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Research Associate Summary Report

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Community conversation

Developing extended schools through stakeholder
consultation

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Background and introduction

Within the six strands of the National Standards for Headteachers published by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004) is one concerned with 'strengthening community'. Within this standard are requirements that:

- school leadership should commit to engaging with the internal and external school community, thus modelling the principles of equity and entitlement
- headteachers should ensure collaboration and collective responsibility for the well-being of children with parents and carers and across multiple agencies, at both strategic and operational levels

As the government's agenda to create extended and full-service schools becomes a reality, there is a growing need to help schools learn from successful pilot projects. Learning on the establishment of the provision and consulting on its nature will be particularly pertinent.

Many schools have a long history of providing some of the activities that feature in extended schools and may wish to develop these further, whereas other schools may be at the early stages of trying to ascertain the potential demand for, and uptake of, planned provision. There is no blueprint for what an extended school will look like because the provision has to be grounded in the needs of the local community.

The initial consultation with the various interest groups and providers is a crucial element in the early stages of development and can seem a daunting prospect when consideration is given to the number and range of groups and individuals involved.

Context of research

The research was carried out in several extended and full-service schools by talking with heads or extended school managers about their consultations with the community connected with their school.

Many of the schools had found the logistics of the consultation daunting and found that different interest groups had different understandings of, and needs from, the provision being considered.

Key findings

- Consultation takes time but is worth the effort.
- For consultation to be effective, consideration needs to be given to developing the approach that is likely to be most effective in consulting with the local community. Within this, any single method adopted will inevitably have its own strengths and weaknesses, for instance:
 - written questionnaire-type consultation provides structured responses and can be an effective use of time. However, it can suffer from poor response rates and may be more likely to elicit replies from a small, distinct group of respondents
 - face-to-face consultation is demanding in terms of time and can initially feel uncomfortable. However, it can be more effective in building trust and ensuring responsiveness to the concerns of local people
- Employing individuals from local communities can be a particularly effective means of liaising with local people.

In the context of the writer's own school, there were issues around engagement of the families and community with education in general.

The school's headteacher had attended a number of conferences and seminars in which Professor John West-Burnham and Dr George Otero had described the notion of social capital and how schools could develop through various levels of school engagement and connectivity en route to becoming core social centres. The school identified very closely with West-Burnham's view that:

"there is a plateauing of national levels and ... significant improvements are increasingly difficult to secure. It may therefore be an appropriate time to focus on the social environment of the learner rather than increasing the emphasis on the technology of teaching."

'Better together' Conference, Manchester, Autumn 2004

The head and governors believed that reaching out into the wider community would make a real difference for the pupils in the school.

The use of 'public conversations', developed by Dr George Otero at the Centre for Relational Learning (sic) in New Mexico, was seen by the headteacher as an ideal model for the school to work through with its communities. From this, the notion of a community conversation was born.

Overview of the approach used

It was decided to hold the community conversation during a school in-service training day. The purpose was to bring together all the people and groups whose life and work had an impact on the children on roll in the school.

The main groups people would be drawn from were:

- parents
- school staff
- community and religious leaders
- health
- social services

- police
- Sure Start
- local authority
- voluntary groups

The day involved 86 people who came together for as much of the day as was feasible with other commitments, and was facilitated by Maggie Farrar, Assistant Director of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

The central aim for the day was to enable all participants to gain a deeper understanding of the role of others in the lives of the children, to ascertain what their aspirations and targets for the future might be, and how groups could work together to enable all those involved to fulfil them.

Key findings from the community conversation

- Representation on the day should be inclusive, including different stakeholder groups. Individuals should be drawn from operational, strategic, managerial and officer levels to promote shared ownership and understanding across different agencies.
- A neutral facilitator is helpful in ensuring balance is maintained and seen to be maintained. There is otherwise the danger of people perceiving the work to be driven by the needs of a single interest or agency.
- Pace needs to be retained in the day, but with sufficient time for networking.
- Bringing together people from a variety of experiences and backgrounds highlights issues of differences in culture and language. Within the various agencies, there were examples of differences in terminology and understanding alongside issues around protocols for sharing information. This highlighted the need for processes aimed at improving inter-agency communications.

- It was very clear that there were significant differences in awareness and understanding. Within the school staff, for example, there were some who had an understanding of multi-agency working and a significant number who had little or no awareness of the role of other agencies and groups in the wider education of the child. This proved a timely reminder that there needs to be regular opportunities for people to raise issues and clarify points.
- One task during the day was to seek out people or groups who were needed to help meet the aspirations. It was interesting to map the links that were being made and where help was being sought. It was also clear that some displayed a reluctance or did not recognise a need to engage with other professional groups, and it may be that additional encouragement is needed to promote fuller engagement in this process.
- The event needs to be action-focused and to highlight specific tasks for a range of individuals, not just seniors within the agency eg the headteacher.
- Specific tasks were divided into those that would have high impact yet were easy to implement and those that would also have high impact but would be more challenging to achieve. Emphasis should be placed on quick wins that were easy and high impact to gain and maintain momentum. There is a note of caution, though, that people will still need to be encouraged to carry out chosen tasks even after taking ownership.

Conclusion

The community conversation approach is one school's example of how it has attempted to reach out to engage its stakeholders in developing its next steps forward. Whichever route schools choose to take as they move towards becoming extended schools, it is hoped that the learning from this report assists their journey.

Acknowledgements

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References

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

Dr George Otero, *Centre for Relational Learning (sic)* at: www.relationalearning.com

Research associate reports available in Spring 2006

■ Rethinking middle leadership roles in secondary schools

Kathryn Hobbs, *Assistant Headteacher, The Nottingham Bluecoat School and Technology College*

■ Search for the leader inside yourself

Diane Heritage, *Headteacher Facilitator, Innovation for Learning, Barnsley Local Authority*

Jacquie Parr, *Headteacher Facilitator, Innovation for Learning, Barnsley Local Authority*

■ Time for coaching

Neil Suggett, *Headteacher, Hayes Park Primary School, London Borough of Hillingdon*

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