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Research Associate Summary Report

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Classrooms in the community

How can local clusters of schools work more effectively
to achieve the community involvement targets in their
development plans?

Spring 2006

Introduction

This research focuses upon local clusters of schools working in partnership to achieve community involvement. Schools group together for a number of purposes and these groupings are given a variety of names, for example: cluster, family and federation. Whatever name is given to these collaborations, this research is intended to help those schools embarking on, or involved in, partnership arrangements to effectively engage the community.

In Somerset, where the research took place, local clusters of schools have been formed into community learning partnerships (CLPs). These are partnerships between life-long learning providers in a defined geographical area. They formally collaborate in the provision of early years education, statutory schooling and adult education by planning together, agreeing priorities, jointly owning targets and pooling resources.

Since CLPs were established in the county in 2001, the government has signalled through a number of initiatives that community-based working is the way forward. This includes the:

- *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) agenda and the development of full-service and extended schools
- provision of personalised learning through extended opportunities beyond the school

The research focused upon two CLPs, one covering a rural area (West Somerset) and the other covering an urban area (Taunton). Both CLPs feel strongly that increased community involvement strengthens strategies for school improvement. For example, they are both successfully developing work in raising pupils' achievement through parental involvement. They therefore said that they would welcome research into ways in which their community involvement work could be improved. For this reason, the question that the enquiry addressed was: 'How can local clusters of schools work more effectively to achieve the community involvement targets in their development plans?'

It is hoped that this research will help school clusters throughout the country to become more effective in realising the goal of improving the quality and delivery of education through community involvement.

Methods

Each of the two CLPs involved in the research selected a community involvement project they were currently developing as a case study for the enquiry. Community involvement targets, in the CLPs' development plans, were then identified. A semi-structured interview format was used for interviews with:

- some headteachers involved in the projects
- other key staff involved

Each project conducted a self-evaluation exercise on its completion.

- One held a focus group which I attended (Taunton Market Project).
- The other asked headteachers to complete and return a questionnaire.

Findings from these self-evaluation procedures were analysed, lessons, activities and displays were observed and local documentation was examined.

Case studies

One CLP identified the Taunton Market Project as its case study and the other selected the Rural Opportunities in Life-long Learning (ROLL) Project. Each case study:

- gives a brief description of the project
- sets the project in the context of the CLP's development plan
- outlines the project's community involvement activities

Case study 1: Taunton Market Project

Taunton CLP had designated the academic year 2004/05 as one in which primary schools would focus on 'enriching the curriculum through history and in particular their local historic environment'. The Taunton Market Project was seen as an ideal vehicle for this due to its impending relocation. The project involved Somerset Heritage Services and local schools working in partnership to create a record of the market, its buildings, users, tradition and history before it left the town.

Case study 2: ROLL Project

The Rural Opportunities in Life-long Learning (ROLL) Project was aimed at working with children, their parents or carers and other interested adults to promote ICT skills. The project had grown out of a former Learning Bus Project, which had provided learning opportunities for people in the remote rural areas of West Somerset. It involved a partnership between the West Somerset Community and Technology College and 13 first schools. A distinctive feature of this project is its rural nature.

More details of the case studies are available in the full report.

Main findings

The main issues that would need to be addressed to improve the community involvement work of the two CLPs have been detailed under the following four generic headings.

1. Involving the wider community

- An integrated policy for school and community work needs to be developed, thus avoiding the tendency for the community dimension to appear to be bolted-on. This will help schools to achieve the goal of improving the quality and delivery of education through community involvement.
- Partnerships, which go beyond links with other schools, should be further developed to widen opportunities for learning in, and with, the community.
- Monitoring and evaluation of community involvement work need to be more robust.

2. Encouraging schools to work together

- The CLPs provided the general framework for schools to work together, and partnership was further encouraged by the specific nature and common focus of the two projects.
- If schools are given clear and specific examples of the cost-effectiveness of their working together, it will increase their commitment to collaboration.
- Partnership work will be strengthened if schools are given a clearer picture of the progress they are making in achieving shared objectives.

3. Staff development

- Projects need a longer lead-in time than was allocated to ensure good communication and staff development opportunities at the crucial early stage.
- CLPs can ease the pressure on time by clarifying which staff development issues are project-specific, and which are best dealt with by individual schools through their ongoing staff development provision.

4. Developing leadership by working collaboratively

- Distributed leadership is appropriate for the community involvement role of CLPs because it enables leadership to be shared with organisations and individuals beyond schools.
- CLPs need to ensure, through their development plans, that the sharing of leadership across their organisation is co-ordinated and working to shared goals.

Recommendations

The two CLPs involved in this research have sought to improve the quality and delivery of education through community involvement and to build upon its success in searching for further improvements. The following recommendations based on this report's main findings will help them and, it is hoped, other school clusters in their efforts to improve quality through collaboration and community involvement.

- Ensure the community dimension in any development is maximised, and clearly articulated to all involved.
- Ensure that stakeholders are represented in the planning and evaluation processes.
- Consider, at the planning stage, the monitoring and evaluation strategies to be used, how these will be rigorously applied, and how these will inform ongoing progress towards set objectives.
- Clearly define the economies of scale to be gained through collaboration.
- Consider how professional development will contribute to the achievement of objectives, and how this will be provided most effectively and efficiently.

- Clearly establish the leadership structures that will support the achievement of objectives, and how leaders will ensure clear communication strategies are employed.

Conclusion

But why should schools involve the wider community in the first place, and if they do, what are the key features of leadership for learning in the community?

Increased community involvement can enhance a school's strategies for school improvement and raising achievement. This accords with the DfES's Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2004a), which encompasses a move towards greater personalisation and choice, greater diversity of provision and providers, the development of effective partnerships and an extended role for schools. This invites schools to consider learning experiences and choices that young people have in both the formal and informal curricula, in school and in other contexts, facilitated by teachers, support staff and a broader range of educators beyond the school sector.

A form of distributed leadership that supports community involvement needs to be established. This will necessarily mean extending leadership to include partners beyond the school.

This broader role for education, characterised by a growing partnership with other sectors and communities, has been given further impetus through the new National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004b). For example, the standard entitled 'strengthening community' includes the following statement:

Headteachers should be aware that school improvement and community development are interdependent and that they share responsibility for leadership of the wider educational system.

This form of leadership displays a number of features that are clearly outlined in the report *Transforming Schools Through Community Education* (ContinYou, 2000). These features, which were also confirmed by my research, include:

- working collaboratively with individuals, organisations and agencies to ensure coherence in leadership
- recognising that skills and capacity exist amongst a variety of individuals and organisations in the community, which can help to realise the goal of improving the quality and delivery of education.

References

- ContinYou, 2000, *Transforming Schools Through Community Education*, Coventry, CEDC
- DfES, 2004a, *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, CM 6272, London, HMSO
- DfES, 2004b, *National Standards for Headteachers*, London, DfES
- DfES, 2003, *Every Child Matters*, CM 5860, London, HMSO

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank staff involved in the two community learning partnerships as well as those in Somerset Heritage Services who participated in the research.

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*

■ Community conversation

Kay Lindley, *Headteacher, Victoria Primary School, Keighley*

■ 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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