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Pulling Together:

Transforming schools through
a collaborative learning network

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Research associate reports available in summer 03

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SUMMER

"It is becoming increasingly clear that right across the board successful schools can and should be working to support other schools where they operate in less favourable circumstances. It is right that those who are influential and strong for whatever reason do help others."

SEEVEAZ secondary school

Context

These findings are drawn from interviews and surveys of teachers, headteachers and governors of the 19 primary and secondary schools that comprise the South East England Virtual Education Action Zone (SEEVEAZ), a learning network established in April 2000 in the south east of England. Information from progress reports of 2000 – 2003, student performance in statutory tests and public examinations and judgements made by an Ofsted inspection in March 2002 have been drawn upon to validate interview response.

The network was established with a mandate to develop a model of school improvement whereby high performing schools collaborate and support with those in challenging circumstances. The model facilitates the sharing of effective practice, identifying the levers within a school which lead to change and improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, the range of curriculum opportunity and leadership at all levels. The network enables the transfer of collective knowledge and information into each member school, supporting their development as a learning organisation.

The findings

The research explores two main themes:

- What are the essential characteristics for successful collaboration within a learning network?

- Does effective collaboration lead to sustainable school improvement?

The study evidence suggests five axioms which are essential for effective collaboration:

1. Collaboration succeeds when participants are willing and committed to share in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and support, giving and receiving as equals.

2. Leadership of any collaborative is a key factor to success.

3. Members of a network must be actively engaged in decision-making and pro-actively embrace the opportunities it offers.

4. Collaboration is sustained when members benefit personally and professionally, and can identify a positive impact on their school, teachers and students.

5. Effective collaboration in a climate conducive to change leads to sustained school improvement.

In the full report these axioms are explored through the interviews, information and reports of three years' practice. From this commentary a number of lessons that lead to effective collaboration are identified.

Lessons from axiom 1:

- Successful collaboration must be nurtured in a climate of trust, professional respect and knowledge sharing.

- Collaboration leads to greater change and improvement between voluntary professionals with a like-minded determination to improve.

- Where collaboration demonstrates mutual respect, members contribute as equals. Any perceived hierarchies soon disappear.

- Effective collaboration relies on the absence of competition, real or perceived. The more diverse the collaborative, the richer the opportunity to disseminate effective practice.

- A sense of collaborative purpose is created where a common improvement agenda is agreed early. Strengths and weaknesses in individual schools are owned and addressed collectively.

- Collaboration cannot be forced upon individuals if they are to contribute and benefit from working together.

Lessons from axiom 2:

- The inspirational leadership of a facilitator is fundamental to successful collaboration.

- Collaboration is effective when opportunities for shared leadership are identified and the skills and expertise of members are used to benefit the network as a whole.

- Collaboration should add value to the leadership of each school involved by offering challenge, advocacy and support, enabling each school to maintain its own identity whilst contributing to the identity of the network as a whole.

Lessons from axiom 3:

- Members of a collaborative are committed to implementing its vision when they contribute to decisions and agree its purpose and actions.

- Management structures for collective decision-making need to be established early in order to foster transparency of decisions and enhance communication.

- Improvements occur in schools when collaboration stimulates receptive leaders to take on new ideas and inspire and support teachers to implement them.

- Teachers embrace new approaches to their teaching when the collaboration produces immediate, tangible outcomes that directly support them in the classroom.

- For collaborative decisions to be implemented in classrooms, teachers must feel part of the network's activity, and connected to a receptive leader, recognising the benefits to themselves and their students.

Lessons from axiom 4:

- Commitment to collaboration is maintained when members see the benefits of their decisions impacting positively on teachers and students. The greatest advocates for sustained collaboration are those leaders who are able to articulate cause-effect improvements.

- Teachers' commitment to the collaboration is reinforced when high-quality professional development and training helps translate new ideas for learning.

- Collaboration works best when there is a commonly agreed educational framework from which members can construct their own learning and translate it into their own organisation. Designing such a framework requires a common desire to better understand what it is that improves teaching and learning.

- Effective collaboration permits risk and innovation, accepts challenge, recognises individual strengths and areas for development, values people and celebrates success.

Lessons from axiom 5:

- Collaboration needs to identify the key levers which build internal capacity for change and improvement in each school. This done, the collective expertise of the collaborative must support members in translating that knowledge into their own learning organisation.

- For a school to develop the culture of a learning organisation, energetic, forward-thinking leadership must connect all elements of an improvement design and draw upon the network's expertise and knowledge to focus single-mindedly on improving outcomes of students in their school.

- Collaboration is only as effective as the demonstrated improvements within each school in teaching and learning.

- For collaboration to establish sustained improvement in each of its member schools it must provide a platform for sharing knowledge about what it is that improves teaching and enables better learning.

- For new approaches, ideas and resources to be effectively implemented in classrooms, receptive teachers must be supported and encouraged by a receptive leader and have access to high quality professional development which they value.

- Sustainable change is brought about by influencing the ethos and culture of the schools participating in the collaborative to ensure that those in schools have the confidence to sustain improvement.

Challenges to effective collaboration

The research concludes by identifying 10 key challenges to effective collaboration which if not addressed may hinder the stability of the network. In summary these are:

- engaging the reluctant leader

- identifying and celebrating the effective practice of teachers

- incorporating network initiatives into school priorities

- overcoming personal and professional agendas

- translating network knowledge to a school's own learning organisation

- ensuring effective communication between all members

- involving headteachers new to the network

- meeting the needs of individuals and maintaining school identity

- establishing network ethos, culture and values

- stimulating continued commitment without authority

"By working in inter-dependent and mutually supportive ways, groups of schools have formed learning networks and are using diversity within and across schools as a positive force for knowledge sharing and innovation. Learning networks are taking hold of the education agenda, focusing on values of partnership and collaboration to create coherence within the ever changing educational landscape."

NCSL

The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associate Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, to engage in enquiry and to impact on practice. The programme includes:

- Study visits

- Team enquiries

- Bursaries

- Researchers in residence

- University project attachments

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate Programme. For details, please contact martin.coles@ncsl.org.uk

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