NCSL National College for School Leadership

Research Associate Summary Report

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Getting our heads together:

shared leadership of a collaborative school improvement project

Summer 2006

Background

One of the biggest challenges facing school leaders today is how to create a climate within which to build and sustain improvement. This becomes even more critical in schools facing challenging circumstances. Historically, this has not been helped by the competition between schools over the recruitment of both staff and students. A raft of government initiatives and its continued drive towards an education system partly funded by private sector business and industry have heightened the focus on private and public working together. For some, this has translated into more competitive behaviour.

The notion of parents (and pupils) as consumers proliferates in current educational thinking, with the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005) giving parents even more power by proposing that they and other interested parties should have the opportunity to set up trust schools. This seems to be at odds with the new leadership and school improvement agendas, which see the development of networks and school-to-school partnerships as a key driver in building the capacity for sustainable improvement. This study explores the process of cultivating shared leadership and moving school leaders from competition to collaboration.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a small collaborative of five secondary schools in the East Midlands entitled Sector 3. The collaborative was formed as part of a school improvement project designed to raise attainment at Key Stage 4 within a local authority. This project was funded by DfES and involved a number of partners: a local authority, a private educational consultancy and the 19 secondary schools within the local authority at the time. At the start of the project, one school was in special measures, another two were facing challenging circumstances, three had free school meal (FSM) ratios of almost 50 per cent. Attainment in gaining five A*–C grades at GCSE ranged across the schools from 13 per cent of students to 70 per cent.

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. The interviews took place between April 2004 and February 2006 and involved seven members of the collaborative leadership group, comprising headteachers, deputy or assistant heads, local authority advisers and a private consultant. Each interview explored participants' perspectives on the formation of, and subsequent collaboration between, the project leadership team.

Main findings

The initial research was based on the 'skills required by school leaders for successful involvement in collaboration', devised by Lambert (1998). However, during the study, a number of other factors emerged as conditions that enable successful collaboration. These are illustrated in the following framework.

Framework for enabling successful collaboration

Personal conditions

- Able to facilitate group processes
- Good communication skills
- Able to develop a shared purpose
- Able to mediate conflict
- Adopt a constructive perspective to adult learning; acknowledge that leaders learn from each other
- Understand how change and transition affect people

Structural conditions

- Additional funding; Leadership Incentive Grant and Leading Edge partnership
- Strategic co-ordination; appointing a co-ordinator with school leadership experience
- Tiered leadership structure; strategic group of headteachers; operational group of deputy heads
- Informed external facilitation; high-quality input from experienced and respected colleagues
- Flexibility, differentiation and ownership; based on the needs of the schools

Contextual conditions

- Support of the local authority; willing to work creatively and allow autonomy of partnerships
- Involvement of partner organisations, eg DfES, private consultant, partner local authority
- Education policy underpinned by collaborative activities, eg Excellence in Cities
- Strategic initiatives that require shared working arrangements, eg federations, 14–19 consortia

Impact of shared leadership

The shared leadership of Sector 3 has been successful, as demonstrated by the evidence of improvement, particularly in the more challenging schools. By 2006:

- three of the schools had successfully applied for specialist status
- all schools were above the DfES floor targets at GCSE
- no school was in an Ofsted category
- three schools had achieved their best-ever results the previous year

Helen, one of the headteachers, describes the way in which the commitment of senior leadership has permeated the culture of each of the schools:

We're very proud of the fact that we've actually created a genuine partnership where we're able to trust each other. The management teams of all five schools have been able to enter into a dialogue where we're not just interested in the partnership but the parts as well. Out of that has grown a whole range of initiatives where staff at all levels in each school have been able to benefit and take their learning forward.

Barriers to effective shared leadership and collaboration

Participants described the main reasons for barriers to shared leadership and collaboration between schools in the study as:

- individual school culture

- competing priorities within the school

- competition between schools

- lack of professional engagement

- time

- capacity

Some of the barriers existed for senior leaders, whilst others were problematic for colleagues at other levels in the schools, limiting their involvement in collaborative activities.

Conclusion

This is a small case study of the leaders of five secondary schools and other partners sharing the leadership of a school improvement project. Those interviewed place a significant emphasis on interpersonal factors and their comments suggest that personal qualities are important to people's ability to work collaboratively. Those elements that are the conditions or levers to success can conversely become the barriers to success if they are absent.

The way in which the headteachers initially involved in the project were able to work together provided a good model for the development of collaboration at other levels across the partnership. They were able to share leadership within the group and began to distribute leadership of the project to others within the leadership team of their own school. Whilst leader behaviour is clearly a highly significant factor in enabling successful shared leadership, the presence of other favourable conditions cannot be underplayed. It is the relationship between the personal, structural and contextual factors that would seem to hold the key to sustainable collaboration.

References

DfES, 2005, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* CM 6677, HMSO, Norwich

Lambert, L, 1998, *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*, Alexandria, VA, ASCD

Acknowledgements

Research associate reports available in Summer 2006

- **Changing times, changing roles**

  Elizabeth Giltinan, *Headteacher, Corpus Christi Catholic Primary School, Portsmouth*

- **Going global**

  Peter Greaves, *Deputy Headteacher, Dovelands Primary School, Leicester*

- **More than a feeling**

  Kathleen Lee, *Deputy Headteacher, King Edward VII School, Melton Mowbray*

- **Leadership, literacy and the creative arts**

  Richard Rutherford, *Headteacher, Bramley Sunnyside Junior School, Rotherham*

- **Does the Net work?**

  Ben Wilding, *Headteacher, Brampton Junior School, Huntingdon* and Andy Blackford, *Assistant Headteacher, St Peter's School, Huntingdon*

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