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## Research Associate Summary Report

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# Raising the bar

What do successful secondary subject leaders leading large teams do to raise attainment in their curriculum areas?

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## Background

This study is based on the views of over 40 subject leaders of English, maths and science in secondary schools. Each of these has led departments that have initiated and sustained improvement in academic standards over three to five years at GCSE. The purpose of the study was to explore the question: what do successful subject leaders actually do to raise attainment in their curriculum areas? The study was focused on English, maths and science, as they usually have the largest curriculum teams in schools and, as core subjects, are increasingly a key focus of attention.

Recent research literature into school leadership (NCSL, 2003; 2004a; 2004b; Kydd, Anderson & Newton, 2003 and Harris & Muijs, 2005) has drawn attention to the importance of the areas below:

- the power of example
- leadership that focuses on schools' core activity, learning
- learning communities
- building capacity
- distributed leadership
- monitoring and evaluation
- quality of personal relationships

These resonate strongly with the themes that emerged in this study:

- creating stable teams that work and learn together
- involving colleagues in decision-making
- understanding the reality of the situation and changing practice if necessary
- developing the skills of the team through the sharing of good practice

## Methods

The sample was drawn from three local authorities in the south east of England. The departments were identified from those that had shown an improvement in their GCSE results over the past three to five years.

The data revealed 61 departments that fulfilled the criteria and a questionnaire was sent to all the corresponding subject leaders. This asked respondents to rate the impact of a range of factors from a list provided. Of these, 42 completed the questionnaire. Of these, 18 subsequently attended one of four focus groups.

## Findings from the questionnaires

Main themes from current research were used to define the fields. The responses from the questionnaires revealed the following five areas to be the most influential in building a successful department:

- curriculum organisation
- monitoring and evaluation
- specialist team delivery
- team and group planning
- department Inset days

## Findings from the focus group meetings

The focus groups also revealed the areas identified below to be important.

### Recruitment and retention

- initiating an early start to the recruitment process to enable selection from a high-quality field
- ensuring full involvement in the recruitment process
- rigorously negotiating with the leadership team to reduce the number of non-specialists teaching in the department
- working with the leadership team to reduce turnover, therefore creating stable teams
- working with teacher training organisations to train teachers and thus provide a potential recruitment source

### Developing a stable team

- encouraged the development of a strong team ethos in the long term
- created a clear ethos that grows with the team
- nurtured and sustained consistency of practice
- increased the likelihood of strong personal and professional relationships developing
- stimulated professional dialogue

### Developing dialogue and building relationships

- having regular whole group meetings
- encouraging teams to work in pairs
- observing one's peers informally
- monitoring one's peers
- having learning sessions in department meetings, in which team members present an item of teaching and learning; this helps shape responsibility for leadership according to expertise and interest

### Walking the job and reality checks

The need to keep abreast of what was happening in the department on a daily basis emerged by:

- walking the job regularly
- carrying out regular and supportive classroom visits
- acting quickly on what is observed

### Maximising the potential of monitoring and evaluation

- involving team members
- encouraging peer review of work
- sharing knowledge of the students' learning contexts, thus making peer observation more meaningful

### Building capacity: developing individuals and teams to initiate change and sustain improvement

It is important to know the individual skills of teachers and their strengths, by:

- allowing team members to take on the mantle of the expert and thereby recognising skills and expertise not possessed to the same level by other team members
- providing the opportunity for team members to deliver Inset sessions; a great way to recognise talents and boost self-esteem and confidence

### The role of Inset

Issues raised related to:

- conflicting school versus department agendas
- leadership groups jumping on what were perceived to be bandwagons and not taking a long-term view of professional development

Most teams gravitated towards involvement in activities that would have a direct and immediate impact on classroom practice, for example:

- attending exam board Inset sessions
- becoming an examiner in order to better understand requirements
- focusing on activities delivered by a team to meet specific requirements

### Preparing students for public examinations

- be realistic, results matter
- analyse results and use them to inform future development plans
- seek views from others in the team about results and how to improve
- build in enough time for preparation
- know your syllabus; if it does not work for your department and students, change it

However, as well as pragmatic approaches to preparation for public examinations, the benefits of encouraging students to take an interest in subjects for their own sake were also acknowledged. Helpful in achieving this were:

- extra-curricular activities related to the subject, eg drama clubs and theatre and museum visits
- regular competitions (science and maths)
- activities such as regular private reading at the beginning of English
- timetabled drama lessons within the English curriculum

### Knowing how the students are performing: using assessment data

- building a credible and accurate body of assessment data; this is essential for keeping a grip on reality and raising performance
- ensuring that prior attainment data is supported by internal assessment
- combining prior attainment and regular assessment aids to help identify underachievement
- using targets for student attainment to challenge expectations of staff
- involving and consulting teachers in the setting of targets; top-down setting was often viewed as an arbitrary process

### Student groupings: what subject leaders did to create an environment for success

- invested time in sorting out teaching groups that would work well
- attempted to maintain stable and successful relationships between teachers and their groups
- avoided creating bottom sets or 'sink' groups
- were flexible enough to change students in groups, had policies for groupings, and allowed teachers to teach different groups to maintain positive relationships between students and the department

### Leadership groups

Relationships that encouraged success were those where:

- there had been regular contact between the subject leader and their line manager
- their line manager had taken the time to understand what was happening in the department
- the establishment of a stable team had been supported
- there was evidence of empathy for the department's needs

## Conclusions

There are certain factors that bring benefit for subject leaders aiming to lead their teams towards improvement. These include:

- a stable team in which sustained and productive working relationships are developed and which engages the members to become a learning community; teams therefore need to spend dedicated time together
- monitoring, evaluation, subject knowledge and assessment
- school leadership groups that are sensitive to the needs of their departments

## Action points for subject leaders

Based on the comments made by the subject leaders, the following might serve as useful action points.

- Improvement is a journey not a destination.
- Be a leader by being proactive in your team.
- Focus on a few critical areas to improve and develop: you cannot do it all at once.
- Monitor the work of your team, walk the job regularly.
- Get a grip of reality; what is really happening in your department.
- If something is not working, do something: change what you are doing.
- Involve your team members in all aspects of the team's work.
- Develop a clear ethos in the team.
- Analyse assessment data and examination results: what do you do well, what are the team's areas of weaknesses?
- Recognise that each member of your team will be good at something; use their skills to teach others.
- Negotiate for time for the team to develop itself; make a case for time away from school.

## Action points for leadership groups

- Know what the needs of a department are; regular contact via a line manager is vital.
- Aim to create stable and specialist teams; be creative in retaining good teachers.
- Listen to subject leaders about what they think their department needs are, then try and meet them.
- Do not jump on every initiative bandwagon that comes along.
- Create time for department teams to work together.

## References

- Harris, A & Muijs, D, 2005, *Improving Schools through Teacher Leadership*, Buckingham, Open University Press
- Kydd, L, Anderson, L & Newton, W (eds), 2003, *Leading People and Teams in Education*, Buckingham, Open University Press
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Joy Beaney, *Assistant Headteacher, Torfield School, East Sussex*

### ■ **Improvement through evaluation**

Ann Marie Dimeck, *Headteacher, Holy Rosary Catholic Primary School, Merseyside*

### ■ **Opening doors, opening minds**

Peter Gordon, *Headteacher, Hazel Court School, East Sussex*

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