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Research Associate Summary Report

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Rethinking middle leadership roles in secondary schools

This report examines how schools have shifted the focus
of middle leaders from management to leadership

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- How do staff in traditional middle management roles successfully negotiate the transition from management to leadership?
- In what ways can these roles be developed to further enhance teaching and learning?

These are the two key questions posed in reviewing pastoral and curriculum leadership at an East Midlands school.

This report describes the review through the eyes of both pastoral and curriculum leaders at the school and goes on to look at how two experienced headteachers of other schools have led innovative developments in their own pastoral and curriculum structures.

The context

Ashfield School is a 2,400-student technology college with 160 staff, which has undergone rapid expansion over recent years. The structure from Year 7 to 11 is based around six houses and eight faculties. There's also a rapidly expanding post-16 centre with 385 students.

The leadership team consists of the headteacher, deputy head and five assistant heads responsible for guidance, student progress, curriculum, staff development, and estates and finance.

Six heads of house (plus the head of post-16) and eight heads of faculty form the middle leadership tier.

Pastoral and curriculum roles have undergone considerable change as the leadership team has encouraged pastoral heads to take a more proactive role in academic tracking and support, and curriculum heads to be more involved in behaviour management.

Many of the issues facing the school and its middle leaders at the time of research reflect national findings in that:

- pastoral and curriculum heads do not regard themselves as middle leaders and do not feel that the leadership team or other staff view them in this way either
- there is a gap between what most believe should be the focus of their roles and what they face on a day-to-day basis
- pastoral and curriculum leaders largely operate separately, often only interacting as faculty teachers or tutors

- there is little connection between the career paths of faculty heads and pastoral leaders

Below we present the perspectives of one pastoral head and one curriculum head that have been synthesized from the views of the 15 heads of house and faculty.

The pastoral head

Sarah Barker is one of six heads of house, each responsible for the welfare and development of 400 students from Years 7 to 11 (the head of post-16 takes separate responsibility for all post 16 students). Each head of house has a deputy and a tutor team of 12.

Like the school's other senior and middle leaders, Sarah wants the pastoral role to shift from being reactive, to having much greater emphasis on proactive academic tracking and support.

But despite the introduction of additional support systems, the majority of her lessons are still interrupted for pastoral intervention because staff continue to see heads of house as disciplinary figureheads.

"We are still firefighters," says Sarah. "I would love it to be more proactive, strategic and planned and that is what I think we strive for. The reality is, sadly, that it isn't. There are crises that have to be dealt with.

"There is still a tendency for staff to see the pastoral heads as the first port of call and they bypass school systems on a regular basis."

Sarah feels the pastoral role is easily marginalised amid emphasis on academic achievement and target-setting and that this has been exacerbated by an increased accent on faculty within the school, making it more likely for targets to be curriculum-driven rather than pastoral.

Nevertheless, the head of house role continues to have a high profile with staff and parents and has enormous influence over the lives of the students.

"Students think that we are omnipotent," she says. "Whenever a major crisis happens, it's always the heads of house who are summoned. Perhaps this shows that the school as a whole – and indeed ourselves – has a tendency to slip back into seeing heads of house as key discipline figures rather than as leaders of teaching and learning."

Sarah also feels pastoral heads work very much in isolation, without the leadership and management of a team.

The lack of pastoral awareness in constructing the timetable also means it is rare for the deputy and head of house to be able to secure any meeting time within the school day.

The curriculum head

Simon Booth is one of eight heads of faculty responsible for the leadership and management of their subject area throughout Key Stages 3, 4 and 5.

Each has a deputy and a range of other staff (eight to 16 teachers) with specific responsibilities.

Simon feels he has more responsibility across the school for student behaviour and support, and that more issues are now dealt with at faculty level.

“Previously there was a clear distinction: head of faculty equals academic and head of house equals pastoral,” he says. “Now the roles have fused and I believe this change is of mutual benefit and allows for ‘shared care’.”

It’s clear however that there is an uneven response to the transformation as faculty heads struggle to meet other increased demands and responsibilities, such as performance management and staff development.

A greater focus on teaching and learning, for example, has led to the development of a peer observation programme, yet planned classroom support for this can be easily derailed by other events.

Also, curriculum heads have received little further training or support to help them effectively implement the many recent changes.

Simon recognises however that new involvement by heads of faculty in developing the school’s strategic plan has provided him with a stronger leadership role across the school. “Students see me in a different light,” he says. “Maybe it helps to be seen as a middle manager and not just a head of subject.”

Moving forward

Pastoral leaders say they want less teaching and more pastoral responsibilities, whilst curriculum heads say they want to focus more on developing teaching and learning.

All call for:

- more leadership training and development
- more administrative and learning support
- more reflective time to better support and define their roles

Addressing the issues

John Baumber is executive principal of the Brook Learning Partnership, which encompasses two schools with radically different profiles:

- Rivington and Blackrod High School – a 2,000-student 11–18 technology college with training school status
- Ladybridge High School – a new 700-student 11–16 school

The partnership has tackled many of the issues raised at Ashfield through innovation based on distributed leadership and a focus on enhancing teaching and learning.

To transcend the divide between faculty and pastoral leadership, the schools have moved away from the traditional roles of pastoral and curriculum head and have taken a top down approach, radically altering the roles of senior leaders.

The assistant headteacher role has been transformed into director of learning, responsible for the quality of teaching and learning and for ensuring the school mission statement is achieved.

The role changes in response to individual need, moving along the continuum of support to intervention and back again as required. This gives greater authority to departmental heads and, says John, “decisions and leadership are as close as possible to where the action actually is.”

Also, a number of directors of learning have a Key Stage responsibility, and each year group has a senior learning co-ordinator and a non-teaching senior support co-ordinator who is a “behaviour coach and mentor, to deal with all of those things that it’s impossible to do if you are teaching 20 periods as well as being head of year”.

Instead of traditional form tutor roles, each member of staff is a learning co-ordinator for a number of students, dedicating two periods each week to one-to-one mentoring. This means every learning co-ordinator has to deal with lower level issues and identify barriers to learning, which John feels addresses the problem of heads of year being left to react to all issues as they arise.

“We have tried to move the focus for those people to learning and not behaviour,” he says. “Behaviour may be one of the things that prevents the learning, but learning is the focus.”

All heads of department are required to take a one-year middle leadership programme and leadership capacity is extended via in-house professional development programmes for emergent leaders.

Continuing professional development periods are also timetabled for all teachers each week, giving them time to reflect on initiatives and embed them more effectively in practice.

Paul Grant is headteacher at Robert Clack Comprehensive in Dagenham – a specialist school for science with 1,700 students, of whom 300 are in post-16.

The school has 36 per cent free school meals and 30 per cent special educational needs. There has been a substantial increase in higher grade passes over the last two years and Ofsted has described the quality of leadership and management at all levels as “very good”.

The school has addressed interruptions to teaching by creating a supervised pupil referral unit and a learning support centre, to which pupils are automatically referred when a ‘crisis’ arises pending further investigation and support. This avoids teachers having to find quick temporary solutions during lesson time.

Whole school attention is focused on pastoral issues and behaviour management through a pastoral committee that meets every three weeks.

The committee, chaired by Paul, is made up of all leadership team members, heads of year, the head of SEN, learning support leaders and learning mentors, thereby placing responsibility for pastoral issues in the hands of the many rather than the isolated few. “It reinforces the idea that behaviour management is everybody’s concern,” says Paul.

Because the system relies heavily on strong working relationships between heads of year and the SEN team, Paul believes it also reduces inconsistencies in approach across the school.

He says the relatively small size of the leadership teams at Ashfield (seven members) and Robert Clack (five members) also offers greater opportunity for other members of staff to take leadership roles for particular issues. Paul argues that a very large leadership team runs the risk of disempowering others and creating top down management at a time when schools are trying to develop a more distributed style.

In conclusion

This study shows that these schools aim to focus on the learning and well-being of every child. In order to do this they have remodelled such that:

- subject and pastoral responsibilities become more integrated, in order to minimise the disruption of learning for the majority, and to deal proactively with (low level) barriers to learning and behaviour problems
- more difficult behaviour problems have dedicated provision, with senior staff centrally involved in pastoral/behaviour provision, and supported behaviour management viewed as everyone’s concern – ‘shared care’
- leadership development is provided to support senior and middle leaders in developing the appropriate skills and expertise

The influence of senior leaders in shifting the focus of all middle leaders from management to leadership is central to this transformation.

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