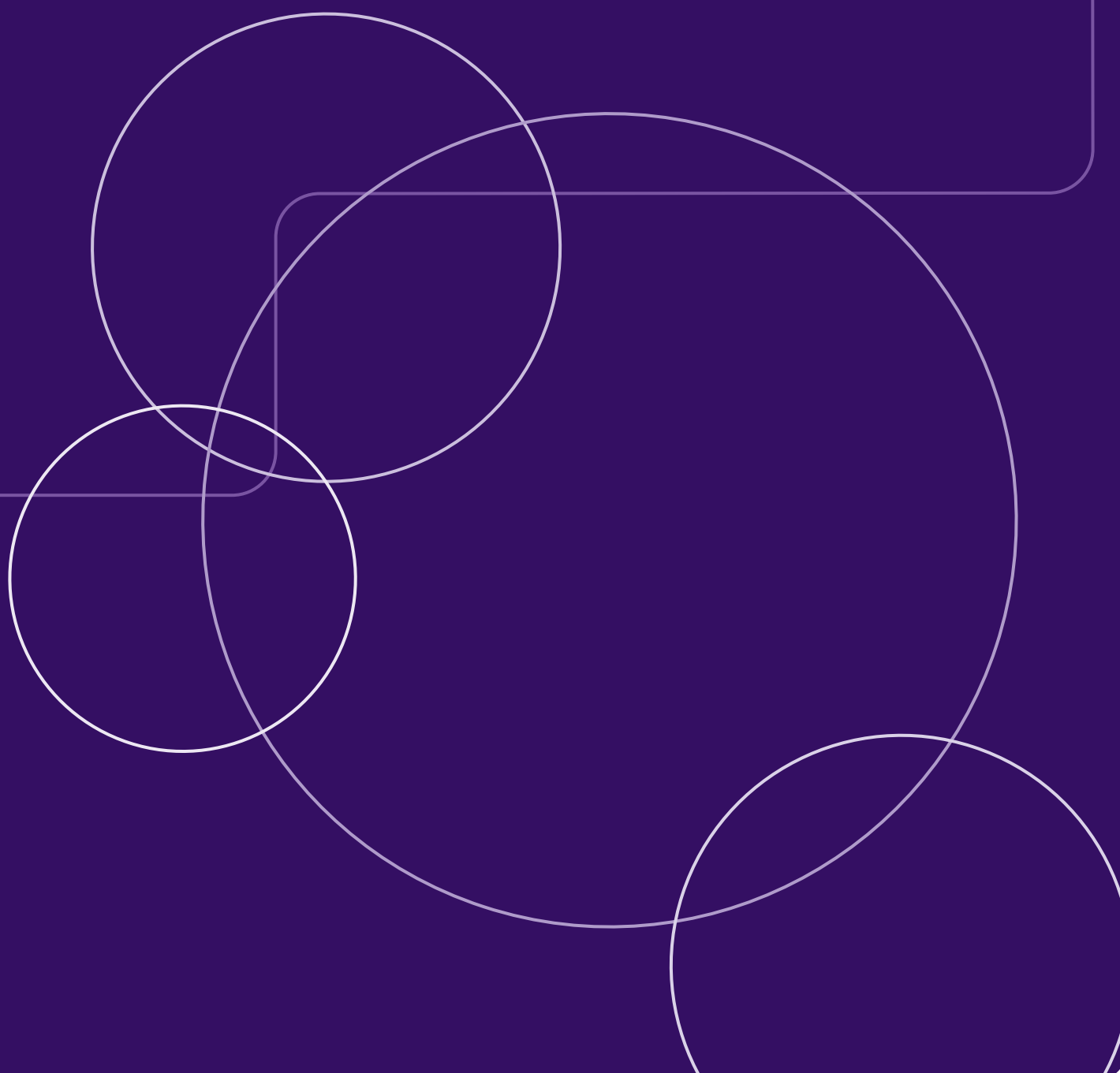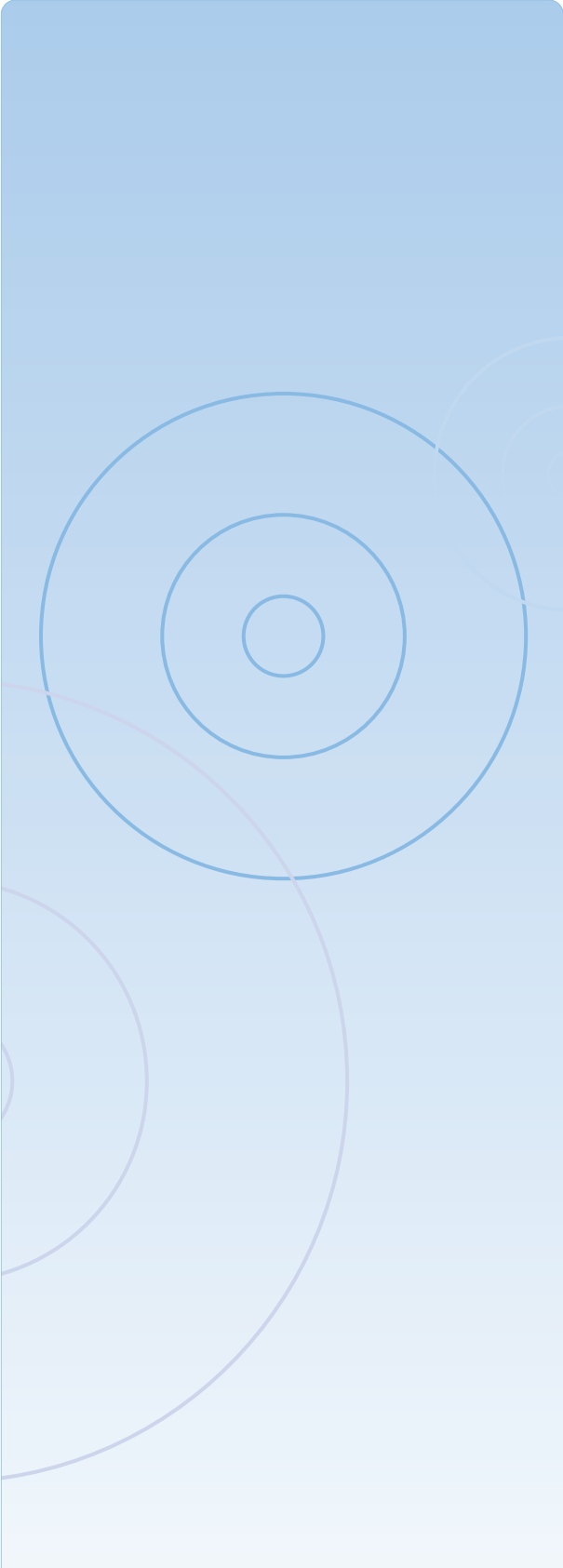NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

School leaders leading the system

System leadership in practice

In the increasingly complex world of 21st century education, school leaders in England are faced with new and different accountabilities as they work towards addressing both Every Child Matters (ECM) and the standards agenda simultaneously.

As a consequence, the development of multi-agency partnerships and collaborative working have come to characterise local responses to system level issues which currently challenge all school leaders. This requires a new form of leadership which focuses the energies of school leaders not just on leading within their own schools, but beyond their schools on behalf of the wider system within their locality and beyond.

The National College of School Leadership (NCSL) is committed to supporting the development of headteachers and other school leaders in rising to the challenges this presents. Growing school and system leaders of the future is therefore, a key priority in supporting the development of an education system which is increasingly responsive to the needs of young people.

In 2006, NCSL's Leadership Network conference took 'School leaders leading the system' as its theme. At the conference, the debate about system leadership was shaped by three questions:

1. What motivation is there for school leaders to help generate development beyond their school?

2. How can headteachers be agents of wider change?

3. How does system leadership benefit learners?

Edited by Karen Carter and Tricia Sharpe

This booklet presents narratives and insights drawn from the conference workshops. It provides snapshots of system leadership in practice together with summary analyses designed to prompt you to consider next steps to action in your context.

System leadership: snapshots from practice

The vignettes of practice presented in this booklet draw on the work of NCSL's Leadership Network which aims to represent headteachers from all phases, contributing to leadership learning and drawing policy issues from professional practice. The Network is considered to be unique in its composition and its ability to link policy to practice. Its aspiration is to bring the best of school leadership into regional and national debate.

'School leaders leading the system' was the third annual conference of the Network. The focus was chosen to reflect emerging interest in system leadership, particularly as an approach with potential to address the current challenges of 21st century education and the associated accountabilities of school leaders in working towards addressing both Every Child Matters and the standards agenda simultaneously.

The purpose of this booklet is to offer experiences and observations from practice as a contribution to a better understanding of, and progress towards, system leadership.

Narratives and insights were presented and discussed at the conference through workshops. These have been grouped into four themes, each of which has a dedicated page in this booklet (indicated below).

For each theme there is a summary analysis of the key points from practice identified and a 'next steps to action' activity – designed to prompt you to consider what action you might take in your situation to develop system leadership in the future.

What does system leadership look like?

These snapshots take a look at emerging characteristics of system leadership in practice. During workshop discussions, headteachers were keen to point out that they are by no means natural experts on system leadership, but because of that, they have worked to develop their thinking on system leadership and its place in schools. Participants acknowledged that the current policy agenda requires leaders who are effective in leading both in and beyond their schools. They demonstrated a receptive attitude towards system leadership with recognition that it would help them address many of the system-level issues they encounter in their work.

Towards a definition of system leadership

Through research and development work undertaken by NCSL, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, and international thinkers on education such as Michael Fullan, a theory of system leadership is beginning to emerge – but what does this mean in practice for school leaders?

"We are starting to understand in practical terms that system leaders are leaders who build capacity within their own schools and also work beyond their school on behalf of all children in their locality. They are moved to make a difference – and to do so across a local system and in partnership with others. We should think about system leaders as of the system (rather than as heroic leaders): creative and skilled individuals to be sure, but nurtured, supported and promoted by systems that they build round themselves and, crucially, by the skilled and creative colleagues with whom they work."

Ballantyne et al, 2006 [1]

Developing system leadership capacity

"We're part of a full service extended school with a middle and upper schools, so it's important that our partnership network brings together a whole host of representatives for the schools and other agencies in the area. Our partnership chair is a local vicar, who has multi-faith liaison as part of his brief, an important issue in a culturally diverse area. We also have representatives from the primary care trust (PCT), health and social services on the partnership board.

I'm interested now in developing a leadership partnership across agencies, as well as developing the networks we have in our school. Our leadership team consists of non-academic staff like our site manager, our office manager and the FSES co-ordinator (an employee of the PCT). What's important is that we have school-to-school partnerships that engage with the community rather than head-to-head ones, and that means everyone has to be involved."

Leadership Network headteacher

Supporting the development of system leaders

"The perception of the head's role is to manage and represent their school, and nobody else's. These roles are changing, and fundamentally, the strategic role of the head is changing. This is not a transformation that will just filter through so one day everybody understands it – we must establish a system that supports a new role for heads, and an approach to training that embeds that understanding of headship. While headteachers and their schools do not identify with a sense of moral purpose beyond their own school gates, then we will still have a long way to go."

"If we really want true leaders for the future, and leaders who can become system leaders we need sustainable programmes of training and development…Capacity building and the kind of professional development that helps create leaders or facilitate leadership needs to be part of a plan that's not vulnerable to the availability of funding."

Leadership Network headteachers

System leadership as a response to complexity

Several types of system leadership roles have already evolved to cope with the complexity of the current policy context and with the new agendas for system reform:

- School leaders engaging at a national level and advising on policy.

- School leaders working with local authorities as School Improvement Partners (SIPs) or part-time advisers.

- School leaders collaborating with other public services under Every Child Matters.

- School leaders leading a network, cluster or federation of schools.

- Executive headship.

- Extended school leadership.

- School leaders working directly with the community and leading the school as a community resource.

John West-Burnham

---

[1] Ballantanye, P, Jackson, D, Temperley, J with Lieberman, A, 2006, *System leadership in action,* Nottingham, NCSL

System leadership in analysis…

✓ A system leader must be able to communicate a vision and moral purpose that resonates with every stakeholder and provides coherence.

✓ Capacity building is fundamental. An individual might act as the catalyst but her or his strategy must be to adopt a distributed leadership model to secure system-wide development and change.

✓ This approach poses challenges to everyone in the system. For it to work, the system has to flex because it is about transformation not add-on.

✓ System leaders are made rather than born and so for this approach to become rooted requires professional development and support.

…and in action

"Releasing power and control can be scary but it is the best way to move forward. I'm going to consider the design of our distributed leadership model within our federation of schools."

"I plan to follow up on cross-sector working and making our school the centre of a range of children's services. I also want to change our CPD programme so that we are more able to spot talent early on in a teacher's career. I'm going to adapt job descriptions to include behaviours and encourage the kind of qualities that reflect our school ethos and the ECM agenda."

Leadership Network
conference participants

Next steps to system leadership…

What are the next steps to action that can be taken to address these aspects of system leadership in your situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

Networks as fundamental to system leadership

So how does a system leader evolve? NCSL's *System leadership in action* (2006)[1] research puts network membership and collaborative opportunities first in the system leader's journey – with network leadership described as 'the proving ground' for system leaders. These snapshots take a look at the experiences of those school leaders who have experienced an introduction to the practice of system leadership through their work in school-to-school and community-based networks.

Networks as the proving ground for system leadership

Emerging evidence suggests that networks are creating environments in which school leaders – headteachers and others – are responding to the challenges of leading development work and learning beyond their own schools with the challenges of the wider locality driving their concerns.

"I don't think you can develop system leaders in practice unless you have networks. I don't think by being part of a network, you become a system leader, but if you don't have networks, where will you ever gain that experience? There are so many people I've worked with who have totally changed their philosophy about leadership, because they've been in networks."

John Baumber, Executive principal, 2006 [2]

Growing system leaders within a network

Winsford Education Partnership illustrated how system leadership opportunities can grow the talents and skills of staff who are not headteachers. All schools in the town are involved in the partnership network. Two of the network's co-leaders have an education background with the third not from education.

One of the co-leaders is a Head of Science in a school. An important feature of her leadership learning journey was that she was accepted and developed regardless of her age. Having an advocate/mentor to support and encourage was very useful: *"Being a leader does not necessarily mean being at the front but working with the team. One of the benefits of the partnership is practising leadership skills, trying things out in a safe environment".*

"Those who take up network leadership roles need to develop new skills including: entrepreneurial skills, political 'know how', negotiation diplomacy and mediation skills and they also need to have a passion!"

Lucy Lloyd-Jones & David Ling,
Network co-leaders

Creating the right climate for system leadership in networks

The role of honesty and trust in effective networks was frequently raised as an important point by those workshop participants who shared their experiences of different network leadership roles. If a network member is failing to instill trust, or is trapped by a sense of rivalry, how does the network function?

"Networks enable honest, professional exchanges, and that is dependent on trust. I think the most effective partnerships come from identifying joint priorities and common ground. Networks can also thrive where people really connect with each other too – if you get talented people together and empower them to create, there is no end to what they'll come up with. Gradually, I think schools who haven't embraced networking and partnership are realising that it's very lonely working without that input and support."

Martine Sinker, Headteacher co-ordinator, 2006 [2]

Supporting the learning of system leaders through networks

In one workshop, two headteachers from different authorities in the north of England shared their experiences of bringing together 10 leaders to form a collaborative leadership learning (CLL) group. They identified the benefits of this form of collaborative learning across schools, and pointed to the importance of providing potential system leaders with support for their own development. So what's different now?

"The way the school comes to important decisions. What would have taken one year of staff meetings is now achieved through splitting into three groups and I abide by their decisions. It is a very powerful method and is now a regular way of getting important things done."

"Not giving answers; I'm now asking questions. I'm more aware staff have a wealth of knowledge and I am better able to draw that knowledge out. There is a greater emphasis on learning conversations."

Jean Hart & Kathy Allen, Network headteachers

---

[2] Baumber, J & Sinker, M, 2006, in *System leaders in profile,* Nottingham, NCSL

System leadership in analysis…

✓ There is evidence to suggest that networks offer powerful opportunities to grow and test system leadership.

✓ Trust building is an essential feature of the climate in which system leadership can be grown and the potential of school leaders to work beyond the boundaries of their own schools fulfilled.

✓ The skill-set needed by system leaders has dimensions additional to that required by the leadership of a single institution. Development of these skills benefits from support and challenge.

✓ System leaders will increasingly require effective professional development and leadership learning opportunities which will support them in working collaboratively beyond their schools.

…and in action

"Within my own role, aspects of this discussion will influence my own practice in delivering leadership CPD activities within the local authority. We have some excellent practice through networks which will continue to be disseminated."

"This discussion has confirmed a lot of the things I've been considering and encouraged me to be more open with the leadership team about these agendas in future. Taking an analogy that was used in one of the workshops about the system leaders' perspective, I now feel I have a responsibility 'to be on the stage, on the balcony and outside the theatre!'"

Leadership Network
conference participants

Next steps to system leadership…

What are the next steps to action that can be taken to address these aspects of system leadership in your situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

System leadership through partnership

The following snapshots focus on the idea of developing system leadership in partnership. A number of workshop discussions explored John West-Burnham's assertion that system leadership, in which school leaders collaborate with other schools, agencies and the wider community, offers a way forward on ECM specifically. It was suggested that the same might be said of other strands of government policy, such as inclusion and extended schools. A key feature of system leadership identified in this regard, was that of 'partnership working', where it was recognised that school leaders were increasingly being called upon to exercise their leadership capacity in the context of collaborative working with others beyond their schools.

System leadership within the ECM agenda

"The conference themes have linked to my thinking on ECM. I think we need system leadership thinking. It's highly relevant as a nursery school developing as a children's centre in partnership with the local social services, but there's still a question-mark over how we engage leaders in other disciplines and professions in the debate."

<div align="right">Leadership Network conference participant</div>

A practical response to the question of partnership working posed above was made by Lesley Curtis, who shared her experiences of developing system leadership in partnership at the Everton Child and Family Centre in Liverpool. The Centre has been created around a nursery school and includes an early childhood centre, family support, daycare, health services and after-school clubs. It now has 70 staff from teachers to health visitors and children there from 8am – 6pm for 50 weeks a year.

The nursery's governing body has been reformed as a management body with 20 members, including parents, staff, community and four local authority representatives as well as representatives from local sponsors. There are also links with Jobcentre Plus, higher and further education, family learning and family support: *"People in the community have played a pivotal role in deciding what the centre does and is. We asked parents to choose the design and format of the centre, for example. Empowering the community has been critical to its success."*

One of the services it hosts is psychiatric services for children from neighbouring primary and secondary schools. Besides the convenience for the community of having the service on their doorstep, it has opened up new learning opportunities for staff: *"Being able to have conversations with a child psychiatrist in the corridor about depression in three-year-olds is something I thought I'd never do."*

"The biggest challenge is how to keep pedagogy at the heart of everything we do."

<div align="right">Lesley Curtis, Network headteacher</div>

System leadership through inclusion partnerships

The increasing impact of inclusion on both mainstream and special schools has meant new systems, structures and processes. Cottingley Primary School in Leeds has developed a programme of sending their children with special education needs to a mainstream school for all but their numeracy and literacy learning. These 'partnership pupils' are making great progress.

"One of the greatest lessons we've all had to learn is that we don't always know best. As leaders we must understand that we cannot know everything and we can trust others to know more. We've also learnt that capacity can only build through truly distributed leadership."

"This is a different kind of leadership, where two schools are sharing responsibility for the same pupils. We've had to develop new systems and protocols to address situations as they arise. There is no blueprint – we're having to evaluate and review all the time."

<div align="right">Clare Bevington, former headteacher</div>

Identifying and overcoming the barriers to system leadership

"I'm surprised and a little envious! I wish I could say talking to other agencies is as rewarding for us as others here seem to have found it. Our primary partners seem easier to engage with. It's more difficult to engage with secondaries over issues like remodelling. We come up against issues sometimes with the local authority, things that seem like territory and 'empire building'. Paper work and red tape are a problem and they inhibit the process of creating good, strong links, which I think are integral if we're going to really personalise learning."

<div align="right">Leadership Network headteacher</div>

"We recognise that this (inclusion) is educational policy at its most political… We must face the negatives, like the backlash. We have somehow to engage in that debate and demonstrate how we've made inclusion succeed through partnership."

<div align="right">Leadership Network headteacher</div>

System leadership in analysis…

✓ If government policy is to be achieved, system leaders must be proactive in establishing effective collaboration and partnerships.

✓ There is no blueprint: clarity of purpose, membership, structures and processes must be derived from the needs of the learners and the situation.

✓ System navigation requires a 'political' adeptness and preparedness to challenge.

✓ System leadership through partnership is about organic growth and so it requires continual review and an adaptive mindset across all collaborators.

…and in action

"I'm going to work with governors and the governors' unit to look at how we can move governors to have an area/city-wide/regional view instead of just an institutional one. I'm also going to work with the DfES via pathfinder work on collaboration to address some of the blockages that prevent a flow in the system leadership agenda."

"Within our team the common language is based on the five outcomes of ECM – I would suggest that measurements of the outcomes of each of these can make the process of measuring the impact of system leadership more manageable. This multi-agency work is impacting on our operation as a school and it needs monitoring."

Leadership Network
conference participants

Next steps to system leadership…

What are the next steps to action that can be taken to address these aspects of system leadership in your situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

System leadership for learning

System thinkers, says Michael Fullan, have a relentless focus on learning. Sustainability, he argues, requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising. This, he suggests, requires 'deep learning', and deep learning means collaborative cultures of enquiry that alter the culture of learning so that leaders together can solve difficult or adaptive problems. The following snapshots take a look at system leadership for learning, pointing to the outcomes of two of the Leadership Network's research and development projects which have involved school leaders in working together using enquiry processes to problem-solve and develop local solutions to, two system-level issues.

Tackling the issue of personalising learning

Personalised learning has the needs of individual learners at its heart. This Leadership Network project has examined:

- the difference that personalised approaches to learning make to pupils

- the strategies schools use to move towards personalised learning

- the leadership implications of personalising the school experience

Studies focused on individual schools, cross-institution groupings and the use of strategies such as mentoring.[3] Lessons for leaders shared at the workshop included the need to:

- start with a clear focus and common language

- provide professional development opportunities to all staff to promote consistent practice, dialogue and innovation exchange

- support engagement with other professionals and allow collaboration to grow organically

- encourage active involvement and empowerment of pupils through drawing on the 'student voice'

- ensure sustainability through a culture of learner-centredness

"It's a time of great change. We need to work with other headteachers to support our development in schools. Collectively, we are a strong voice and we should use this to move schools into the 'wrap around care' that gives children an education provided for their needs rather than a system they need to fit into."

Leadership Network headteacher

Developing local solutions to within-school variation

In this project, school leaders from across the country have been focusing on developing local, contextualised solutions to the complex issue of within-school variation.[4] As Ray Tarleton (the Leadership Network's National Co-ordinator) explains, this is an important system-level issue to tackle as: *"A lower than expected performance in just one subject at the end of a key stage can seriously depress a school's achievement and, more importantly, children's opportunities."*

Secondary school issues and strategies

- Issues identified: Weak management; false modesty; misplaced egalitarianism; small samples; micro-political issues; budget/time constraints; separating personal and professional; crossing subject barriers; using David Beckham instead of Sid Stone.

- Strategies developed: Use of data; student voice; role of middle leaders; staff development including cross-department learning and coaching; lesson observation and feedback; focus on the positive.

Primary school issues and strategies

- Issues identified: Emotional problem of confronting weaker practice; staff who are a negative drain; unconscious variation; pupil movement leading to enormous variation in behavioural issues; and ownership of behaviour.

- Strategies developed: Use of data; role of middle leaders; curriculum change; involvement of teachers in enquiry; detailed lesson observation; a team approach; focus on pupil self-esteem; teaching for learning policy; monitoring and evaluation procedures.

"This work will influence my practice in planning our roles as the local leaders of the ECM agenda. I want to engage the student voice in lesson evaluation, and I want to partner subjects and encourage peer collaboration to address in-school variation."

Leadership Network headteacher

---

[3] For more information see: National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Personalising learning,* Nottingham, NCSL

[4] For more information see: National College for School Leadership, 2006, *Narrowing the gap,* Nottingham, NCSL

System leadership in analysis...

✓ The need to develop a system leadership approach to tackling complex issues at the local level is often rooted in a school's desire to optimise the learning of its students.

✓ For system leaders, this sense of moral purpose is extended beyond the boundaries of an individual school – it means you have a vested interest in ensuring positive outcomes for the school down the road.

✓ System leadership with a learning focus can help facilitate the introduction of new approaches to leading learning, re-configuring school-based learning support for both pupils and staff.

✓ System leaders build cultures of collaborative enquiry and utilise enquiry processes to solve difficult problems.

...and in action

"I'm going to investigate learning in a social context – is it compatible with personalised learning? Does it complement it? Is it an essential part of it? I'm going to revisit successful changes before developing personalised learning plans."

"I'm going to look into encouraging a student voice. I especially like the idea of taking some students to another school to gather ideas on how we could move our own school forward."

Leadership Network
conference participants

Next steps to system leadership...

What are the next steps to action that can be taken to address these aspects of system leadership in your situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

PB149/practice