need to think specifically about how their work is (or is not) building public support for public education.

Secondly, there is the matter of how school leaders respond to government directives. In a well-led school or school system there will already be a well developed and justified statement of goals and strategy for achieving those goals. These should have the support of staff and community. Where this is indeed the case, schools will be in a good position to determine at least to some extent how to respond to new requirements.

I remember well, a head at a school in England telling me that his school had kept its tradition of integrated, thematic teaching despite the National Curriculum and testing, because the parents and community in that school would not accept anything else. In other words, schools that are working effectively and are well-connected with their communities, are likely to have more flexibility in their approach than they may think. This is particularly so in England because of the degree of autonomy individual schools and their governing bodies have.

Many educators dislike politics. They believe that education policy and practice should be guided by the expertise of professionals. However this is no longer the case – if it ever was – in any significant field of public policy. Just ask doctors or social service workers about their feelings in this regard. Education is political in the sense that it is important to the common good, and therefore, a subject on which citizens have the right and obligation to express their preferences through the political process.

Educational leaders are themselves operating in a political world, making it important to understand something about how political systems and dynamics operate. Keep in mind that politics has often been and can continue to be a force for good as well; after all, most of the achievements of

modern education, such as universal access and public financing, came about through political struggle. The values of education – the open pursuit of knowledge, respect for ideas, the constant questioning of received wisdom – are also the values of democracy. As educators we can, I believe, be true to our educational values while also contributing effectively to our society's political life.

Pause for thought... ?

- **What is your response to Levin's perspective?**
- **What effect is the feeling of being 'in-tune' or 'out-of-tune' with public policy having on your approach to leadership?**
- **What strategies are you deploying to influence and address public policy?**
- **What evidence do you have of its impact?**

References

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Linked resources



For more details on education and policy developments in Ontario please visit **www.edu.gov.on.ca**

Leading beyond boundaries: Every Child Matters and system leadership within communities

Kate Bond, Maggie Farrar, John West-Burnham and George Otero

This think piece proposes that current policy agendas, particularly Every Child Matters, require system leadership that embraces community and other agencies. It highlights two strategies – leading together to build social capital and leading through networks – that offer some purchase on this challenge.

Every Child Matters redefines relationships between key institutions and services and the individuals they serve. It puts the needs of young people at the heart of reform and requires the creation of new professional communities with different forms of leadership (for more details on *ECM Why it matters to school leaders* see page 9).

The five aims of ECM

1. Being healthy – enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle.
2. Staying safe – being protected from harm and neglect, growing up able to look after themselves.
3. Enjoying and achieving – getting the most out of life and developing the skills for adulthood.
4. Making a positive contribution – to the community and to society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour.
5. Achieving economic well-being – overcoming socio-economic disadvantages to achieve full potential in life.

DfES, 2004

For many, current approaches are rooted in, and bound by, individual organisational systems. It is clear that these methods will no longer work for a system that aspires to be increasingly networked, inclusive and community orientated.

In a series of regional consultations carried out by NCSL in 2005, the Every Child Matters agenda was identified by heads as their greatest challenge. In the absence of set models, many wondered

whether it was possible to deliver such a wide-ranging set of aims which would mean new ways of working, collaborating with new and unknown partners in other agencies, and, in some instances, working to much broader goals.

In responding to this challenge in open debate at the Leadership Network's conference (2006) John West-Burnham proposed that system leadership, in which school leaders collaborate with other schools, agencies and the wider community, offers a way forward on ECM specifically; *"The notion that a school can achieve all five of the ECM outcomes by itself is nonsense. It could even be argued that system leadership needs to be rooted in Every Child Matters because system leadership is not just about running more and more good schools."*

This think piece draws on research and the analysis of collaborative leadership practices undertaken within NCSL's Community Leadership Network and Networked Learning Communities programme. It highlights two complementary strategies¹ for addressing the ECM agenda in schools and communities and reframes them to focus more sharply on system leadership, these are:

- leading together to build social capital
- community leadership through networks

Leading together to build social capital

Every Child Matters aims to maximise the achievement of every single child. The present attainment 'plateau' suggests that there is a need to explore alternatives to a solution based on in-school improvement. One starting point is to focus on the social environment of the learner and the effect that deprived communities have on educational outcomes.

"The context in which children grow up is very important. What are we doing as leaders beyond boundaries to influence that?"

Maggie Farrar, NCSL

¹ More detail on these can be found in NCSL, 2005, *What are we learning about...Community leadership in networks?*, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

Schools have long been aware of the impact of poverty on personal achievement and academic attainment, but until now their action has more frequently been inward-facing to provide remedial or ameliorating support as part of school improvement efforts. This internal orientation creates institutional bonding and integrity, but ironically, it also tends to lead to detachment and compromises engagement and networking – the very bases of social capital. Thus there is a strong case to be made for shifting the emphasis of improvement – and by implication the leadership practices in education – beyond an institutional or organisational focus.

The theory of social capital can be summarised in two words “*relationships matter*” (Field, 2003). Building social capital is a key lever for educational success and working to achieve this requires significant restructuring of how educational leadership is conceptualised. So, how might social capital be actively created with educational leaders as its champion?

John West-Burnham and George Otero (2005) propose two strategies as the most powerful: building relational trust and promoting and practising dialogue. They refer to Bryk & Schneider (2002) who suggest four signs for identifying and assessing relational trust in schools:

1. **Respect** – do we acknowledge one another’s dignity and ideas?
2. **Competence** – do we believe in each other’s ability to fulfil our responsibilities?
3. **Personal regard** – do we care about each other enough to go the extra mile?
4. **Integrity** – do we trust each other to put children’s needs first even in the face of tough decisions?

West-Burnham and Otero argue that educational leaders might make a start by applying these concepts to their leadership practices in schools. However, as the idea of system leadership broadens the remit of school leaders to consider their role in leading not just within, but beyond, the boundaries of their schools – these same signs might also be used to assess the characteristics of developing shared leadership roles with other partners in the educational venture proposed by

ECM (for more details on *Working together; helping community leadership work in practice* please see page 9).

The second strategy concerns the quality and content of our communications. Dialogue is a vehicle through which a school can interact with its community and promote mutual learning. The beginnings might be small-scale – at the school gate – leading to more structured occasions, en route to a culture of dialogue as an integral element of the system.

A role of the system leader is to create spaces and opportunities where dialogue can be learned, valued and practised on an inclusive basis by all members of the community with which she/he interacts. A system leader models *power with* not *power over*. Some signposts are:

- Caring as much about questions as answers.
- Devoting as much energy to listening as to speaking.
- Growing comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.
- Caring as much about the thinking processes and learning of others as about our own.
- Leaving ourselves open to be changed by the conversation

Pause for thought... ?

- **Using the indicators given for assessing the development of relational trust and dialogue, what examples from practice might you select to illustrate your own attitudes and approaches?**
- **How far does your organisation mirror these?**
- **What elements of your strategy may need to change?**

Community leadership through networks

Every Child Matters creates a new landscape for system leadership both within education and beyond the boundaries of the school gates. 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.

Research on community leadership (Bond & Farrar, 2005) has identified that networks offer one effective route-way. They have the potential to support a personalised approach to learning, explore multi-agency collaboration, work with a range of partners and promote a broader, more distributed view of leadership across school and communities. In short, they increase opportunities for individual, family, agency and community involvement.

Four key dimensions of community-focused network activity

1. Sharing leadership with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions.
2. Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred.
3. Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making-for-action by all.
4. Designing local strategies for long-term system-wide change.

Bond & Farrar, 2005

A school leader operating as system leader must be concerned about how power relations affect the development of successful partnerships that go beyond the school. They are aware that they are reading their community through the lens of the school or schools within a network, and either professionalising or pathologising what they see. They wish to transform doing things *for* the community to engaging in joint learning and action *with* the community.

Networks experiencing most success know why they are collaborating together and what good outcomes look like. The downside is, that in building this sense of belonging, networks can appear inward-looking and exclusive. To address this, some have attempted to 'graft' on the community dimension. However, it was soon clear to members that this felt tokenistic and school-dominated. A more effective model proved to be a move from 'bonding' to 'bridging', from connecting inwards to connecting outwards.

Pause for thought... ?

- Using these four dimensions, what examples would you select to illustrate effective leadership of community-focused activity in your situation?
- What would you assess as weak and why?

Educational leaders with an outward-facing, system perspective are well placed to provide leadership beyond the boundaries of their own schools and to embrace a broader remit for leadership in collaboration with others within the communities they serve. It would be wrong to pretend that such a change is easy – but by developing a commitment to building capacity, engaging in dialogue, developing trust and working collaboratively to share and mobilise learning across communities – school leaders are provided with a real opportunity to contribute to the wider leadership of an education system able to secure comprehensive and sustained improvement into the future.

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Linked resources



For more details on system leadership in community settings please visit www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership

Reshaping the landscape: exploring the challenges of outward-facing leadership with a system perspective

Karen Carter, Trish Franey and Gene Payne

This think piece makes the point that educational leadership requires system thinking. Critical to this, is a better understanding of the context within which students live and learn along with local and national imperatives, and to make this combined knowledge work. It argues that achieving change is dependent on ‘collaborative competence’ and ‘deep learning’ both of which are enabled by the practice of distributed leadership, collaborative working and network membership.

“I strongly believe that we need leaders who build outward-facing learning cultures within their schools, who – with their staff – learn from others and are willing to lead and learn beyond their single school. We need leaders who take greater responsibility for all the children in a locality and are prepared to offer support and deploy resources collectively where it is needed.”

Steve Munby, CEO, NCSL, 2005

We currently work within a policy context which speaks to the aspirations of every education professional in the country. Every Child Matters makes the welfare, achievement and well-being of the individual child the collective concern of all agencies. Schools are at its core. At the same time school leaders are amongst the most respected professional leaders in our society (Mori, 2004). Their experience, knowledge and understanding is recognised and trusted. Put these two elements together, and it is easy to see that schools of the future will be central to the success of this policy and that school leaders will have the opportunity to shape the future educational and social landscape.

But we also know there’s still a huge job to be done. Day-to-day life in most of our schools is just as challenging now, if not more so, as it was a decade ago. We work within a context where our most vulnerable children are still those who are most likely to under-achieve, where the recruitment and retention of teaching staff continues to be problematic and where we must grapple with the complex and sensitive realities of workforce reform.

We also know that changing the way that a system functions is not a simple or straightforward process. If we are really going to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest achievers, then the solutions will be as complicated as the underpinning problems. Those contexts, in which children live and learn, will only be changed when those who lead schools see themselves as education, or system, leaders rather than institutional leaders. This means looking outward as well as inward, working in collaboration with other leaders and other services. We will need to exercise leadership in ways that demonstrate professional care for all the children within our orbit, not just those with whom we have a relationship of direct accountability.

Changing the context

Context, then, is the most pressing challenge and the most critical variable – but it is also a key part of the solution. To achieve the changes demanded by society, and by professional honour, school leaders must become the architects and engineers who re-shape the education landscape. They will apply their professional expertise and local knowledge for the benefit of the whole community – acting as what Michael Fullan (2005) has termed ‘system thinkers’. They will, as always, use what they know to inform thinking vertically – through local authorities, other agencies and government departments and increasingly, laterally, with partner schools. This will happen in ‘extended school’ provision and through multi-agency working in local communities.

The engagement of system thinkers does not stop at the school gates. They aim to move within and between different agencies and communities, facilitating the transmission of knowledge and experience. In doing so they create closer ties and more intimate working relationships. If improving educational outcomes demands change in the local context, school leaders have to develop new and more reciprocal relationships with local authorities and other partner institutions. We already have examples of this kind of successful practice in some of our Extended School networks, Community Leadership networks and Networked Learning Communities.

Moving from network to system leadership looks like a big step up, but being part of an effective network provides the essential groundwork for the next phase of ascent. Networks are the places where Fullan's theory moves off the page and into practice. They are the bedrock on which system leadership is grown (for more details of *System leadership in action* in networks please see page 9).

What is system leadership?

A number of national agencies have together suggested that leadership with an outward-facing and system-oriented perspective will be characterised by:

- willingness to take on system-wide leadership roles
- moral and strategic purpose – problem-solving the complexities of context
- commitment to building lateral capacity through collaboration and networking
- focus on enhancing the quality of learning and achievement for all children
- ability to transform schools and networks into personal and professional learning communities
- capacity to empower and develop leadership in others – and to plan for succession

System change

In order for school leadership to impact across the system, there needs also to be an alignment between leadership development and the wider reform agenda, but in ways that allow emerging leaders to take control of the reform agenda from within their own context. To use directional descriptors, it means supplementing 'outside-in' change with 'inside-out' and 'school-to-school' approaches, and this bottom-up and lateral orientation requires different leadership norms.

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. This, in turn, requires the development of collaborative processes which are open to 'possibility thinking' – trying out new options and identifying other possibilities. 'Possibility thinking' is an integral aspect of leadership which is

adaptive in practice, and seeks with others to find solutions which lie outside the current way of operating. At its optimum this involves:

- collective action within communities
- individual members co-designing or co-creating with others
- harnessing everyone's creative ability and not just that of the elite
- building relationships between people and their world (Dyer & Craft, 1997)

Pause for thought... ?

- **What examples from practice might you select that indicate progress in developing possibility thinking in your situation?**
- **Where are the weaknesses, if any?**
- **What elements of your strategy may need to change?**

Leadership development – the art of doing

It is widely recognised that most leadership learning is situated and takes place "*while leaders are doing the job, through engaging actively in leadership practice*" (NCSL, 2004). As Fullan describes, the mark of good leadership for headteachers during their tenure is how many good leaders they are creating. It is a role for school leaders which endorses the diversity of people's talents and skills and recognises that leadership is vested in more than an organisational role. Educational rather than institutional in its focus, this form of leadership is exercised through the liberation of talents within a participatory framework. It "*allows fluidity and flexibility between people and alignment which moves this distributed function in a common direction*" (Jackson, 2002).

NCSL's strategy, *Learning to Lead* (2004), proposed six key areas for leadership development which support this development of lateral capacity – where leadership learning is focused on increasing the number of skilled leaders in a school and increasing leadership learning opportunities both within and between schools. This configuration of leadership for learning has a number of inter-related strands:

- a shared purpose and aspiration for pupil learning
- opportunities for teachers to collaborate and problem-solve together
- individual and collective responsibility for pupil learning
- clear links between teaching, learning and pupil achievement
- leadership focused upon learning – every member of the school can learn
- the school operating as a part of a wider educational community

Leadership capacity – the art of learning

The potential for building internal capacity through the development of schools as learning communities has been well documented. School networks as learning communities have gone one step further. They draw not only from the potential leadership capacity which exists within the boundaries of one school, but also from the leadership learning dynamic which exists when schools work together as a network in the act of joint problem-solving and the shared responsibility for contextualised action. Networks of schools learning together are creating a powerful context for “...*sharing participation and responsibility for the problems generated by the system and for developing creative solutions to them.*” (Whitaker, 1993).

The implication of this is leaders who close the ‘knowing-doing gap’. Their ability resides in having collaborative and collective competence. This in turn, equips them to create effective problem-solving and implementation processes to deal with highly contextualised and complex problems. Michael Fullan, once again, states that sustainability 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.

Pause for thought... ?

- **What examples from practice might you select that indicate significant capability in both these areas?**
- **Where are the weaknesses, if any?**
- **What elements of your strategy may need to change?**

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Linked resources



For more details on system leadership in networks please visit www.ncsl.org/nlc

Linked resources



Government and politics: leading in a political world

- Levin, B, 2005, *Governing Education*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press
- For more details on education and policy developments in Ontario please visit **www.edu.gov.on.ca**



Leading beyond boundaries: Every Child Matters and system leadership within communities

- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *ECM Why it matters to school leaders*, Nottingham, NCSL
- National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Working together: Helping community leadership work in practice*, Nottingham, NCSL
- For more details on system leadership in community settings or to download the publications detailed above please visit **www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership**



Reshaping the landscape: exploring the challenges of outward-facing leadership with a system perspective

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

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