

## **The Heart of the Matter:**

A practical guide to  
what middle leaders can  
do to improve learning  
in secondary schools



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# Eight strategies for improvement

This booklet sets out eight areas in which middle and senior leaders can make a difference to learning. On the pages which follow, you will find practical suggestions for each of these, set out in colour coded sections. For each, we list what middle leaders can do and how senior leaders can support and enable them to work effectively.

- 01** Focus on learning and teaching
- 02** Generate positive relationships
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The headings used here reflect eight strategies for improvement originally developed in NCSL commissioned research (Harris/Chapman, 2001) on successful leadership of schools in challenging circumstances. They were used in an earlier Leading Edge publication, *Making the Difference: A practical guide to what school leaders can do to improve and energise their schools* which is available from [research@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:research@ncsl.org.uk) or online at [www.ncsl.org.uk/leadingedge](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/leadingedge)

## Introduction

*The Heart of the Matter* is a record of what effective middle leaders tell us about their work in secondary schools. It emerges from a series of NCSL Leading Edge seminars held in autumn 2002 and spring 2003. The quotations used reflect the words and ideas of middle and senior leaders who attended the seminars.

Middle leaders vary in titles and responsibilities, from subject leaders and year heads to those with roles related to broader aspects of learning and development. Yet across all secondary schools, middle leaders represent a critical base of knowledge and expertise for schools. Indeed, headteachers talk about them as ‘the engine room of change’ and a repository of expert, up-to-date knowledge capable of transforming and energising learning and teaching.

This publication confirms a shift of role from managers of resources to leaders of people. It demands the development of a strong relationship between middle and senior leaders and explores how those in senior positions can support, challenge and enable middle leaders to have maximum impact on the quality of learning in schools.

This publication sets out to:

- ☐ illuminate the relationship between effective middle leadership and school improvement
- ☐ recognise the practical ways in which schools can harness the potential of middle leaders and develop their capacity to work as a team
- ☐ explore how senior leaders can provide support and enable middle leaders to be as good as they can be

The underlying message of this publication is that schools need clarity, consensus and the support of senior leaders in identifying what makes a difference in building schools’ capacity to improve learning for all.

## Using the materials

These materials encompass a variety of practical ideas which celebrate good practice and challenge middle and senior leaders to evaluate and develop what they do.

You can use these materials for personal reading. Alternatively, you can use them as a basis for:

- ☐ whole school review
- ☐ middle leader development workshops
- ☐ subject or team discussion
- ☐ middle/senior level dialogue to identify priorities for future development

You may find it useful to consider the following questions for each of the areas:

- ☐ In our school, what do we do already?
- ☐ What else could we do?
- ☐ What should we stop doing?
- ☐ Why are these changes important?
- ☐ What impact will they have on learning?
- ☐ How will we know?

# Focus on learning and teaching

**strategy**

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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Middle leaders are, above all, close to children and learning; that is the heart of the work.** Be clear about how you keep in touch with learning across your team and be resolute in protecting the time you allocate.
- ☐ **Develop the culture of the open classroom.** Make a point of being in and around classes, talking to children, giving positive feedback. Be proactive.
- ☐ **As a priority seek to generate and lead a debate about learning.** Open up issues of lesson length, structure and research into learning processes and styles.
- ☐ **Talk to pupils about what they have learned and how they feel about learning.** Encourage this in others.
- ☐ **Develop and share a written guide for teachers to act as a reminder of what good lessons should look like.** Include an emphasis on an agreed range of different teaching strategies and styles. Set out what should be in every lesson, together with a menu of what could be there. Be explicit about your expectations.
- ☐ **Be open to new ideas about what works best.** One way is to take a really tricky lesson or concept and ask a team to redesign and 'road test' it together. This encourages shared planning, observation and partnerships which go beyond the usual subject alliances.

- ☐ **Take your team beyond a general understanding of different learning styles.** Use data powerfully.

“In our team, we give each teacher a class folder at the start of the year. The folder includes detailed information on learning styles, for example indicating the number of boys and girls who are visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners.”

This can make all teachers more aware of individual learning needs and pathways and inform planning processes.

- ☐ **Write down in simple language what you have all agreed.** For example, put objectives on the board in the form of a question at the beginning of every lesson and make sure you check that pupils know what they should be doing.
- ☐ **On the classroom door put a poster** which says, ‘What have you learnt this lesson?’ Agree to use it to reinforce whole class and individual reflection.
- ☐ **Develop a culture of coaching and mentoring.** Show that you too are involved in professional learning and benefit from constructive criticism.
- ☐ **Plan subject/faculty team sessions on a rotational basis** to limit time used for administration and enrich opportunities for dialogue about learning.

“In our school, meetings run in threes. The first is an administration meeting, the second is a faculty learning meeting and the third is an inter-faculty learning meeting where we explore issues of teaching and learning. The last provides a supportive environment where middle leaders have opportunities to share good practice, coaching and mentoring.”

## Middle leaders

☐ **Development of teaching and learning doesn't need to be compulsory!**

"We run voluntary teaching and learning workshops where the team shares expertise and supports itself. They are run in a spirit of democracy where everyone can learn. Fit them in whenever people feel that they can get together."

☐ **Develop not just a programme of peer observation but a culture of mutual challenge and support.** Ensure peer observation is conducted in a collective, collaborative environment where there are agreed ground rules and a principle that, through this, we all become better teachers.

☐ **As middle leaders, invite others to observe your work** and to work with you in the classroom. Take turns being the observer and the observed.

☐ **Use demonstration lessons** to open up new approaches and strategies and to circulate interesting articles and books to stimulate curiosity about learning.

☐ **Use non-contact periods to cover colleagues' lessons** so they can observe good practice in another team.

☐ **Share a good practice lunch.**

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Keep it simple.** Make learning the key school priority – both learning for pupils in the classroom and the professional learning which enables teachers to improve.
- ☐ **Resist the temptation to overload middle leaders with routine tasks** whilst simultaneously asking them to take the lead in improving learning. Decide with middle leaders how they can make most difference to learning and clear away the clutter to enable them to focus on this.
- ☐ **Shift the vocabulary from middle managers to middle leaders.**
- ☐ **Work to create a shared understanding of how middle leaders can improve learning** through:
  - ☐ recognising what good learning and teaching look like
  - ☐ observing
  - ☐ offering feedback which enables teachers to change the way they teach
  - ☐ providing coaching support over a sustained period to enable teachers to make these new approaches a part of their teaching repertoire
- ☐ **Find ways to enable middle leaders to observe lessons** both within their own teams and across subject boundaries, to offer feedback and stimulate reflection.
- ☐ **Reach agreement with middle leaders about their core purpose** and the school's expectations of them in developing and assuring the quality of learning. Through this you can write and share your school's own principles of learning and protocols for observation.

- ☐ **Make a point of starting staff meetings with sharing and celebrating some aspect of teaching and learning.**
- ☐ **As senior leaders, model what you expect others to do.** Make learning and teaching a focus of all leadership team meetings. Provide opportunities for middle leaders to explore some aspect of their leadership through dialogue with the leadership team.
- ☐ **Build opportunities for middle leaders to make presentations to members of the governing body about new or important aspects of learning.**  
Through this, recognise middle leaders' expertise and contribution to the school.
- ☐ **Practice between teams varies greatly, so work systematically to identify strengths and development needs of individual middle leaders.** Build professional alliances through mentoring and coaching partnerships to support development.
- ☐ **Use a learning styles inventory across the school to identify what sort of learners children are.** Share this with children and always make this information available to teachers each year as part of a class data file.
- ☐ **Meet with middle leaders regularly to review issues related to learning to support them in managing workload and identifying priorities.**

- ☐ **Be creative in managing time**, for example by an early finish to the student day on Wednesday afternoons to provide quality time for development of learning and teaching.
- ☐ **Have 'learning fairs' as part of staff development days** where interesting lessons and developments can be shared across the school. From this, develop a good practice learning resources file which includes a brief summary of 'what we think is a good lesson'.
- ☐ **Develop use of the video camera in school to establish a bank of lessons as a stimulus for professional development.** Walk the talk by making sure that senior leaders are also filmed, evaluated and coached.
- ☐ **Try a staff 'hot spot'.** In one school in a weekly staff briefing a department spends ten minutes sharing an effective teaching and learning strategy.
- ☐ **Change parents evenings to parents days** to include open classrooms and talks on learning.
- ☐ **Establish a middle leaders' induction programme** which focuses on learning as a core component.

## Practitioner voice

In our school, we felt that there were three key tasks that we needed middle leaders to fulfil:

- ☐ **teaching** – make sure that the teaching delivered by those you line manage is of the highest possible quality.
- ☐ **learning** – make sure that pupils achieve at least to their potential as established by baseline testing, and preferably beyond.
- ☐ **becoming involved in, or initiating, a whole-school activity related to school improvement** – help to drive the school forward.

We hoped that making these three tasks central to their work would help middle leaders to prioritise when planning and managing day-to-day activities.

There are many variations on the job description for subject leaders which can be very complex – this in itself can cause pressure and confusion for post-holders. We have tried to focus on key essentials, a benchmark of three core tasks. So the message to our subject leaders is simple: “Deliver well in these key areas and you'll be doing a good job.”

It gives particularly the inexperienced subject leader the rationale for saying ‘no’ when the tasks that are being required of them suck them away from their core role.

We felt that the third requirement was especially important. It made sure that middle leaders got their heads above the parapet of their own departments and developed an understanding of the vision of the school and contributed to taking it forward. Middle leaders should be the power house of change in our view and if they are aiming for senior management, then they must develop a whole-school perspective, so it seemed sensible to build it in at this stage.

# Generate positive relationships

**strategy**

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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **As an effective middle leader you need to be able to get to know the people in your team**, identify and acknowledge their strengths, recognise their worth and potential and, through this, empower them to take risks and improve. Make sure that you also acknowledge and value the work of teaching assistants and other support staff.
- ☐ **Deliberately shift the vocabulary from ‘my team’ to ‘our team’.**
- ☐ **Publish times when you are available to your team.**
- ☐ **Never underestimate the value of humour to defuse tension.** Be sensitive to pressures of work, take time to talk to people. Remember that people want to do a good job.
- ☐ **Stop to think about the range of relationships you need to develop and sustain**, both within and beyond your team. It may be useful to map these and be quite explicit about how you will develop them.
- ☐ **Use the head and other senior leaders to recognise the commitment and endeavour of members of your team** – this gives them a real opportunity to show they know about and understand the work of individual teachers.
- ☐ **The team leader has to be a model of how the team relates to students and staff in all situations.** Live the policies!
- ☐ **Be seen to act upon good suggestions** rather than just acknowledging them and then doing nothing about it. In this and other ways, be an active listener with your team and colleagues.
- ☐ **Develop your role as a facilitator.** Know what people want to achieve, play to the strengths of the team and enable each member to take an active part and make a personal contribution.

- ☐ **Be accessible and take time to talk to your team individually** and regularly about their needs, anxieties and aspirations. Through this you can identify development needs, note areas of expertise and grow leadership potential. You should also ask others what they make of your work, what else you could do to support them and how you too can develop and improve.
- ☐ **Acknowledge people's strengths** – particularly those that you do not have yourself.
- ☐ **Be aware of principles of emotional intelligence.** People work for people and your team will be successful if you are able to work with and through people. Tasks matter, but don't be too task-oriented.
- ☐ **Wipe out the culture of negativity** and focus on strengths rather than weakness.

“When I arrived as head of department, people used to use labels and talk of ‘poor classes’. I had to break it down bit by bit by asking who, where, why. It’s never right to be negative about a whole class and we don’t do that any more.”
- ☐ **Do something outside school** such as going out for meals together, celebrating birthdays or Friday treats.
- ☐ **Give thought to how you manage relationships with parents and the wider community.**

“Involving our parents takes a lot of energy and is a team responsibility. Ringing them at home, talking to them or inviting them in is better than just sending a letter about a problem. We also write and phone before parents’ evenings, to make sure we get a high turn out.”

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Just as you expect middle leaders to find time to talk individually with their teams, make sure that you do so also.** Model the behaviour you expect from others. Provide positive feedback, listen, recognise potential, explore the bigger picture together.
- ☐ **Ensure everyone is aware of their own rights and responsibilities** whether they are pupils, teachers or support staff so that they know what is expected of them. In this way everyone feels valued. Problems are not an admission that 'I can't cope'; they identify needs to be met in a supportive structure.
- ☐ **Empower middle leaders by encouraging innovation** and support them as risk takers.
- ☐ **Build coaching relationships** where middle leaders can rehearse how they will respond to situations, help them to generate alternative ways and see different perspectives.
- ☐ In your conversations with middle leaders, **develop a vocabulary about interpersonal leadership**, be explicit about the importance of this and develop it together.
- ☐ **Recognise commitment**, celebrate good practice and develop individual relationships.
- ☐ **Be a critical friend.** Avoiding emphasis on the negative, encourage open honest discussion, propose possible ways forward and provide a regular forum for debate.

- ☐ **Have team-building activities** so that the middle leaders get to know you as people and leaders engaged in learning. Encourage a range of formal and informal activities.
- ☐ **One day a year, outside school, try an alternative team-building exercise**, for example to plan a unusual curriculum activity day.
- ☐ **Build the potential of middle leaders**, not only as leaders of teams but as a powerful, supportive team themselves.

# Provide a clear vision and high expectations

**strategy**

03



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## Middle leaders

- ☐ Nobody is ever opposed to high expectations, though, in practice, they often mean quite different things to different people. **Articulate and exemplify what high expectations mean** in the team, in each year, at each level.
- ☐ **Use data with students and staff to raise expectations**, to challenge preconceptions and stereotypes. Develop dialogue within the team which progressively moves from an expectation for a whole group to focus on the attainment of individual pupils. Train staff to understand and interpret the internal and external data they are being given.
- ☐ **Recognise that teachers in local partner primary schools also know a great deal** about what we should expect from children in our school. Find ways of building dialogue, for example in looking at samples of Year 5, 6, 7 and 8 work in your area, or reviewing schemes of work together.
- ☐ **Invite an AST from another school to give subject advice** and conduct observations or inter-school subject-based review of pupils' work.
- ☐ **Share the team's short and medium term vision and revisit it regularly**. Make it real by relating this, in practical terms, to what is and could be happening in classrooms. Ask: how does this look and feel today? How will it look and feel when it is put into practice for pupils, staff, parents and the wider community? What do we need to do next to get there?
- ☐ **Don't be afraid to change working partnerships**, to move staff and responsibilities around to improve results and raise expectations.

## Senior leaders

- **Make success for all a reality**, not rhetoric. State and restate that there is no limit on potential, that well-directed hard work can make children smarter. Work systematically to break down the common misconception amongst pupils that hard work is only for those who struggle.
- In this way, **create a culture which values high expectations** as a right of every child and seeks to exemplify what these mean in practical terms. Build dialogue between departments to challenge low expectations and regular dialogue between the leadership team and team leaders to review monitoring and pupil data.
- **Work systematically to enrich dialogue with partner primary schools to raise expectations on transfer.** This could involve shared review of schemes and samples of work, teacher exchanges or shared development time. Use of primary phase teachers to trail pupils for a day in Year 7 can be particularly powerful. Shared use of teaching assistants between schools can all work well to prevent 'dip' on transfer.
- **Provide regular opportunities for middle leaders**, ideally with another member of staff, to visit other schools to observe lessons, find new ideas and recalibrate expectations.
- **Use data to draw up expectations** but always ensure that vision and high expectations permeate the whole staff by celebrating success in assemblies, in school displays, in the local media, in staff rooms and governor reports.
- **Ensure that data about pupils reaches middle leaders** and is used as the basis for action.

# Improve the environment

**strategy**

04



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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Use professional development time** to ask staff to think: if I were shown a silent film of this block/subject area/school, what impression would it make? Would it tell me what was important?
- ☐ **Open up dialogue about display areas, policy and the ways in which display is more than an attractive covering for dingy walls.** Ask: how does this environment value and support learning? Create displays that give the message 'We learn here.'
- ☐ **Agree together how rooms should be set out** to meet learning needs and provide a degree of consistency for children.
- ☐ **If learning environments matter, show this by allocating resources to each member of staff to make tangible improvements within agreed parameters.** Test out any improvement by asking, collectively, how it will make a difference to learning. Don't be afraid to use development time to improve and develop learning environments, not just to talk about it.
- ☐ **Involve pupils in reviewing, developing and redesigning the learning environment.**
- ☐ **Have a good work wall** outside the team leader's office and take time to see children to acknowledge their effort and outstanding work.
- ☐ **Make display an item for discussion** in meetings and workshops.
- ☐ **Give staff their own specialist space in which their ideas can be shown.**

- ☐ **Teach display as part of an in-service day and as a matter of course when inducting new staff.** Look at the often outstanding work in primary schools and learn from this. Develop the specialist skills of support staff in this area.
- ☐ **Rotate team meetings around different classrooms** and include a review of the learning environment as part of this.
- ☐ **Be clear about your team's policy on learning environment** and how it relates to wider school policy.
- ☐ In discussion of teaching and learning, **explore the impact of classroom layout and wider environmental issues.**
- ☐ **Use tutor teams in rotation to help keep the block/site clear** and encourage children to take pride in the wider school environment.
- ☐ **Have a praise board used by staff and pupils.**

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Set up pupil trails to highlight environment.** Concentrate on classroom layout, resources for independent learning, an environment which supports and informs learning. Feed back the best of what you see as a basis for action and development of agreed principles and expectations.
- ☐ **Encourage creative inter-subject projects to cross-fertilise thinking** and challenge use of display and classroom layout.
- ☐ **Try to rotate other meetings around classrooms**, including governors' meetings.
- ☐ **Have a rolling 'today's events' screen in the reception area.**
- ☐ **Give different departments responsibility for particular areas and link display in central areas to agreed learning styles or themes.** Evaluate the messages conveyed by the school's foyer/reception area. Is there evidence of pupil voice? Does it encompass a range of curriculum areas, learning styles and pupils? Does the area recognise the wider community and the school's part in it? Is it welcoming, creative, imaginative?
- ☐ **Open up the school canteen for breakfast and show News 24.** Make it a civilised place. Incorporate topical news in morning assemblies.
- ☐ **Ensure the staff room has a learning zone.**
- ☐ **Invite students to co-design the learning environment.**

- ☐ **Link school council members to particular teams.**
- ☐ **Spend time looking at the visual stimuli in schools.** Link colours to learning, make them vibrant.
- ☐ **Ensure the vocabulary being used is 'our' classroom not 'my' classroom.**

# Provide time and opportunities for collaboration

strategy

05



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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Move department sessions around team bases** and provide some time for the 'host' to share an element of good practice.
- ☐ **When you meet, plan a clear, thoughtful agenda** and keep to it. In big teams, a bulletin or newsletter allows you to communicate basic administrative information to your fellow professionals. Overall, be clear in separating maintenance and development.
- ☐ **Build in reflection time to team sessions.** Ask periodically: how can we improve these sessions? What else should we be doing? Are we spending our development time doing the right things?
- ☐ **Running an effective team doesn't always mean doing more.** It's good to engage in some 'plate clearing' from time to time. To do this, simply ask: What should we stop doing?
- ☐ **Encourage a focus on collaborative enquiry.** Ask: What do we need to know more about? How can we find out? How will we use what we find?
- ☐ **Raise self esteem by encouraging positive comments.** Support one another!
- ☐ **Network more with other middle leaders in the school.**
- ☐ **Ensure all members of the department/faculty have an opportunity to observe learning in others' classes.**
- ☐ **Plan inter-department meetings to share best practice.**

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Recognise publicly that people learn most from working with people who are different from themselves.** Make collaborative learning a school priority.

- ☐ **Make a point about administrative meetings.**

“Most people described them as slow and frustrating, so we abolished them for six months. In that time, subject leaders and year heads had to find other ways to communicate. In their place, we set up inter-faculty learning workshops and professional alliances which were, in practice, coaching relationships between groups of three staff.”

- ☐ **Agree to stop talking about ‘meetings’ wherever you can and get to something which is more specific** – for example a development workshop, a learning review session, a staff forum.

- ☐ **Make administrative meetings short,** focused, time-bound and rationed.

- ☐ **Give professional learning high status.** Encourage systematic approaches through, for example, Investors in People. Develop coaching skills and relationships both between middle leaders and between senior and middle leaders. Provide funding and access to higher degrees and other relevant courses to enable staff to learn about current research and develop their own research skills.

- ☐ **Reshape and reculture middle leaders’ meetings too.** In this way you can signal a transition from middle managers to middle leaders. Recognise the depth and quality of their knowledge about children’s learning, engage them in determining the direction of the school and develop them as a self-supporting, coherent team with a capacity to drive forward development.

- ☐ **Recognise the central role of middle leaders in improving learning.**  
Provide a programme of group development activities for them as a team.  
To provide further challenge, link them with professional partners from higher education institutions.
- ☐ **Set up a working group on sharing good practice.**
- ☐ **Try key stage or year workshops where teachers across disciplines can explore and improve lessons or units.** A science teacher, for example, could review a subject unit and incorporate ideas from other subject teachers and co-ordinators.
- ☐ **Encourage middle leaders to be out and about in the school,** within and beyond their own specialist area.
- ☐ **Use CPD funding imaginatively.** Open up discussion in school on tension between the need to keep teachers working directly with children and the need to provide them with opportunities for coaching, team teaching and observation during the school day.
- ☐ **Plan how you can use CPD funding to extend non-contact time for middle leaders and how you agree the time should be used.**
- ☐ **Think radically!** Restructure the school around multi-disciplinary teams with a clear focus on collaboration, enquiry and professional learning.

# Distribute leadership: build teams

**strategy**

06



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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Agree your priorities for development together** and make sure you keep a clear focus on learning. Involve the wider team in planning sessions and give other staff opportunities to take a lead.
- ☐ **Once a year, go to a hotel or conference centre for a department conference to give development work status and avoid interruption.**  
“We took the last period off, worked until seven o'clock then socialised over a bottle of wine and a meal. Administration was banned! It was our single most productive time and the best investment we made. You're paid to lead, after all.”
- ☐ **Dedicate whole sessions to teaching and learning**, inviting colleagues to lead the learning. Encourage team teaching or collaborative design.
- ☐ **Try to bring out the leader in everyone.** Invite the team to take leadership in areas of research and personal interest.
- ☐ **As a team agree and regularly audit the team development plan**, assigning key objectives to all in the department.  
“I have to ensure every member of my team is seen as crucial to the success of the department and school.”
- ☐ **Create department roles that are flexible.** Change the focus every couple of years to bring freshness to the role and flexibility to the team as curriculum changes and vision evolves.
- ☐ **Ensure lesson observations are done not just by the team leader but by everybody** so that the variety of teaching styles can be observed.
- ☐ **Remove blame, show trust and offer a balance of challenge and support.**

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Help middle leaders to focus on learning and their team priorities** by informal support, regular review sessions or, if more structure is needed, allocation of non-contact time to specific activities, such as observation and review, coaching or walkabout.
- ☐ **Build a sense of middle leaders as a team** through annual residential or off-site conferences or seminars. As senior leaders, make a contribution in covering classes.
- ☐ **Move from top-down observation to peer observation and buddying.**
- ☐ **Establish voluntary good practice pairings**, enabling observation in protected time.
- ☐ **Recognise there is good practice in everybody** and bring this view together in an atmosphere and culture where it is everyone's responsibility in school.

# Engage the community

**strategy**

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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Be clear that the area of work in which you are engaged needs to be presented as part of the wider picture of the school** to parents, governors and the community. Don't assume that others will do this on your behalf. Find out where responsibility for community/media relations lies within the leadership team and be proactive.
- ☐ **Look for opportunities for wider partnership with employers and companies** to make curriculum in your area both immediate and relevant to children. Seek out parents/carers with particular expertise in working as volunteers in the classroom or in contributing relevant specialist areas of knowledge.
- ☐ **Think explicitly about what you do to draw on the expertise of the community as a resource** and how you project your work to parents and beyond. Conduct surveys and sample parents' views of your subject, year group or specialist area through questionnaires and follow up telephone calls. In areas like special needs, open 'surgery' sessions can also work well.
- ☐ **Involve governors in your work**, either in enlisting them as volunteers, in using them as critical friends or in drawing on their specialist knowledge.
- ☐ **Be bold and imaginative!** Parent and community perceptions are vitally important – involve them in, for example, reviewing arrangements for parents' evenings and homework. Communicate the expectation that all members of the team will, in some way, contribute to this.

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Emphasise that middle leaders must look into their own team, out across the school and beyond to the wider community.** Make this an expectation of all.
- ☐ **Share good practice in middle leaders' development of community links.**
- ☐ **Share the wider values of the school with the community** and so provide a context for middle leaders' work in this area.
- ☐ **Develop links between middle leaders and governors** through, for example, critical friendships, holding governors' meetings in subject and other bases and inviting middle leaders to report on development of their area of responsibility.
- ☐ **Extend the student council** to encompass the wider community.
- ☐ **Create an e-learning community** or publish handbooks which allow parents access to curricular and departmental information.
- ☐ **Encourage parents to support fieldwork and other activities.**
- ☐ **Highlight the diversity of school achievements** in the local press and display these in the entrance hall.

# Evaluate and innovate

**strategy**

08



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## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Identify areas of innovation** and build these into the team development plan.
- ☐ Keep asking the question: **‘how will we know if this has made a difference to the children here?’**
- ☐ **Develop a culture of constructive criticism.**
- ☐ **Ask pupils in a particular year group to keep a learning journal for a week.**
- ☐ **Undertake a fortnightly pupil progress check** which goes beyond just looking at books. As subject leader, set aside time to talk with children and test their understanding and knowledge. In modern languages, for example, things can look good in an exercise book but understanding and capacity to apply knowledge may not be at the same level. Unless you talk to children on a regular basis and in a structured way, you won't find out.
- ☐ **Be clear how you will monitor children's work** on a regular basis. For example, you can ask for six books/folders from a group, together with planning and records. When you do this, spend time giving positive feedback to teachers and write comments in the books to show parents you have seen the work.
- ☐ **Be clear that, in monitoring, you need to reach the silent majority.** Talk to a sample of pupils to get beneath the surface and use this as a means to encourage the group teacher to engage in similar dialogue.

## Middle leaders

- ☐ **Use team time to look at samples of pupils' work collectively** – comparing the work of parallel groups or looking at wider issues of progression. This will also give you an opportunity to include classes you teach in the process. Emphasise that evaluation is about children's learning, openness and collective improvement.
- ☐ **Don't underestimate the importance of focused observation**, relating directly to a current area of development, in improving practice. The whole team needs to be involved, but middle leaders should set the pace and have key expertise about teaching and learning.
- ☐ **Review the job description of everyone in the team** through discussion to ensure the skills of each member of the team are being fully utilised.
- ☐ **Set aside time each week to evaluate and plan your own work.** Make sure you are not disturbed, so creating time and space to think and reflect.
- ☐ **As a team, present your annual plan to the school leadership team** and subsequently relate your evaluation of team performance to exam results and each section of the development plan.

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Recognise and expect that middle leaders are leading edge practitioners.**
- ☐ **Give permission for risk-taking.** Value and articulate the importance of well-considered innovation and celebrate its success.
- ☐ **Promote practitioner-based enquiry,** 're-intellectualise' the profession so that change is driven from within, not imposed from without.
- ☐ **Develop a school-wide learning forum** for middle leaders where they can:
  - have opportunities to promote new thinking
  - find space for creativity
  - evaluate and manage the risks associated with particular innovations
  - share good practice and learning which has the potential to make a difference across the school
- ☐ As part of development work, **explore with middle leaders why innovation is important,** the conditions for innovation and risk and their role in the management of change.
- ☐ **Understand that effective change can come from anyone within the school** and create a culture to allow this.
- ☐ **Establish weekly bulletins** with classroom innovation/good practice highlighted.

## Senior leaders

- ☐ **Establish working parties for a fixed period to focus on particular innovation.**
- ☐ **Timetable research and development.**
- ☐ **Use an intranet site to share knowledge and communicate with colleagues.**
- ☐ **Build a rigorous programme of school self-evaluation giving all middle leaders a key role.** Gather evidence relevant to your areas of improvement and which reflect identified school priorities, such as particular pupil groups or issues of progression. As senior leaders, position yourselves to resource, give status and participate in the self-evaluation work.
- ☐ **Encourage middle leaders to seek out new ideas** and resources in the classroom to add to the school's intellectual capital. Ask them to explore: what good thinking is out there? How do I bring it into school? How do I get other people to use it?

## Leading Edge Seminars

The Leading Edge Seminar Series is designed to explore current and significant aspects of leadership, draw on best practice nationally, and bring together successful school leaders to generate new understandings. It offers a dynamic forum for school leaders to engage in professional dialogue, discussion and debate, through seminars that allow and encourage an active exchange of perspectives drawn from leading edge research and practice.

The series provides opportunities for school leaders to learn from and with each other, to offer a degree of challenge and to bring together research and best practice.



National College for  
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## The principles

The solutions to our problems lie within ourselves. The best practice in our schools has the potential to generate solutions to problems we all face, if only we can find ways of telling our stories of leadership and articulating what we do in a shared professional language.

We learn with humility from and with the best practitioners.

We must enrich the dialogue between school leaders and academics to

- ☐ bring together research and practitioner perspectives
- ☐ connect theory with practice and practice with theory

We must recognise that nothing ends in a full stop and strive to

- ☐ extend what we know about aspects of leadership
- ☐ identify new learning, issues and themes for further case study and research
- ☐ use innovative and energising ways of creating wider impact on schools

## With thanks

We would like to thank the middle and senior leaders who attended the two Leading Edge seminars at NCSL and provided such a thoughtful and stimulating debate. Particular thanks need to go to the middle and senior leaders who worked with us to refine and critique *The Heart of the Matter* and who led the second session in partnership with us.

|                             |                                               |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Diana Beeden-Simpson</b> | City of Leicester School and 6th Form College |
| <b>Robin Casson</b>         | Prudhoe Community High School                 |
| <b>Chris Charlesworth</b>   | Linton Village College                        |
| <b>Neil Cowdy</b>           | Brooke Weston City Technology College         |
| <b>Ann Cox</b>              | Coombe Dean School                            |
| <b>Wendy Down</b>           | Framington Earl High School                   |
| <b>Les Hall</b>             | Mounts Bay School                             |
| <b>Gill Hevingham</b>       | The Park Community School                     |
| <b>James Lancaster</b>      | All Hallows Catholic High School              |
| <b>Nick Merrifield</b>      | Hummersknott School and Language College      |
| <b>Lee Mortiboys</b>        | Seven Kings High School                       |
| <b>Og Owen</b>              | Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School          |
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| <b>Anne Raynor</b>          | Kingswood High School                         |
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## Next steps

For further development opportunities, including building capacity for school improvement and developing learning-centred leadership, please visit NCSL's web site at **[www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)**

Your comments on these and any other NCSL materials are always welcome.  
Please email us at **[research@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:research@ncsl.org.uk)**

For information on our Leading from the Middle programme for subject leaders in primary, secondary and special schools visit our web site at **[www.ncsl.org.uk/lftm](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/lftm)**

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