

www.ncsl.org.uk

What are we **learning about...?**

Establishing a network of schools

The first 200 days in a school network

Illustrative examples of what establishing a
network of schools looks like in practice.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

The first 200 days in a school network

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of the early phases of network development. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when 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. However, we do know about some things that seem 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 in school networks, it is possible to identify the factors that successful networks have in common.

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.*

Considering some of these factors in the process of beginning to plan for establishing a network will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is known from current thinking and practice. In other words, as Leadbetter (2004)¹ has described, it will assist in moving ‘from best practice to next practice’.

The accounts of practice in this series explore in different ways and with different emphases, these key elements of effective networks and in so doing they help to explain what establishing a network of schools looks like in practice. □

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution to the generation and publication of these accounts of practice: Michelle Anderson, Tom Elkins, Terry Hadyn, Chris Kubiak, Jasbir Mann, Duncan O’Leary, Barbara Spender and Non Worrall.

**Darren Holmes and Louise Johns-Shepherd,
Networked Learning Group, Lead Developers**

¹ Leadbetter, C., 2004, Keynote address to the Leading Network of Schools Conference, Birmingham, October 2004

The first 200 days in a school network

This account of practice is drawn from the experience of six networked learning communities. It helps to show the ways in which successful school networks have demonstrated a common set of features consistent with the four elements of effective networks described opposite.

What follows will be of particular interest to those who wish to learn from the experience of other successful networks and apply this learning to the planning of activity and the generation of ideas within newly established or existing networks.

Six networks: the first 200 days

This account of practice reports upon the outcomes of research undertaken into the first two terms of activity and development in six very different networks in Warwickshire, Milton Keynes, Suffolk, Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Derby. Three of the networks are cross phase: two consist of secondary schools only, and one operates as three clusters, centering on primary, secondary and cross phase groupings of schools. By examining the documentation generated as part of the submission process, records of visits carried out by facilitators, principally through interviews with the co-leaders of each network, we have created a narrative of each network's progress towards achieving their vision statement. The following analysis presents the data gathered on the networks' intentions, decisions and activities through the filter of four criteria that inform good network design. We explore how six newly established networks demonstrated these criteria in their design and practice, so providing indicators and examples that could prove useful to those involved in planning and developing new networks.

1 Designing around a compelling purpose and appropriate form and structure

Identifying the compelling ideas which informed the original submissions of the six networks reveals not only individual, local aspirations, but also common emphases on improving the quality of teaching and learning of all network members, adults and children, and developing distributed leadership roles (see fig 1).

All six of the networks demonstrate a clear commitment to engage all staff in the networking process. **Network 4** has paired primary teachers and teaching assistants as lead learners and **Network 6**, for example, has generated a support staff group which is proving to be hugely influential at the level of exchanging knowledge and information through personal contact. One of the co-leaders of this network feels that their administrative staff 'have become the umbilical cord of the whole thing.'

The different pattern of membership of the six networks is very apparent. Their reasons for joining together highlight the ways in which networks develop via patterns of combination and collaboration which embody specifically local contexts.

Fig 1

Statements showing networks' compelling purposes

Network 1 ten schools: six primary and four secondary	Network 2 eight secondary schools	Network 3 24 schools in three clusters: seven secondary, six primary, one secondary and ten primary	Network 4 12 schools: one secondary, two middle, eight primary and one pupil referral unit	Network 5 nine secondary schools and one tertiary college	Network 6 15 schools: five secondary, two special and eight primary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To accelerate the improvement in standards by improving the quality of teaching and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop confident, powerful learners with infectious enthusiasm and commitment to excellence and to the development of leadership potential within schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage participant schools to develop transformational pedagogies and to share the processes and outcomes of their work with other partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing leadership roles for all teaching staff, pupils and parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To extend and develop access to learning for all members – students, teachers and all support staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing approaches to learning, teaching and assessment likely to promote social and economic inclusion.

The first 200 days in a school network

Fig 2

Do you have a powerful pupil learning focus to inform the development of your work?

Harnessing the potential of collaboration whilst reducing the damaging aspects of competition between schools is evident here. The adults are determined to give all students access to the expertise available within the whole partnership, rather than just from their own school. They are consciously shaping a qualitatively different educational experience. In the words of one of the co-leaders of **Network 4**: *'I think it's changing the whole culture of the way we're thinking and the future. When the funding stops, it will carry on'.*

The networks recorded their plans to use this diversity, finding ways to address local needs but also acknowledging the national agenda. The emphasis on equality of access, learning about learning and generating genuine learning communities is powerfully evident,

underlining a common intention to address the need to ensure that the inequalities of provision and standards achieved by pupils are gradually but deliberately dismantled.

2 Establishing and maintaining a focus upon pupil learning

It is undoubtedly challenging to move from an 'own school' perspective, to seeing pupil learning and attainment through the focus of a network of schools. An analysis of the sections on the pupil learning focus in the original NLC submissions of these networks throws light upon their thinking, through a variety of methods used to identify their focus. The range of foci are shown below (see fig 2).

Network 1	Network 2	Network 3	Network 4	Network 5	Network 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Critical thinking / understanding processes of learning. ● Leading towards independence in learning and building towards ownership of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding learning styles combined with the use of value added data and target setting to create challenging expectations. ● Specific link to Assessment for Learning and peer mentoring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enabling pupils to understand how they learn. ● Enabling pupils to give clear feedback about their learning. ● Particular focus on formative assessment covering affective and cognitive domains. ● Development of ICT. 	Four areas: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 How we learn 2 Assessment for Learning 3 Learning mentors 4 Pupil responsibilities in school and network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing appropriate and effective use of ICT to support learning at classroom, school and network level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning to lead programme. ● Student leadership group. ● Students as researchers. ● <i>Including the Future</i> project with EBP.

The need to be very specific about the measures put in place (and having quantitative and qualitative success criteria against which to judge them) is underlined by the targets listed by **Network 6** for their pupil learning focus:

How will you demonstrate evidence of progress?

- Target 1** Average boy-girl attainment gap at KS2, KS3 and KS4 – reduced by five average points at each key stage while overall average points scores rise for both boys and girls.
- Target 2** Indicative gifted & talented attainment targets – three per cent average network increase in English levels/grades over 2003 baseline by 2006 at KS2 L4+, KS3 L7+, KS4 A/A*. Four per cent average increase in maths at each of these points. Average gap between girls' and boys' performance is greater in maths than in English. We believe that through focusing on raising achievement through improving teaching and learning styles, this will have an effect on gifted & talented students' core subject results.
- Target 3** Observation, questionnaire and interviews reveal high levels of communication, reflection and leadership skills in students.
- Target 4** Students are more able to undertake independent learning activities.
- Target 5** Teacher enquiry projects will be the norm throughout our network by 2007.
- Target 6** Most students, by 2007, will be gaining a new LEA accreditation in student leadership and the new student researcher diploma through the University of Warwick.

3 Creating new opportunities for adult learning

The intentions and practice of all six networks indicate the perceived potential of the opportunities for adult learning offered by joining a network (see fig 3). Whether by **Network 1's** development of cross-school improvement groups, through enquiry partnerships in **Networks 2, 3, 4 and 6**, or via the year-long programme of network-devised and delivered CPD of **Networks 4 and 5**, there is a determination to develop strategies that offer opportunities to all. In **Networks 1, 4 and 6** the partnership between teachers and teaching assistants has proved particularly powerful, building a collaborative approach within classrooms that reinforces and contributes to the development of the networks' social capital. **Network 2's** priority to 'increase the confidence of staff and students as independent learners through the development of expertise in peer coaching and pupil mentoring', neatly links the adult and student dimensions, a characteristic of many successful networks.

The level of headteacher participation in the adult learning opportunities varies across the six networks. The primary headteachers in **Network 1** are very strongly involved in the work of the school improvement groups, but their secondary equivalents are far more distant.

Networks 2 and 3 have extended peer mentoring opportunities and headteacher forums that already existed within their LEA and **Network 6** has developed shadowing opportunities for heads as well as constructing an inter-school generic Leadership for Inclusive Learning programme open to all heads. For the headteachers in **Network 4**, originally seen as giving permission to networking, as opposed to generating collaboration, the learning plans and outcomes of the network now absorb nine tenths of their former business and administration oriented meeting agendas.

By building on established links with external partners, particularly personnel from LEAs and HEIs, but also a range of highly regarded consultants, the networks are determined to offer as many adult learning opportunities as possible. However, they also carefully deploy their internal expertise to mentor, coach and train increasing numbers of staff. **Network 1** has skillfully, via the agency of the LEA, accessed DfES CPD funding of sabbaticals to give additional time release for two of their school improvement co-ordinators. **Network 3** has an HEI as one of its leading partners. It is therefore possible for the staff of the schools to access the analytical, writing and reporting skills of their HEI colleagues in demonstrating evidence of staff learning and professional development.

Fig 3

Creating new learning opportunities for adults

Network 1	Network 2	Network 3	Network 4	Network 5	Network 6
<i>Enhancing teacher ownership of own learning with particular focus on cross-phase developments and teaching assistants:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cross-phase appointment of school improvement co-ordinators. ● Teaching assistants involved. ● Conferences to share what is being learnt. ● Cross-school enquiries to identify good practice. 	<i>Staff learning through a coaching and action research project:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaborative dimension within and across schools. ● Opportunities to observe colleagues in classrooms in other schools. ● Funded joint action research projects. 	<i>Collaborative enquiry and research into teaching approaches that maximise pupil engagement and motivation:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sharing enquiry outcomes across sites and phases. ● Training and support from HEI partner. ● Opportunities for coaching in innovative approaches to brain-based learning. 	<i>31 lead learners identified – teaching assistants are a particular focus for growth:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research opportunities available to all lead learners, teachers and assistants. ● Sharing outcomes across schools. ● CPD packages to meet needs of network members. 	<i>Increased CPD opportunities with particular emphasis on middle leadership development:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity to learn from and with adults from other schools. 	<i>Developing leadership capacity of all adults:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Subject teacher network across schools. ● Access to HEI expertise to extend leadership skills. ● Leadership conferences. ● Inclusive learning teacher enquiry projects. ● Support staff leadership group.

The first 200 days in a school network

4 Ongoing planning and dedicated leadership and management

The internal leadership and management arrangements of the six sample networks are interestingly diverse, each one highlighting specific ways of addressing their local contexts (see fig 4).

This lack of an identifiable pattern would seem to indicate that leadership and management arrangements for networks necessarily should be individual. Choices have to be made about which pattern of organisation will be most effective and efficient in particular circumstances. The ways in which network decisions are made and financed also reflect the different constitutions of the steering groups and the roles of the co-leaders. Within each network the commitment, energy and vision of the co-leaders has proved vital to progress. They are the network's work engine, the levers and drivers of change. Their challenge can be encapsulated in the words of the co-leader of **Network 6**: *'to ensure it's a triumph of reality over spin – ensuring that it's as meaningful for a seven year-old as a 17 year-old'*.

In order to meet their objectives, all of the co-leaders are intensely aware of the need to manage the budget to best effect for all network members. Although there is no single approach evident across the practice of all six, there is a significant preference for not distributing the budget

to all partners but to hold the funds centrally and institute a bidding or suggestions process to facilitate networked activity. Some activity is promoted by incentivisation.

All of the networks devised a launch conference, three using a shared CPD day, which guaranteed the attendance of all adult members, and three held twilight sessions which were attended by representatives from all partners.

Network 4 included a group of students, who ran a student voice workshop.

Continuing communication with all staff, sharing the developing learning within the network, have proved to be the focus of much of the co-leaders' and steering groups' discussions in the early months of their existence. Strategies adopted include:

- information giving in staff meetings in all schools
- newsletters – electronic and printed versions
- video conferencing
- intranet, websites, e-groups and e-mail
- cascading through group meetings of practitioner enquirers and SIG co-ordinators

All of the networks continue to experiment with formal and informal channels of communication, hoping to hit upon the best solution to spread the growing knowledge and information across the network effortlessly. It remains a significant challenge for them all. □

Fig 4

Network leadership and management

Network 1	Network 2	Network 3	Network 4	Network 5	Network 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 4: – three co-leaders plus LEA representative – meet half termly. ● Two primary heads and secondary deputy – not dedicated time. ● SIG co-ordinators – responsible for running cross-school projects. Co-ordinators from each school meet more frequently but in non-dedicated time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 10: – two co-leaders plus SIG co-ordinators from each school. ● Twilight meetings every six weeks – voluntary commitment of time. ● Co-leaders, deputy head and assistant head, meet as often as possible – often weekly. ● Funding made available to schools to pay for their time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 4: – three co-leaders and consultant – meet one afternoon half termly. ● Primary head, HEI partner and secondary deputy – not dedicated time. ● Each co-leader acts in isolation to co-ordinate clusters – email contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 14: – all headteachers plus co-leaders – one co-leader is head. ● Three co-leaders, one primary head, two deputies – meet at least weekly. Their teaching timetables are arranged to facilitate this but no increase in non-contact time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 11: – headteachers meet half termly – NLC as agenda item, serviced by co-leaders but this is a continuation of previous arrangement. ● Two co-leaders, deputies – have rarely met due to illness of one. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steering Group 15: – representative from each school meets half-termly. ● Three co-leaders: head and deputy from one secondary school, head from primary – meet regularly as and when needed, often early morning in voluntary time.

End note

For all of the networks, their own measure of success lies in student outcomes. These are measured quantitatively, for example, in end of key stage scores, or qualitatively, for example in terms of student motivation, involvement in learning and self-esteem. By setting out a detailed plan for each year which expands upon their three year timeline, each network has committed its members to a clear cycle of planning, implementation and review, which is captured in both internal monitoring and evaluation processes and in significant network events such as annual network conferences. Annual review processes provide an external perspective that brings a broader awareness of both individual network's and other networks' achievements, dilemmas and future plans.

The six networks profiled here characterise the rich diversity of networked learning communities. Their members are united in their determination that their school network will become embedded in the lives and aspirations of all of the adults and children in their schools. Two pervasive characteristics are consistent across all six networks studied during their first 200 days. The first is that network activity is challenging, uncertain and runs against the grain of previous practice. The second is that it is at the same time motivating and inspiring, because it offers the potential to achieve real gains for pupils – and therefore for everyone who works in network schools.

At the time of writing – after almost 800 days – all six networks are further on with their journey and equally committed. □

Contact details:

Contact: Non Worrall,
Networked Learning Group, NCSL

Email: non.worrall@ncsl.org.uk

What are we learning about...?

The 'What are we learning about...?' series is designed to make public the learning that has emerged from NLCs in the last two years.

The first six titles in the series will focus on:

What are we learning about...?

- LEA involvement in school networks
- **Establishing a network of schools**
- The impact of school networks
- Professional development within school networks
- Leadership within school networks
- Sustaining a network of schools

To order a copy of this publication and others in this series, please email **nlc@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference **WAWLA/Establishing a network of schools**

National College for School Leadership

Networked Learning Group
Derwent House
Cranfield University Technology Park
University Way, Cranfield
Bedfordshire
MK43 0AZ

T: 08707 870 370
F: 0115 872 2401
E: nlc@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc



National College for School Leadership