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What are we
learning about...?

Establishing a network of schools

“ Networks are now the most important organisational form of our time, reshaping the activities of families, governments and businesses. They are increasingly fundamental to any successful enterprise and they challenge our notions of leadership. ”

Valerie Hannon

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

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Establishing a network of schools

There is no blueprint for an effective network. No one set of arrangements or one particular type of organisation is necessarily better than another. In fact, one of the most important things to acknowledge as you begin your journey together as a network is that your schools, your staff and your children will be your guides. Your context, your histories, your strengths and needs, your aspirations and the ways of working in your LEA – all will influence the design of your network and its activities.

However, we do know some things about what seems to work. There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. From their experience and from the range of research that has been undertaken, it is possible to identify factors that successful networks have in common. Considering some of these factors as you begin to plan your network activity will help you to ensure that you build from what is known.

Four things effective networks do

- 1 Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure.
- 2 Focus on pupil learning.
- 3 Create new opportunities for adult learning.
- 4 Plan and have dedicated leadership and management.

Networks are an increasingly important feature of contemporary life. Modern organisations understand their importance for innovation and knowledge exchange. Across all sectors, networks are becoming an organisational principle of choice. Within the education sector we now understand that organisational isolation inhibits learning. In this paper we are most concerned with the early phases of the development of school networks, but we hope that the material will have wider currency. For example, it should also be appropriate for those who are already involved in an established and successful network and who would like to review and re-focus their activities.

Our work draws directly upon the learning of NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme and aims to represent the lived experience of practitioners who have been actively involved in generating effective networks. The Networked Learning Communities programme set out to generate learning about effective networks on behalf of the wider system, so we hope that this think piece will be of use to you whether you are considering setting up a network, part of a newly formed network or if you are simply interested in finding out about school networks and how they can benefit children in schools. □

Why bother establishing a learning network?

As the DfES (2004) has acknowledged, from the recent experience of schools involved in learning networks, it is clear that schools working together can add significantly to teachers' professional development and children's learning in order to raise standards. Schools involved in networks have seen that networks:

- broaden the teacher expertise and learning opportunities available to pupils
- provide a direct mechanism for sharing expert teacher practice
- provide the diversity, flexibility and range of opportunities that no single school can offer
- nurture creativity, risk-taking and innovation to improve learning and teaching
- lead to improvement in pupils' attainment
- lead to improved teaching

“ The next phase of educational reform will need new methods of delivering excellence and equity in a system which respond to the diverse needs of individual learners and gives schools autonomy to create local solutions. Teachers and schools will need to work together – and networks are a powerful organisational form. School-to-school networks which are focused on learning offer a foundation for genuine transformation based on the knowledge embedded in teaching practice. ”

DfES, 2004

Our knowledge about school-to-school networks and the power they have to innovate and to change perceptions and practice comes not just from education, but also from trends and practices in wider society. Our expectations of services, from banking to hospitals, from shopping to councils, are for a service which is increasingly personalised to our needs. Services are no longer structured around organisational expectations or institutional needs, they are structured around individuals. In education, schools will only be able to meet the needs of all learners if they work in partnership with one another, sharing resources and assembling the right

mix and range of education for each individual learner (Leadbeater, 2004). Networks of schools also enable joint problem-solving and the creation of new practices that are particular to a specific context or group of schools (Hannon, 2004).

So networks enable us to meet the needs of individual learners in our schools. They also enable us to formalise collaborative arrangements and to investigate new forms of leadership. They provide the mechanism for us to learn from our peers and the space to develop effective and innovative practice (Fullan, 2004). Networks increase access to good ideas and they allow groups of professionals to take collective responsibility for children. It is within this context of understanding and aspiration, that we share our knowledge from the Networked Learning Communities programme with you.

Our work within the Networked Learning Group of NCSL has shown us that networks are a powerful tool for school improvement, professional development and for improving learning experiences for children. They provide people in schools with opportunities that they may not have traditionally had when working in isolation. They also provide a safe place for researching, testing and formulating new ideas which help to solve problems. They give schools the opportunities to learn from one another's experience – to work smarter together rather than harder alone.

Developing a successful network, however, demands hard work and commitment. Those who have been involved in networks are clear that the initial stages are exhilarating but tough. The establishment phase requires a complex range of activities that encompasses creating structures, building relationships, developing focus and sharing values. As Michael Fullan points out though, networks are not of themselves a panacea. They are in some ways a necessary but insufficient part of the solution to excellence and equity – success for all children. There are also downsides to the networking enterprise that need to be acknowledged if they are to be overcome. A learning network needs a clear and compelling reason to exist. The network must offer a way of doing things that is better and adds value to tried and tested school processes. □

What effective networks do

1 *Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure*

Effective networks are designed around a compelling idea or an aspirational purpose. They also have an appropriate form and structure.

“ We are especially interested in special needs learning and teaching for our young people and we have many staff who have been in the special school sector for some years now and need enrichment and a real invigoration of the way that they work with young people. So they were very excited to look at the learning opportunities ... and I firmly believe that we need to look at all individuals, whether it be students or teachers and look at ways of how we can develop their potential. I think looking at the opportunities and the diversity available within our learning community set-up is so exciting. ”

Special school headteacher cited in Anderson & Thomas, 2004

Successful networks are those which manage to unite all their school communities around a purpose which is relevant and compelling, whatever the school contexts or current circumstances. This purpose, however expressed, will have at its core raising achievement for pupils. They are also those which have considered how best to structure their network to ensure that all the schools can engage around real work tasks and have the opportunity to build trust with one another through this engagement.

However diverse the schools in your network, it is safe to assume that all of them want to improve the pupil experience and that this is why they have committed to the network. The adults who work in them will want to engage with new ideas if they can see a direct benefit to their pupils. If you are leading the network you will want to work in partnership with other headteachers to identify a common learning focus. There is also evidence that the following practical strategies are helpful in further developing wide reach and engagement in the early stages of network development.

Strategies for developing reach and engagement in school networks

- Ensuring that the initial propositions of networked learning are framed around children's needs.
- Holding a launch event involving as many members of your school communities as possible – this should include all staff and could include governors, pupils and parents.
- Setting up smaller school-to-school enquiry or network work groups involving a broad range of staff, with meetings held at different schools.
- Organising school-to-school visits so that learning transfers easily and rapidly between schools
- Ensuring network structures don't exclude some schools because of their timings or locations.
- Involving pupils in meetings and other activities.

The willingness of individuals to see themselves as learners and to embrace diversity is critical. That is why collaboration, particularly in the early days of network life, requires concerted and focused action. The common elements of successful early collaborative activities such as launch events, inter-school visitations and the establishment of governing structures and processes can be characterised as follows:

- highly visible
- familiar ie within the realm of network members' confidence and comfort-zones
- concerned with building and extending relationships and trust
- provide examples of quick wins and thus potential momentum builders for further activity

It is important to establish the value of networking and working together for a shared purpose. The emphasis in these early collaborative activities is on doing and not necessarily explicitly on networked learning (by which we mean the creation of knowledge for all schools or the transfer of learning from one or more network school to all the network's schools). However, through 'doing together' network members increase opportunities to build relationships and the trust of others. Network members say this is necessary for future learning and innovation both for themselves and the network. These early activities develop a wider involvement and ownership of goals and take network participation beyond a handful of core enthusiasts.

What effective networks do

Networks also need internal leadership to initiate these collaborative opportunities and facilitation to maintain the momentum gained by these early activities and quick wins.

“ Successful facilitators worked as information brokers. They gathered information relevant to the network aspirations and also worked to build infrastructures for disseminating information. They often visited schools personally to inform participants about network activity and accomplishments. ”

Wohlstetter et al, 2003

Creating a shared vision for the network depends on reducing the barriers between people – that’s why it is important to meet in different locations and to offer staff opportunities to get to know each other. It is essential to invite participation and to show that you value everyone’s contributions. Making sure there are opportunities for people in your schools to meet and to have both formal and informal conversations breaks down anxiety and encourages trust. Being clear about your purpose helps everybody involved see the benefits of being part of a network.

“ We had to collaborate with each other! We had developed a joint monitoring/ evaluation plan and job description for strand facilitators and just expected it all to work (which it did at a service level). But we needed a deeper understanding at all levels of the network. This came as we heads started to listen and learn to coach each other, air feelings and frustrations. Each had a small responsibility for the group (conference organisation, minute taking) so they all felt valued and part of the group – not just the co-leaders driving the network. ”

Consultant headteacher

2 Focus on pupil learning

A core principle of the Networked Learning Communities programme is the importance and centrality of a clear focus on pupil learning. We have learnt that it is this that provides the impetus for wide participation and drives the active learning. Providing for pupils’ needs on a wider stage than one school, provides the unifying moral purpose that always underpins successful learning networks. An appropriate learning focus is likely to be housed in appropriate subject content around which powerful learning processes can be built.

The learning focus needs to be widely shared and well understood. Networks benefit from going through a process of self-evaluation that has wide participation. This helps schools gain a clear sense of alignment between the focus of the network and the individual priorities of member schools. This process helps to ensure that the chosen focus matches the lived reality of those working in each of the network’s schools. The relationships and trust that are the essential foundation of successful networks are also built through such work.

In addition to a clear and compelling learning focus, the work with networked learning communities reveals that collaborative activity benefits from the use of a substantive and evidence-informed process for engaging learners. This provides a common field of learning for school-based activity and helps to frame the network’s learning. Co-leaders of existing networks argue that such a vehicle eg Assessment for Learning or thinking skills, provides a common language for inter-school discourse and enables a wider connection to accessible public knowledge and evidence.

The real benefit of being part of a network is the impact the group of schools can have on children and their learning. Whatever the learning focus, what you have decided to work on together should both make the learning experience better for children in your schools and also raise achievement levels. This in turn, enthuses teachers and others who work in schools, and has the potential to involve parents and pupils directly too.

Research has shown that people in networks do unite around those things that they can see will develop and enhance children’s learning, particularly around aspirations that can be better achieved (or only achieved) through working together rather than striving alone.

Your network should be designed around adding a value to pupils' learning that would not be possible were you to work in isolation. Teachers are motivated by purposes that act themselves out in classrooms – and they draw energy from connecting with each other's work and schools.

Successful network activity will be dependent on your group of schools having considered the following elements before you begin your work.

Six elements of preparation for network activity

- 1 Your pupil learning focus should be drawn from school-level data or contextual evidence that all members of your network can access and identify.
- 2 You should be clear about the substantive content area for your pupil learning focus.
- 3 You will need to ensure that you have identified a powerful, evidence-informed pupil learning process to inform the development of your work (eg Assessment for Learning, critical thinking, thinking skills).
- 4 You should use your data to help you define a particular target group for your pupil learning focus.
- 5 When headteachers and teachers have agreed upon the learning focus, you should also be able to define it in ways that are clearly understandable at classroom level – it will need to be observable, coachable, and such that pupils can be asked whether it is making a difference to their learning.
- 6 You should be able to identify a tool or instrument that you can use to baseline pupil achievement. You should also have a timeline with key milestones for assessing the impact of your work.

A shared pupil learning focus is really important to the effectiveness of your network. If all members of your network can answer the question 'what difference is what we are doing likely to make to children in our schools?' your network activity has the greatest chance of success.

3 Create new opportunities for adult learning

Effective school-to-school networks create new opportunities for adult learning. Whilst your pupil learning focus will provide your network activity with a unifying purpose, what is likely to make it sustainable and a real force for improvement is the engagement of the adults in your schools. Adult learning needs to be purposeful, focused and informed. Ultimately it is through teachers and other adults doing things differently (or doing different things) in classrooms that pupils' learning is positively affected.

“Where unsuccessful, team meetings were characterised by the dissemination of information and routine decision-making – such that the outcomes were the same whether participants attended or not. The value of personal attendance (epitomised by contributions to the discussion, interpersonal relationships, shared decision-making and collaborative planning) was a characteristic of the more successful meetings. In these networks, teachers and administrators perceived collaboration as a reward in itself. As one teacher mentioned, “We felt part of something – our views were taken into consideration”.”

Wohlstetter et al, 2003

The adult learning in the network will take place as you embark on a shared investigation of your schools' practice and strategies, but it is important to consider how you can best provide opportunities for the adults to share, validate, analyse and adapt practice across the network. Successful networks make sure that they plan for the time, opportunities and resources that the adults will need to engage in collaborative learning.

What effective networks do

Networks generate the capacity to create new and powerful opportunities for adult learning, allowing practice to cross the boundaries of individual schools and place innovative ideas in the marketplace of knowledge exchange, where they can be traded, refined and verified. Successful learning in this context appears to adhere to a common sense set of principles.

Principles for successful adult learning in school networks

- It provides access to public knowledge.
- It is built upon what learners already know or do.
- It involves social processing.
- It is challenging (but within the learner's zone of proximal development).
- It is based in the context of the learner's work and experience.
- It is coherent and this coherence is clear to the learner.

You may have planned some school-to-school activities as part of a network launch. However, the most effective opportunities for adult learning in networks tend to be dynamic and structured interactions between staff from different schools that centre on the overarching aim or pupil learning focus. These can be called 'networked learning' opportunities. They are the places where teachers come together to engage in real tasks on behalf of the wider network. Evidence suggests that these include the following collaborative activities.

The collaborative activities of adult learning in school networks

- Collective planning (eg steering groups or headteacher groups).
- Joint work groups (eg project teams).
- Joint problem-solving teams (eg focus groups).
- Collaborative enquiry groups (eg enquiry teams).
- Shared professional development activities (learning forums/joint staff days).
- Structured school-to-school visits (eg 'learning walks').
- Collaborative coaching and mentoring (eg lesson study groups/partnerships).

It helps to be clear about what is different and additional about what the adults in your network are going to do. Network activity is a means of studying and learning from what is happening in different schools and a way of improving learning opportunities for pupils. We know that when teachers are engaged in actively researching and enquiring about existing practice, processes and outcomes with teachers from other schools they are more likely to improve their own analytical thinking and be more prepared to take risks. It is an opportunity then to work smarter together not harder alone and also to generate together network-wide knowledge that can have a direct impact on the children in classrooms across all schools.

We know that if headteachers and other senior leaders in schools are prepared to model this kind of collaborative learning, then the network is more likely to be successful. You will need to consider how the senior managers in your network will be able to do this. It may be that you decide to have heads as members on the collaborative enquiry groups, or that headteachers explicitly engage in similar activities to other adults in the network – such as inter-school visits or shared professional development activities. When headteacher groups move beyond meetings and agendas to embrace collaborative learning, some of the following characteristics tend to be found in their work.

The characteristics of collaborative headteacher learning in school networks

- The use of an external facilitator to plan and lead sessions.
- Honouring each other's practice by visiting each other's schools.
- Enquiring into the challenge areas for the network.
- Taking on the evaluation role for the network and generating evidence of impact.
- Visiting other networks and generating accounts of practice for discussion by all headteachers and other staff.

4 Plan and have dedicated leadership and management

Effective networks require planning and dedicated leadership and management. The leadership, internal facilitation and management of your network will be crucial to its development. Research has shown us that the success of a network (particularly in its early stages) is almost uniquely dependent upon the vision, energy and effort of those who take on this leadership role. All organisational structures require tending, and networks are no different. As network structures are more fluid, the leadership of the network is needed to sort and shape the activity, to guide reflection and adaptation, and to help re-focus, to make sure it remains purposeful.

Networked learning communities have demonstrated the significance of shared or co-leadership arrangements (Anderson & Thomas, 2004). Not only does this spread the load and build in leadership succession, it also distributes the leadership function across more than one school location within the network. Shared leadership creates a capacity for dialogue and debate – a dialectic around leadership issues. In some cases, it also allows for co-leaders of different status levels to work together (such as a headteacher from one school, a deputy from another and a CPD co-ordinator from a third).

However, one of the most powerful aspects of networked learning is also the most difficult to plan for. The knowledge about your schools that your network activity will generate, will not just come from senior leaders in schools but from all those working and learning within the network. You will need to make sure that there are systems within your network which encourage everybody to contribute and to feel that their contributions are valued. Successful networks have acknowledged that leadership within the network may not necessarily come from the places it has traditionally been found in the past. They have also been able to find systems which distribute leadership throughout the network. In this way, it becomes possible to ensure that all adults within the network take responsibility for creating, validating and spreading knowledge about what works. Those networks which report the greatest progress during their first year or so, are generally the ones that have planned for distributed leadership from the earliest stage.

This doesn't mean that there isn't a role for senior leaders in networks. In fact, the involvement of headteachers and senior managers in the schools is crucial to the development of the network, both in terms of the priority and the profile network activity is given in schools. We also know that distributed leadership only thrives where there is effective senior leadership – it requires a mandate and supportive conditions. Planning for this distributed leadership means giving key staff in each school clear roles and providing them with appropriate support structures. It also means planning to develop teachers, and others as leaders, trainers and enquirers.

The network activity will, of course, need managing. Effective networks have specific structural characteristics where there is clarity about which people will take on management responsibility and how much time they will spend. Again, evidence also tells us that communication strategies are crucial. These will need to be planned, both within and between schools. Networked learning groups will need to be timetabled, visits co-ordinated, decision-making systems established and outcomes communicated.

A timetable for the early development of your network and the identification of key milestones you are hoping to reach are also important in the planning and management of your network. These milestones enable celebration of success to occur and provide internal and external evidence of achievement. You will also want to be clear about the process for reviewing the progress of the network and about the data you are likely to need to be able to do this.

“As educational networks become a larger and more influential part of the educational landscape, it is increasingly important to understand them organisationally as well as to understand their work, their influence, and their effects on both teachers and students.”

Lieberman & Wood, 2003

What effective networks do

From the work of the network learning communities we have discovered that thinking about success criteria and measuring impact are important considerations for any new network. Many networks begin with great energy and enthusiasm for the work and arrive at awareness of the need to understand the difference they are making much later.

Defining the pupil learning focus, building structures to facilitate adult and pupil learning and initiating new or different leadership configurations are all linked to the success of a network's learning. Through our work we are also aware that networks need to be clear about how and why all of these things impact on the learning of children. Establishing a structure for monitoring and evaluating network progress at the beginning of a network's life is, then, as important as establishing the network itself.

Many network leaders agree that deciding on evaluation at the outset is a worthwhile and meaningful task that helps to maintain focus on the factors that ultimately drive the learning forward. It means that a network can continue to grow and develop by learning from its own successes and failures and also that it is able to demonstrate and transfer the effective practices it has developed.

This is not to say that the task of evaluation is straightforward. School-level data and performance measures can be used at the network level to give bottom line indications of impact. You would want to know for instance that pupils' attainment overall was rising and that the achievement gaps across a learning community were narrowing. You would also want to be in a position to share information that indicates any differentials in success across the network of schools, so that the learning strategy can be adapted and leadership can be responsive. In addition, individual networks are likely to have their own contextually specific attainment targets, which might include motivational factors (eg emotional intelligence, self-esteem, behaviour, attendance) or learning skills (eg reading, learning to learn, meta-cognitive skills, writing).

Evaluating the nature of the learning is also an important consideration at the outset. The processes of networked learning are distinctive and network leaders will need to be clear about the way these processes work for the benefit of learners. □

End piece

All of the suggestions put forward in this paper have been drawn from the experience of real networks of schools working together. The intention is not to impose or replicate any one particular form of organisation or network design. Rather, it is an opportunity to share learning that has already been generated in order that it can inform your planning.

Beginning a network is an exciting opportunity for your schools to develop local solutions. It will provide you with the capacity to reinvent structures and practices in ways that you know will be more appropriate for your children.

However, it isn't a simple or straightforward journey. In fact, we know that it is hard. It involves collective commitment, discipline and effective network leadership. Experience has also shown us that all networks need to plan to ensure that they are clear about the systems, roles and responsibilities which will enable them to develop and flourish. If you are able to do this when your network is in its infancy, and if you are able to build from the existing knowledge-base, you will find that the journey together, whilst being no less challenging, will be an exciting and productive one.

Being part of a network is stimulating, it offers the prospect of learning new things in different ways for the benefit of all the pupils in the network. It can, however, be a somewhat unpredictable journey which doesn't always end up where you think it might. Whilst we don't claim to be able to provide you with a map for that journey, what we do hope is that this paper will provide you with some signposts and directions that will help you on your way. □

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