

## **National Standards for Headteachers in focus**

### **Urban primary schools**

#### **Contributors:**

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## Introduction

Three urban primary headteachers in very different locations and with differing communities to serve, were interviewed for this focus piece on the National Standards for Headteachers. What follows is a composite of their experiences and of how they perceive their role. Their perceptions are cross-referenced to the National Standards for Headteachers and to the urban leadership competencies and show how these are made manifest in the urban context.

## Shaping the future

Critical to the role of headship is working with the governing body and others to create a shared vision and strategic plan which inspires and motivates pupils, staff and all other members of the school community. This vision should express core educational values and moral purpose and be inclusive of stakeholders' values and beliefs. The strategic planning process is critical to sustaining school improvement and ensuring that the school moves forward for the benefit of its pupils. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES2004: 6)

What became clear from the outset was that all three were passionately committed to urban education and saw themselves as performing a vital function in giving their pupils as good an education as they possibly could. From early in their careers they had become determined to serve children in an urban environment either through personal vocation or because they had grown up in similar communities and wished to give something back. They have a total belief that the pupils in their school are entitled to as good an education as could be provided and that they should have equal opportunities to achieve to the highest level possible. This vision inevitably involves an agenda of improving teaching and learning and of raising standards to a very high level. It is invariably shared with the governing body, the staff and other stakeholders to form a shared, strategic vision that inspires and motivates all members of the school community.

Given the many pressures that urban headteachers face, it is not surprising that one of the characteristics that they readily identify with is that of courage and conviction (urban leadership competency 1). The challenges facing them, particularly in the early days of their headship, take many forms: mental, professional, personal and even physical. Entrenched members of staff with fixed ideas about their expectations of pupils, about how to conduct themselves and about the education on offer can often put up a fierce resistance to change. If a group of teachers take this attitude of resistance then this is inevitably very wearing on the new headteacher and they need enormous courage and belief in what they are doing in order to persist and maintain their beliefs in the vision that they espouse. Only in this way can they begin to shape the future as they see it.

Most successful urban headteachers have tales to tell of having to face down a recalcitrant member of staff and even going to the extent of terminating that person's employment. Challenge can also come from the community either from the very nature of the community itself but also from some of its perceptions about what the urban headteacher should be doing. Where the local area has severe social problems such as crime, drug taking, vandalism, gangs, or a high incidence of crime, these may sometimes intrude into the life and work of the school causing an inevitable culture clash.

The headteacher is at the centre of this clash and has to show both the courage of their convictions and also the sheer physical fortitude to be able to face direct challenges to what the school is aiming to achieve.

For example, one headteacher was confronted by drug taking on the school site after hours. Her challenge to this involved other agencies including the police, which led to drug users deliberately planting needles point upwards in the school grounds. Tackling this needed considerable persistence and courage. By maintaining her belief in what the school was for and resisting alternative value systems, that headteacher was able to prevail and win through in the end.

In urban schools, it is often the case that the parents of the pupils have either limited knowledge of schools in this country or negative experiences of them. This can manifest itself in hostile or suspicious behaviour on their part. Most urban primary headteachers have had to put up with aggressive parents or carers coming into the school and engaging in seriously inappropriate behaviour. Some traditional communities are very suspicious of change and may resist aspects of what the new primary headteacher is trying to do. In both cases, these actions have to be resisted, politely but firmly, and again this can be very wearing on the headteacher. They need the courage to stick to their guns and persist in developing an educational provision that is the very best for the pupils in the school.

Given the many and varied demands on their attention and the often volatile nature of the local community, it is inevitable that the urban leader may become distracted from his or her main task. The successful and effective urban leader is able to achieve focused vision and simplicity (urban leadership competency 5), which means they are able to resist being sidetracked by the complexities of the job and to focus on what is essential.

Sometimes the main agenda for the headteacher may be set by external forces. For example, they may be asked to run a school in difficulties that been placed into special measures or that has experienced considerable turbulence at senior management level. In these cases, the priorities for action are set but the strategies for achieving them need to be identified and pursued with vigour and relentless determination.

In other situations, the school may be coasting along and in need of an injection of new ideas to change something that is satisfactory into something that is excellent. This ability to keep a clear eye on the ball, to be stubborn in promoting the school improvement agenda and to have the skills of building the capability for the sustained raising of standards is seen as essential.

One of those interviewed spoke of insisting that the school could achieve standards that were at least at the national average and meeting considerable scepticism from the staff. She pursued that target vigorously despite many distractions and a few setbacks and by a rigorous programme of staff training and extra support for the pupils she was able to achieve and exceed the average national test results for Year 6 pupils. Another headteacher spoke of the difficulties of keeping all the staff focused on understanding and delivering an assertive discipline policy that was vital if the pupils were to develop more positive attitudes to learning.

In order to achieve his or her vision, the urban headteacher has to be prepared to listen to the views of others, in particular, the stakeholders in the school. In other words, open and connected leadership (urban leadership competency 4) is needed. This involves the headteacher seeking to incorporate the aspirations, values and opinions of others while retaining the central direction of the overarching vision. In this way, there can be a shared ownership and responsibility for what the school is trying to achieve.

One headteacher spoke of the way in which she was gradually able to persuade the parents and her staff of the feasibility of her vision even though they had been mainly

happy with the school's mediocre previous performance. In time, she was able to delegate important functions for the achievement of her vision to one of her deputies and some middle managers because they became committed to the headteacher's aspirations: "Once this happened, I knew we were going to be successful".

One of the consequences of this new united approach to urban leadership is that the school begins to acquire a much more positive reputation in the locality.

Successful urban headteachers often become skilled users of the local media to enhance and promote their schools. One headteacher described herself as having become 'media savvy' and her school as being a regular feature in the local press and radio.

## **Leading learning and teaching**

Headteachers have a central responsibility for raising the quality of teaching and learning and for pupils' achievement. This implies setting high expectations and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of learning outcomes. A successful learning culture will enable pupils to become effective, enthusiastic, independent learners, committed to life-long learning. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES 2004: 7)

In order to achieve the high standards that are sought, the urban leader has to communicate high expectations and maintain the essential role of educational leader. This will usually involve the application of the skills of leading learning innovation (urban leadership competency 7).

The interviewed headteachers all spoke of the need they had had at some time to coach and arrange training for members of their staff. One of the essential tools of successful leadership in education is that of monitoring and evaluation. The effective headteacher knows exactly what is happening around their schools and this will usually include a formal and focused programme of lesson observations. Successful headteachers have the skills of feeding back sensitively and constructively following these observations and the information they generate is vital for informing the programme of school improvement.

One interviewee spoke of being dismayed by what she learnt about the teaching of English, especially to pupils with English as an additional language, and how she developed, in conjunction with her subject leader for English, a rigorous programme of staff development and arranged for an advanced skills teacher to come to the school to coach and work with staff. Gradually the teachers' aspirations for their pupils were raised and the school began to make headway.

Effective urban leaders are very skilled at plugging into networks of external support and generating as much finance, help and guidance for their staff as they can. Occasionally, urban headteachers have to take a radical stance regarding the curriculum their school offers and to work with colleagues to develop learning programmes, sometimes individualised, that are more in keeping with the needs of the pupils. A strong focus is given to the pupils' personal and social education and this emphasis, too, informs the education that the urban leader promotes for the pupils.

## **Developing self and working with others**

Effective relationships and communication are important in headship as headteachers work with and through others. Effective headteachers manage themselves and their relationships well. Headship is about building a professional learning community which enables others to achieve. Through performance

management and effective continuing professional development practice, the headteacher supports all staff to achieve high standards. To equip themselves with the capacity to deal with the complexity of the role and the range of leadership skills and actions required of them, headteachers should be committed to their own continuing professional development. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES/0083/2004: 8)

Each of the headteachers had taken on urban leadership in the full realisation of what the role involved. They were aware of the numerous and diverse challenges facing headteachers in urban settings and were prepared for the enormous pressures to which they would be subjected. They knew that they were embarking on a course that would involve considerable professional and personal development for themselves as well as for others.

The urban headteacher invariably has a vision of the education they wish to transmit to their students and of the kind of education they want to provide. They are often very good at articulating that vision and persuading others to go along with them in achieving it. They know that they will have to demonstrate enduring resilience (urban leadership competency 2) in being able to bring their vision to fruition. For example, one headteacher found outright hostility to what he wanted to achieve from some of his senior staff when he took up his post. By being firm and resolute, he was able to convince the staff of the merits of his approach until he eventually achieved whole school commitment to his policies and practices. Part of this enduring resilience is the need to establish clear expectations for both staff and pupils.

In one case, the headteacher found that a senior colleague was not adhering to these expectations regarding how pupils were to be addressed. This behaviour was challenged and after several unacceptable incidents, disciplinary proceedings had to be initiated. The headteacher clearly did not like having to do this but felt that unless he was steadfast in his resolution, he would not be able to achieve the quality of education that he desired for his pupils.

The headteachers were aware that when they took up their post, many individuals and groups would be watching them carefully to see how successful they would be. This scrutiny carries its own pressure and the successful urban headteacher needs the fortitude to be able to stand up and even thrive under the intense spotlight that is urban education. One headteacher described this as being prepared to be “bloody minded” and “not caring what others think” in order to achieve her vision. Two of the interviewees spoke of the need to have high levels of emotional intelligence and to learn how to foster this among their colleagues. They stressed that by striving to maintain a reasonable life/work balance, by managing their own time well and by being continually open to personal developmental influences, they could encourage others to work with them in the pursuit of excellence.

As the urban headteacher becomes established and seen to be effective, inevitably they will begin to exert purposeful influencing (urban leadership competency 8) on those around them. The most obvious influence that effective urban leaders have is on members of their own staff. They create learning climates and an ethos of quality and achievement and teaching and non-teaching staff often respond very well to this.

Effective leaders often have a good record of having members of staff promoted either within or out of the school. Effective leaders will be sought out for advice and support by other leaders and by those aspiring to that role. Local and national organisations will seek their contributions and they will be asked to act as mentors or as associate headteachers to other leaders who are either very new to the role or are in particularly challenging circumstances. They will invariably be asked to be consultant leaders.

All those interviewed said that they were gratified to be asked to contribute in these ways but also that they recognised the temptation to spend too much time on external activities. As one headteacher put it, “You have to make sure that the shop is being minded”.

## **Managing the organisation**

Headteachers need to provide effective organisation and management of the school and seek ways of improving organisational structures and functions based on rigorous self-evaluation. Headteachers should ensure that the school and the people and the resources within it are organised and managed to provide an efficient, effective and safe learning environment. These management responsibilities imply the re-examination of the roles and responsibilities of those adults working in the school to build capacity across the workforce and ensure resources are deployed to achieve value for money. Headteachers should also seek to build successful organisations through effective collaborations with others. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES/0083/2004: 9)

The successful urban leader has to acquire the skills of filtering, judging and acting (urban leadership competency 9). This involves ensuring that the school and the people and resources within it are organised and managed well so that an effective learning environment is created. It also means dealing efficiently with the mass of information that descends on headteachers, filtering what is important from that which is trivial.

One of the headteachers interviewed said that she had never had any training in this skill and it was one that she felt was essential for the modern headteacher. Another aspect of this skill is that headteachers perform a multiplicity of roles during the school day: counsellor, confidant, arbiter, employer, assessor, social worker as well as a range of other strictly non-educational functions.

The interviewed headteachers all said how important it is to remember what the essential nature of their position is, to be the educational leader of the school. They have to develop the skills of deciding what is important to deal with oneself, what can be delegated to someone else and what can be postponed to a more convenient time. When such decisions have been made, the need is for timely and purposeful action so that the day-to-day activities of the primary school can proceed smoothly while, at the same time, the headteacher keeps an overall steer on its educational direction.

## **Securing accountability**

With values at the heart of their leadership, headteachers have a responsibility to the whole school community. In carrying out this responsibility, headteachers are accountable to a wide range of groups, particularly pupils, parents, carers, governors and the LEA [local education authority]. They are accountable for ensuring that pupils enjoy and benefit from a high quality education, for promoting collective responsibility within the whole school community and for contributing to the education service more widely. Headteachers are legally and contractually accountable to the governing body for the school, its environment and its work. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES/0083/2004: 10)

With an open and connected leadership style comes the need for accountability and consistency (urban leadership competency 6). All the headteachers interviewed stressed the need for a consistent approach to all aspects of the life and work of the school. One interviewee expressed it as: “the staff and pupils needed to know what I expected in terms of behaviour, teaching and learning and the way we treat each other. Every child matters and so does every other member of the school”.

The Urban Leadership Award is intended to promote excellence in educational provision and the attainment of very high standards in urban schools. By recognising this, effective urban leaders accept willingly the need to be accountable for the quality of education they provide and the results they achieve; they must be accountable at all levels: to the pupils; their parents and carers, the local community and society in general.

With this personal accountability, the effective urban headteacher expects others to be accountable too. Responsibility for the performance of the school must be held collectively by all members of the school community and it is the task of the urban leader to ensure that this is achieved. One interviewee spoke of the ways in which she sensitively yet firmly insists on the highest quality of teaching and learning in her classrooms: "Outstanding has to be our norm".

## **Strengthening community through collaboration**

Schools exist in a distinctive social context, which has a direct impact on what happens inside the school. School leadership should commit to engaging with the internal and external community to ensure equity and entitlement. Headteachers should collaborate with other schools in order to share expertise and bring positive benefits to their own and other schools. They should work collaboratively at both strategic and operational levels with parents and carers and across multiple agencies for the well-being of all children. Headteachers share responsibility for leadership of the wider educational system and should be aware that school improvement and community development are interdependent. (National Standards for Headteachers, DfES/0083/2004: 11)

Urban headteachers work with many kinds of community. They may be overwhelmingly of one ethnic or religious group or they may represent a very disparate range of peoples from widely differing backgrounds and experiences. Often the local communities are extremely volatile. This makes community engagement (urban leadership competency 3) a vital skill for the urban headteacher to exhibit for if the community does not support what the urban school is trying to do, there is much less chance of success.

Where there is an easily identified community group or groups to work with, contact can be made by visiting the local church, mosque or community centre to talk about and recruit leading members to the school's cause. Local community leaders such as an Imam or a councillor can be invited to visit the school, to join the governing body or simply to champion the school in the local community.

One headteacher enrolled parents in a fruit charity scheme to enlist their support as well as to teach the pupils and their families something about healthy eating. Successful urban headteachers pay a lot of attention to informing parents about the school's policies and gaining their cooperation in matters such as behaviour, homework, uniform and general attitude to school. This is done formally through parents' evenings and open days but also informally through meeting and greeting parents at the beginning and end of the day.

One headteacher summed up his philosophy for engaging with the local community by saying "I needed to let the community and the parents of my pupils know that I meant business; that I was determined to improve the quality of the education for their children because they deserve it".

Finally, the distinguishing characteristic of successful and highly effective urban primary headteachers is that they are passionate about primary education in urban settings. They are often driven by a strong sense of equity and entitlement; they want only the very best for their pupils and the communities they serve. This commitment,

allied to a steely resolve, goes a long way towards ensuring that some of the more troubled and needy children in our society get as fair a deal as possible and the opportunity to realise their potential.

### ***References***

DfES, 2004, *National Standards for Headteachers*, DfES, London