

Leadership in complex schools

Advice to the Secretary of State

A. Summary

1. There is a growing body of hard evidence that schools that are failing their pupils can be transformed by excellent leadership plus support from another high capacity school. There are at present a small number of experienced leaders who, with their schools, are able and willing to take on these complex roles successfully. Structures vary but the transformation process, and the skills required, are becoming increasingly clear. This pool of competent system leaders could be expanded relatively quickly through more systematic identification and personalised development, together with stronger – mainly non-financial – incentives. Those with the necessary skills, who are also committed to taking responsibility for the leadership of complex schools, should be awarded the designation of National Leaders of Education. Those Leaders who also have high capacity schools should be placed on a register of potential Executive Headteachers. Local Authorities and the National Strategies Regional Team should be accountable for ensuring that the Leaders and their schools are consistently and effectively deployed where they are most needed, taking advice from others such as the Specialist Schools and Academy Trust and the National College for School Leadership as appropriate. Helping to strengthen leadership in these complex roles is a key priority for the College.

B. Introduction

2. In her Remit Letter of December 20, 2004, the Secretary of State said:

*“There is currently no dedicated programme to prepare heads to take on complex roles such as head of an Academy, or a school federation, or a school with serious weaknesses. I should like advice from the College on how far current activity bears on this issue and what further action you propose might be taken. This does not imply that a new, discrete programme is needed.”*¹

3. There are important examples of leadership of complex roles which are not primarily about intervention or turning round failing schools. These include leadership of federations voluntarily formed by two or more schools in order to develop capacity and share expertise. There are examples of this in the primary sector, the secondary sector and cross-phase. However, this advice will focus on the leadership of schools which are particularly challenging and where schools are seriously under achieving or failing.
4. There are currently 285 schools in special measures (96 secondary, 156 primary, 20 special schools, 13 PRUs), and a further 295 schools with serious weaknesses –

¹ * Separate advice is being provided to DfES by NCSL and TDA jointly on the leadership of extended schools

together responsible for around 300,000 pupils. Ofsted's new inspection regime may well identify others in these categories or at risk of subsequent failure. Leadership in some of these complex schools is very good and making a big difference to the children and young people concerned. But in too many it is not sufficiently effective.

5. Getting significantly better leadership in these complex roles is of critical importance because:
 - The schools under scrutiny have typically failed year after year to provide a sufficiently good education for their pupils.
 - They face multiple challenges – typically from their location, the pupil mix, parental attitudes, weak staffing, or from a history of inadequate leadership.
 - Each school has its own uniquely difficult mix of these problems and there is no one model that works in every context.
 - Such schools invariably need outstanding leadership for pupils to be successful learners.
 - Ofsted rates 62 per cent of all secondary headteachers and 48 percent of all primary headteachers as very good or excellent but not enough of these leaders are in these schools. In fact, the schools with the greatest problems are often the least likely to attract our best leaders. So the children and young people who most need their learning and life chances transformed are missing out, and we are not using our best leaders where they are most needed to transform the system.
 - Local Authorities vary in their capacity to identify, support and challenge these schools.
 - It has typically taken too long to intervene in these schools and to turn them around. Too many have subsequently slipped back into failure. Secondary schools take on average 21 months to come out of special measures, primary schools 12 months.
6. In developing this formal advice the College has drawn heavily on the practical experience of those most directly involved with these schools, and has found substantial common ground in the views expressed. Those consulted include:
 - up to 30 executive headteachers or heads of federations
 - a number of successful leaders of schools previously in serious weaknesses or special measures
 - principals of academies and City Technology Colleges
 - a number of Chief Education Officers/Directors of Children's Services from successful local authorities
 - colleagues in the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust,
 - colleagues from the Institute of Education in London, including Professor David Hopkins
 - colleagues from the National Strategies
 - colleagues from the London Challenge
 - DfES officials

C. Ways forward

7. Our consultations have led us to the following conclusions and proposals:
- Turning around these schools and maintaining the improvement requires both outstanding leadership and, usually, a sustained relationship with at least one excellent, high capacity school.
 - The models for structural support can and do vary, but there is a common process for effective turnaround.
 - The necessary skills are similar to those required for effective school leadership, although both an extended repertoire and higher level performance in key areas are required.
 - We can identify those who have these skills, but incentives – particularly recognition, agreed powers and appropriate accountabilities - are required to attract them to this work
 - Existing, newly appointed and aspirant leaders in these schools need different and personalised forms of support and development, but not a discrete programme.
 - The National Strategies Regional Team and the Local Authority should be accountable for brokering the right school-to-school relationships, taking advice, where appropriate, from organisations such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the National College for School Leadership.
8. Together these would ensure both that we build more robust preventative measures and speedier, more effective remedial strategies; in other words, stronger “fences” to reduce the numbers of schools that fall over the cliff, and more effective “ambulances” waiting at the bottom. The argument is developed more fully below.

D. Models for support

9. If we are to develop a world class educational system we need to ensure that we maximize the use of our best school leaders to influence the whole system. We have to develop systems of learning transfer and of distributed leadership across groups of schools if we are going to see more schools become outstanding schools. A variety of roles is now emerging, all taking the individual beyond their own school into system leadership. They include being a mentor, being a consultant leader, being a School Improvement Partner, being a leader of a collaborative or federation, being a leader of a multi-agency partnership or being an Executive Headteacher. All of these roles are important, as is the role of being a headteacher of an individual school, including of course, specialist schools and academies in the secondary sector. This advice on leadership in complex schools should therefore be seen within this wider “system leadership” context.
10. There is a growing body of well-documented evidence from around the country that where a school is in serious trouble, the use of an executive headteacher/partner headteacher and a paired arrangement with that head’s successful school, can be a particularly effective solution, and is being increasingly widely applied.

11. Various models are viable and need to be tailored to the particular context. Some lead to permanent federation arrangements, others more commonly are intentionally fixed term.
12. Such approaches multiply the impact of these very good heads. But the critical resource is not just the Executive Head but the lead school as a whole. Other key staff often need to be seconded into the failing school to be part of its leadership team, to make an immediate impact on particular problems, or to spread their expertise more widely. This can be essential both to secure fundamental change quickly, and to build long term capacity in the weaker school.
13. This is not all one-way traffic – evidence shows that providing this support can, over time, have a very positive impact on the lead school. But the initial demands on the lead school can be substantial. It is essential that it has the capacity to provide that support, without putting the education of its own pupils at risk.

E. The process

14. In the experience of Executive Heads, the process of turning a school round successfully has three main phases:
 - Building the foundations
 - Setting up the partnership, with a written mandate covering freedom to act, accountabilities, agreed targets
 - Entry and diagnosis – identifying strengths and weaknesses, and analysing how the lead school can best provide support and build capacity in the partner school
 - Improving the partner school
 - Setting direction – establishing a vision, agreeing objectives and targets, and securing commitment through inspiring staff and tackling resistance
 - Developing people – getting the Associate Head to think strategically, reshaping the SMT, strengthening middle management, improving the quality of teaching, and building capacity by getting the school to become a learning community
 - Developing the organization – creating robust systems for behaviour, timetabling and curriculum, cleaning up the environment and upgrading buildings, transferring good practice, and encouraging disciplined innovation
 - Implementing an exit strategy, once the partner school's capacity to sustain its improvement is secure. In a formal federation, 'exit' may take the form of greater autonomy for the constituent parts.

F. Skills required

15. The skills required at the different stages of this process map well onto the six key areas of the National Standards for Headteachers. But because of the scale of the challenge involved the levels of skill required for success are significantly greater than for a normal school, and there are additional or particularly acute demands in the following areas:

- Setting up the partnership
 - Simultaneous improvement across the school
 - Managing change and handling conflict
 - Building capacity across the workforce
 - Building relationships with parents, the wider community and external agencies
 - Transferring and embedding best practice
16. We think we now have sufficient evidence from the experience of Executive Headship to be able to publish clear national guidance about the skills and expertise required.

G. Selection and incentives

17. We need school leaders to regard success in these complex roles as the pinnacle of their profession. We believe, therefore, that in order to recruit significantly greater numbers of effective headteachers who are prepared to work with schools requiring improvement one lever would be to enhance the status of the work by awarding designation as **National Leaders of Education**. This would be awarded to outstanding leaders in complex schools and to other outstanding school leaders who were willing to involve themselves in system leadership outside their own school- taking lead responsibility for one or more schools in very challenging circumstances. The standing of National Leaders of Education would be further enhanced if, as a result of this designation, they had access to policy development at national level. They would also play a key role in developing the next generation of National Leaders of Education.
18. The criteria for identifying National Leaders of Education will need to be clear and transparent. We propose that we work with key partners including OFSTED, SSAT, SHA, NAHT, local authorities, National Strategies and existing outstanding school leaders to develop the criteria and a process for identifying these national leaders.
19. Once awarded the designation of National Leader of Education, the headteacher would be placed on a **register of potential Executive Headteachers**, provided their self-evaluation – confirmed by the School Improvement Partner – demonstrates that the school has capacity to release the headteacher to exercise a leadership role in another school or schools. This register would be maintained by the National College for School Leadership.
20. The register would form a source of information provided to Local Authorities and to the National Strategies to aid the selection and pairing of schools in that particular region or locality. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, through its networks and regional coordinators, could also act as a further resource in identifying and pairing schools.
21. Additional incentives are also required. These are not primarily about financial reward – most secondary Executive Heads say money is not their main driver, and some get no extra pay.

22. Other incentives - and removal of some existing disincentives - will also be influential. Executive Heads typically set conditions for their involvement. In particular, they want:
- The ability to bring known and trusted people into key positions
 - A significant degree of freedom to act
 - Sufficient resources to make the changes required.
23. A clear pre-take up agreement is essential – setting out the objectives of the intervention and the outcomes and timescales against which success will be measured. Executive Heads have no difficulty about being held properly to account for the partner school's improvement. But a common disincentive is unrealistic expectations by others of how quickly sustained improvement can be delivered. Some elements of a school can be transformed quickly – such as behaviour, attendance, exclusion levels, internal coherence or basic systems – and need to be seen as 'green shoots' signaling underlying progress. But significant improvements in key stage outcomes often take longer than a year to come through across the curriculum. In some of the most effective transformations these results have got worse before they got better. The risk of press or public criticism, and damage to their own or their school's reputation, if headline results do not immediately improve in the partner school, is a real concern.

H. Development and support

24. This needs to be highly personalised and tailored to the level of experience in these complex roles:
- For **existing** Executive Heads the key requirement is opportunity to meet together to share experience, discuss common issues, and codify effective practice – both to shape future policy and the development of the next generation of leaders
 - **Newly appointed or designate** Executive Heads should have access to bespoke and targeted support – a range of options and approaches, including coaching from existing heads, which they would access on a personalised basis – and events to bring them together for issues-based problem-solving. A similar approach is already being piloted for Principals-Designate of Academies by NCSL in partnership with DfES and SSAT
 - **Aspirant** Executive Heads should have access to structured visits, work shadowing, diagnostic tools, peer group and coaching sessions focused on prospective challenges.

I. Brokering school partnerships

25. Choosing the right partner for a school in trouble, and establishing the appropriate relationship between them, are critically important decisions. It is essential to consider the local context, the particular challenges facing the failing school, the expertise of potential Executive Heads, and the capacity of their schools, as partner schools, to give effective support. The local authority clearly has to be part of the brokerage process. But some, particularly small, authorities cannot do this

alone, either because they lack capacity, or do not have an appropriate partner school in their locality, or are not aware of or cannot access available expertise outside their area. The National Strategies Regional Team, through their joint management of School Improvement Partners, will increasingly have this accurate wider knowledge. Our proposal is that the National Strategies Regional Team and the Local Authority, in dialogue with DfES, should be accountable for intervening promptly in a failing school and establishing an effective relationship with an appropriate partner school. They in turn should be able to draw on the register of potential executive headteachers, maintained by the National College for School Leadership, and advice from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in selecting lead schools. Clearly if it is a faith school then the appropriate religious authority would also play a key role in this partnering process.

J. The National College

26. Strengthening leadership in the schools in greatest need will be a key priority in NCSL's Corporate Plan. If the Secretary of State endorses this analysis we would be keen to work with other partners to help implement these proposals as rapidly as possible. We believe our most appropriate lead responsibility would be in:

- Commissioning and publishing guidance on the skills required in these complex roles
- Managing, in partnership with others, the identification and accreditation of National Leaders of Education, using transparent criteria
- Maintaining the register of potential executive headteachers, who are National Leaders of Education and whose schools have capacity for them to be released to lead another school/schools
- Maintaining, in collaboration with others, a national data base of applied models of practice, which is made available to all National Leaders of Education and newly appointed Executive Heads.
- Commissioning development and support activities for existing, newly appointed or designate, and aspirant Executive Heads.

Steve Munby, Chief Executive, NCSL, October 2005