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Community leadership in networks

“Organisations can sometimes appear impenetrable to those on the ‘outside’. Networks are less so. That is why we need to understand more about community leadership in networks and its role in building the all important relationships within and between schools and their communities.”

John West-Burnham

Community Leadership Strategy

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

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Community leadership in networks

The English education system is no stranger to community education, nor to the practice of networking and collaboration. There is a long and rich tradition of community schools, as well as a strong commitment to extra-curricular out-of-hours learning, family learning, and increasingly, networked learning. The development of full-service extended schools in England and the programme of similar reforms in Scotland and Wales are now attempting to build on this rich tradition within a coherent policy framework. Schools are at the heart of this new agenda which is rooted in a commitment to social justice and its attendant need to reduce inequality and increase the life chances of all children. These factors create a new landscape for community leadership both within education and beyond.

The Department for Education and Skills *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004) and the *Every Child Matters* (2004) agenda place an emphasis upon public service reform centred on the personalisation of learning and the improvement of the delivery of services to all children. When taken together with the inclusion of 'strengthening community' as a component of the proposed new standards for headteachers (DfES, 2004a), we are presented with a national policy picture which provides a clear rationale for the development of community leadership within a networked context. In this regard networks are seen to provide a new and dynamic means of connecting up the work of schools, communities, multi-agency partners and a broader range of educators from beyond the school gates.

Our work in supporting the development of community leadership has shown us that the use of the full-service extended school model has proved to be a powerful catalyst for building networks which requires us to think differently about how we work, learn and lead together. For many, current approaches are rooted in and bound by, organisational systems. What is clear, from even a cursory glance at the current landscape of public sector reform, is that this approach will no longer work for a system which is increasingly networked, inclusive and community-oriented. In the course of our work, discussions with leaders of extended schools have emphasised that 'doing business as we have always done it' is unlikely to have any

effect in creating a more inclusive, holistic approach to the delivery of public services. At every level, we need to re-think our approach: how we consult, how we engage others, how we meet together, how we celebrate and how we lead.

For over two years NCSL has been supporting and researching networking and collaboration within the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme and more recently, the Community Leadership Network (CLN) with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of community leadership in networks through practice, enquiry, reflection and improvement.

In this short paper we share our developing understanding about community leadership in networks, drawing directly upon the learning of NLCs and the CLN. We outline why the development of community leadership in networks is important and look at how it involves four key dimensions of activity.

Four characteristics of effective community leadership in networks

- 1 Sharing leadership with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions.
- 2 Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred.
- 3 Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making-for-action by all.
- 4 Designing local strategies for long term system-wide change.

We hope that this think piece will be of use to you if you are considering developing community leadership activities within networks, schools or other organisations, or if you are simply interested in finding out more about community leadership in networks and its potential benefits for all. □

Why develop community leadership in networks?

Imagine a group of people drawn from a range of backgrounds – from the voluntary, community, education, health and social care sectors. Imagine those people sitting down together to share their ambitions, hopes and dreams for a local area. Eavesdrop on their conversation and the possibilities it throws up – “*What’s to stop us developing a virtual extended school ‘without walls’ that embraces the whole town?*” “*How can we use this as an opportunity to make sure that local services really meet the needs of local people?*” Listen in to their frustrations – “*Why don’t we trust each other more?*” “*Why do I get the sense that we can talk all we like, but nothing really significant will happen?*” Check out the stance that people take. How much time is spent on defending and explaining our positions or exploring and reflecting on the positions others are taking? Who is doing most of the talking ...and the listening? Who is part of the network...and who isn’t?

These conversations and the work that networks do together are the hallmark of NCSL’s Community Leadership Network. The networks involved have spent time exploring what community leadership means and have arrived at a definition that places relationships, connections and taking action at its centre.

“Community leadership mobilises, encourages, connects and supports people to take action and make a collective difference to children, young people and families.”

This definition has been developed in the belief that networks create new opportunities for mobilising people and for providing them with support and encouragement to take action together in a way which really makes a difference to children, families and young people. If you had been part of this discussion you would have felt the sense of urgency and the passion that accompanied their debate. There are a number of reasons why this might be so.

The Department for Education and Skills *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004) is entitled ‘Putting people at the heart of public services’. The strategy 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. In addition, the push for greater personalisation of services across the public sector emphasises flexibility and choice and the importance of engaging stakeholders in their own development. In education, this means looking at the

learning experiences and choices young people have in both the formal and informal curriculum, in school and in other contexts, facilitated by teachers, support staff and a broader range of educators from beyond the school sector.

Alongside the *Five Year Strategy*, the *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) programme of reform has engaged professionals who work with children in a rich and significant debate on the better delivery of services to children, with the aim of ensuring that “*every child and young person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and no child slips through the net*”. Taken together, these reform initiatives provide opportunities for networks to support and promote a personalised approach to learning, explore multi-agency collaboration, work with a range of partners and promote a broader, more distributed view of leadership across schools and communities. This broader view of leadership will be different from that exercised in organisations and in networks made up exclusively of school members.

This broader role for education, characterised by a growing partnership with other sectors and communities, has been given further impetus through the recent consultation on the new national standards for headteachers, which includes a proposed standard entitled ‘Strengthening community’.

Strengthening community

- Schools exist in a distinctive social context which has a direct impact on what happens inside the school.
- School leadership should commit to engaging with the internal and external school community to secure equity and entitlement.
- Headteachers should work collaboratively at both strategic and operational levels with parents and carers and across multiple agencies for the well-being of all children.
- Headteachers should be aware that school improvement and community development are interdependent and that they share responsibility for leadership of the wider educational system.

DfES, 2004a

The collective impetus generated by these strands of national policy provides a clear rationale for the development of community leadership within a networked context. A school which is not actively part of a network that includes other schools, community organisations and agencies, and is not actively pursuing full community engagement and leadership, would find it very difficult to operationalise the strengthening of community as indicated in the national standards for headteachers, or to develop a connected approach to the personalising of learning reflected in the *Five Year Strategy* and *Every Child Matters*.

Practitioners and policy makers in England are seeing trends of increasing inequality that are worrying. A headline summarising a speech made in 2003 by David Miliband, the then Minister for School Standards, described how *“Birth is all in the UK”*. He noted that the trajectory of a child’s achievement is largely set at around 22 months. He further noted that where you are born, the family you are born into, the neighbourhood you live in and the school you go to, still have the greatest impact on your life chances. The gap between those who are achieving in England and those who are not, as measured by General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades, is growing ever wider, with the 2004 results showing the gap widening still further. In other words, we have an education system which is characterised by high excellence where young people are getting better exam results than ever before, but low equity where the gap between those who achieve and those who don’t, is widening.

As John West-Burnham and George Otero (2004) suggest, a system characterised by continued high excellence *and* high equity can only be created through educational leadership that builds social capital beyond the school gates. It is in this regard that networks are seen to provide a potentially powerful context for the development of community leadership. Nurturing of social capital is seen to be more easily accommodated when the focus for collective action and engagement is networked in its orientation, rather than bound by the strictures of traditional ways of organising on an individual or institutional basis.

“ Organisations can sometimes appear impenetrable to those on the ‘outside’. Networks are less so. That is why we need to understand more about community leadership in networks and its role in building the all important relationships within and between schools and their communities. ” □

The characteristics of effective community leadership in networks

1 *Sharing leadership with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions*

There are indications that networks can provide more opportunities for community, agency and family involvement than single organisations. Networks ought to be, by their very nature, more open, more fluid and more accessible. Many of the current networked learning communities link people who are similar in crucial respects – they link schools, classrooms and teachers around a common core purpose of improving learning and teaching. That's the plus side.

The down side is that, for some, these networks can appear inward-looking and exclusive. In building a sense of belonging, network members have become bonded aspirationally through a sort of professional 'superglue', symbolically defined by the name the network gives itself, the logo it adopts, its processes and actions. But in working very hard at this necessary bonding, they may have created the very conditions that exclude others who can't connect in the same way. To extend the superglue analogy – 'it doesn't bond plastic and glass' – just as this approach to building network membership and participation on an inclusive basis can't bond school and community.

Some networks started their journey believing they could take the current network and 'graft' the community dimension on to it. It soon became very clear that this would not work and would be seen for what it was – tokenistic and school dominated. What was identified from this early learning was the need for a strategy for sharing leadership within the network more inclusively, with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions.

How then might networks help to create new models of leadership that move from 'bonding' to 'bridging', from connecting inward to connecting outward? There are already strong models of co-leadership in networked learning communities that encourage shared and distributed leadership across a network. It does, of course, beg the question "Shared by whom?" Network members are becoming more skilled at finding points of connection

that link needs and aspirations, so everyone can buy into a shared vision, process and outcome. A recent series of seminars entitled 'Better together' explored the sort of leadership behaviours that support this bridging – what John West-Burnham refers to as '*Level four leadership*.' This kind of leadership operates across a community rather than being institutionally focused and is at the heart of the work of the CLN.

Level four 'bridging leaders' are characterised by:

- a focus on student leadership to promote school – community champions
- a focus on families – empowering, engaging and involving them
- leading a range of people involved in educating themselves and others
- advocating a personalised approach to learning and ready to experiment with new approaches to learning and teaching
- wholly focused on growing leaders from a range of contexts
- an unshakeable belief in the capacity of people to mobilise, take action and achieve

Robert Putnam *et al.* (2003) urge us to find the 'on ramp' that helps people to connect. They also share with us what we all know, the need to be ready for 'the slow boring of hard boards', in other words, bridging, partnership building and social change takes time and trust – and lots of it. The early work of the CLN demonstrates that networks do indeed create more 'on ramps' to enable more connections to be made, but we also know we need to shift our time horizons from weeks and months to years and decades, if we are to stick with the necessary sustaining and building of connections that these diverse networks require.

2 *Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred*

Our work has shown that one important component of effective community leadership in networks is the creation of a context for collaborative working which builds social capital on an inclusive basis. As Field (2003) describes, the theory of social capital can be simply summed up in two words: 'relationships matter'. In putting these collaborative working arrangements in place, the challenge is to create entire networks that build and do their business through 'bridging', not 'bonding'. This is hard – homogenous networks make connective strategies easier to employ. Diverse networks need to use strategies that will help to identify points of connection and commonality within the perceived diversity.

One strategy which does seem to have worked in creating the sort of 'bridging' relationships and processes described, is that of establishing clarity of purpose, where collaborative working within the network coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred. Networks that know why they are collaborating together and what a good outcome would look like are experiencing more success. Networks that spend time allowing everyone involved to share 'good outcome visions' through stories, pictures, music and words, build an identity through common purpose.

The desire from the education domain is to see better learning outcomes as the natural point of connection across the community, school and other agencies, but this is not always the case. In this regard, educational professionals need to address their levels of comfort in sticking with points of connection that may not be directly relevant to raising standards, such as the local environment, but which indirectly have a significant role to play in embracing a wider definition of a child-centred focus for their work eg local engagement in environmental projects, agenda 21 local school groups, volunteering and mentoring programmes, young apprenticeships to local environmental agencies and groups.

The early work of the Community Leadership Network suggests that there are a number of other strategies which have proved to be powerful in developing effective community leadership in networks through collaborative working which is characterised by 'bridging' relationships, processes and actions.

Strategies for 'bridging' through collaborative work

- **Who we are** is a stronger point of connection than what we do. We need to get out from behind our professional roles.
- **Rituals build connection.** Eating, celebrating and 'checking in' together as people whenever we meet, fosters relationships and builds connections.
- **Use common spaces** for common encounters – not schools.
- **Explore the art of dialogue.** How we talk to each other, the questions we ask, our ability to listen without resistance and our commitment to explore rather than defend or explain, should characterise our communication.
- **Celebrate the small wins.** Nothing builds success like success. In networks, one individual's success is everyone's success and we need to find ways of celebrating this. Start events with 'good news', end with 'an appreciation', acknowledge everyone's contribution and keep people coming back for more.

The characteristics of effective community leadership in networks

3 *Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making-for-action by all*

A third characteristic, which we have found to be evident in the practice of effective community leadership in networks, is that of joint planning and dialogue. Returning to the CLN's definition of community leadership presented earlier – *“Community leadership mobilises, encourages, connects and supports people to take action and make a collective difference to children, young people and families”* – we are able to see that it is the action-orientation of such communal planning and dialogue which makes it distinctive. In this way, a core component of the conduct of collaborative planning and dialogue is the promotion of active participation in *decision-making-for-action* by all network participants on an inclusive basis. In our work within the CLN and with NLCs, this has been recognised as one of the key characteristics of ‘doing things differently’ in developing approaches to community leadership in a networked context.

It is in this area that the greatest challenges are still to be faced. Some headteachers are concerned about power relationships affecting the development of successful partnerships that go beyond schools. They are aware that they are ‘reading their community’ through the lens of the school or schools within a network, and either professionalising or pathologising what they see. They wish to move from doing things *for* the community - to engaging in joint learning and joint action *with* the community.

The New South Wales Department of Planning (2003) has developed a useful ‘engagement continuum’ which is helpful in understanding how this shift can be achieved. It describes the objectives and actions involved in moving through the stages of informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering (for details see www.tamarackcommunity.ca). This model demonstrates that the level of public impact is increased as one moves from a system that informs the public, to one that truly empowers them by placing decision-making in their hands.

Amongst those in the Community Leadership Network the following strategies have emerged as significant in enacting the principle of participation for action within their community leadership practice.

Strategies for developing joint planning and dialogue

- **Focus on bridging rather than bonding behaviours.** Use all means of communication including word of mouth and allow time for people to tell their stories to build points of connection.
- **Develop and distribute leadership** which allows people to say “I’ll do that” and know that they have the responsibility, authority and support to get it done.
- **Explore the practice of dialogue** to facilitate engagement, planning and active participation. Conduct ‘community conversations’ where the focus and the outcomes are open.
- **Start with people and relationships**, not systems and structures, which allow for developing collective aspirations and moves to action – “Who are we?” “What’s worth learning together?” “How are we going to do that?”
- **Look for ‘learnable moments’** that demonstrate leadership. Constantly ask: “What are we learning from this?” “What is this telling us?” “What are the hidden messages?”
- **Model the giving and receiving of feedback** at every opportunity and remain genuinely open to the critical appraisal of others.

4 Designing local strategies for long term system-wide change

The territory is complex and we need maps which allow us to connect the strategic work with the local work and the individual worries, desires and talents of people, with national strategies and outcomes. The NCSL community leadership strategy framework has been used by networks to shape their leadership focus and direct their work. We believe that community leadership is practised through four dimensions and within four domains (see figure 1). These key features of the strategy are recognised as being important in building community leadership in networks in ways which enable local strategies to be designed for long term system-wide change.

It is the interdependence of each of the domains of community leadership and the connective processes drawn from the centre of the diagram that gives the strategy its energy. They provide the context whereby the potential impact of local initiatives developed in each domain might most effectively inform system-level change.

From our work in the Community Leadership Network and with the NLCs involved, we have learned that adopting a connected, networked approach to activity in each of these domains of community leadership has the potential to create new knowledge, tools, relationships, processes and actions, in ways not possible via a singular focus on any one domain of the strategy.

As Demos (2002) has described *“a focus on one or two aspects of teaching and learning will not build the system-wide capacity for continuous adaptation and improvement upon which long term success depends”*. The development of community leadership in networks as it has been described throughout this think piece takes this finding as its starting point, where it is recognised that networks promote leadership development aimed at encouraging change through learning at multiple levels of the system within, between and beyond the education domain. □

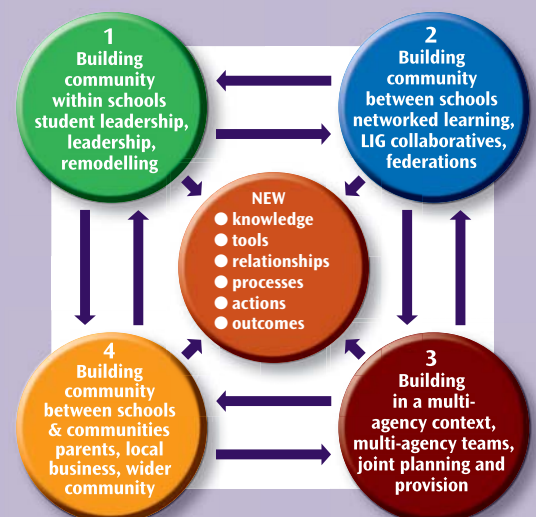
Figure 1

NCSL Community Leadership Strategy

The four community leadership dimensions

- 1 Leadership of purpose** – child, family and community focused: how do you practise leadership of purpose?
- 2 Leadership of orientation** – improving standards, well being and social justice: what is your leadership orientation and how do you practise this?
- 3 Leadership of place** – geographical not institutional: where do you practise leadership?
- 4 Leadership of style** – partnership-oriented and distributed: what leadership styles do you use?

The four community leadership domains



(NCSL, 2004)

End piece

It may be simplistic to say that leading in an institutional context is specific, focused and largely controlled, whilst leading in a community context is diffuse and complex, but this gets us some way toward understanding the challenges we face as we make the required shift towards embracing the simultaneous demands of school improvement, school-to-school collaboration and community engagement within the current period of public service development and reform.

The current networked learning community model may or may not be the answer. However, the community leadership practices of the NLCs and other networks from across the country which have been drawn upon to inform the evidence-base for this think piece are truly pioneering. They are asking questions, they are allowing themselves to be disturbed by what they hear, and they are demonstrating genuine struggle in the work they are doing. From this struggle new models of leadership are emerging characterised by: people and relationships, not roles and responsibilities; by engagement and empowerment, not consultation and information; by dialogue, not defence; and by a genuine desire to 'tell the truth' and 'keep our word', hard though that sometimes may be.

Our challenge is to create 'bonded' organisations that work as organisations and give a sense of belonging to the people who live and work there, but at the same time to engage in 'bridging', so that school-community-family-agency engagement and collective action can be part of our professional and personal lives. From our work in developing community leadership in action, networks are beginning to show themselves as one effective route-way to achieving this long term aim, and in so doing, they point the way towards a new direction for community leadership within what is increasingly characterised as the networked landscape of the future. □

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