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What are we
learning about...?
Sustaining a network of schools

Distributed leadership roles

An illustrative account of what sustaining
a network looks like in practice.

NCSL National College for
School Leadership

Distributed leadership roles

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of sustaining a network of schools. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing effective and, therefore, sustainable networks.

> ❝ *Constant change, both at the school level and the system level is a given in our education system. Sustainability of a network of schools is therefore best and most usefully understood as being dependent upon a number of capacity building functions within the network's design. Sustaining a network is not about maintaining the status quo, it is about building the capacity to respond to change.* ❞

NCSL, 2006

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. By drawing upon their experience and that of others who are actively involved in creating sustainable school networks, it is possible to identify what sustainability within networks looks like in practice and look at how it involves three key dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity.

Three dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity:

1 Network development

2 Adaptive change

3 Network leadership

The accounts of practice explore, in different ways and with differing emphases, these key characteristics of sustaining a network of schools. In so doing they help to explain what sustainability looks like in practice. Considering these dimensions of activity in the process of developing sustainable networks will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is know from current thinking and practice. We hope that they will be of practical use to you if you are considering setting up a network, are part of a newly formed or more established network, or are simply interested in finding out more about sustainability within networks. ☐

Acknowledgements

The characteristics of network practice

Headteachers of schools in successful networks talk of the power released in a network when new groups of individuals are brought together and begin to carry forward the work of the network.

❝ The network really took off when the work moved out of this room [the headteachers' meeting] and the work of the network became theirs. ❞

Oldham headteacher

In describing the widening of ownership in a network there is also an acknowledgement that the leadership of networked activity has also moved. The future direction of the work of the network necessarily ceases to be wholly controlled by the headteacher group. Good strategic decision making must then also begin to acknowledge and take account of the contribution made by these groups of network activists.

Any successful, sustainable network of schools must have compelling common purpose, or reason to be, and the capacity for self-evaluation. In addition they will build capacity within key individuals and groups for leadership and facilitation of network activity.

The development of internal leadership capacity means that a network is more likely to be able to carry forward activity no matter how the focus of the network evolves over time. The necessary range of interest, expertise and commitment is built and can be tapped into as and when needed. As much as this capacity lies within those key individuals it also lies in the places and the unique ways in which those people meet together. Networks can create

innovative spaces for leadership learning, in the co-designing of lessons and materials, in the observation of one another's teaching, or in the reflection together upon the creation of better learning opportunities for children.

A number of different networks have created groups of network activists from across their schools. The short accounts of practice which follow describe some of the roles through which these networks have distributed and developed leadership capacity in the process.

Key questions to consider when creating groups of network activists:

● How is the group identified, what is their purpose and what is the opportunity that is offered to them?

● How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

● How does what is being learned within the group make a wider difference in their schools?

Distributing operational leadership

Tweedmouth NLC

How was the group identified, what is its purpose and what are the opportunities it offers?

The headteacher group of this network, comprising all of the schools in Tweedmouth, met to plan their strategic direction. They soon realised that the co-ordination of networked activity within and across their schools could add significantly to their already overbearing responsibilities. However, in this conversation they also agreed that if the work of the network was to make a real difference in their schools it would be because teachers were directly involved in its development. In that moment of realisation they chose to devolve the responsibility for the development of networked activity to a key group from across their schools. Responsibility for the network budget was also devolved.

The decision was made to appointment a network co-ordinator in each school. The process of identification varied from school to school but the commonality was someone who the headteacher felt could influence change in their school. This group was thus put in a position to influence the achievement of the key purpose of the network – to improve transition in the three-tier system that exists in Northumberland, by use of the 'Thinking for learning' pedagogy.

How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

This key group, appointed as network co-ordinators, has come to be known as the lead learners group. Their meetings take two forms: firstly they look at strategic and organisational matters, taking care of the business of the network; and secondly they look at their own learning. This learning sometimes takes the form of joint working – planning joint activity, sharing the outcomes of activity and reflecting upon how they move that forward. At other times external expertise is drawn in, sometimes to help to develop their expertise in 'Thinking for learning', at other times considering how they are to influence change beyond their own classrooms. A key outcome has been the development of a local programme called 'Leading from the classroom'.

As activity has developed in the network, and different focuses have been identified sub-groups have formed to lead each activity, with two or three individuals taking on responsibility for each activity. Also significant are the connections between the lead learners group and headteachers, both informally in school and formally at meetings with the headteacher group.

How does the learning of the group make a wider difference in their schools?

The group of lead learners formed and began to learn together. They came up with new ways of working, tried things out, went into one another's classrooms and, in doing so, built a togetherness, a sense of mutuality. However, for a while their learning stayed within the group and it felt as though they were 'making haste slowly'. Nonetheless, in this phase of creating foundations for future work, some of their learning did begin to move beyond the group in informal ways. During other meetings within their schools and in the casual staffroom and corridor conversations when other members of staff expressed an interest in the work, the learning began to spread. As the group grew in confidence the means of spreading the learning became formalised, for example in network-wide conferences on pupil voice, in the monthly 'thinking lunches' where staff come together to share and talk about 'Thinking for learning', and in informing curriculum planning in each school.

As new solutions have been developed, tested, refined and reapplied, expertise has grown within the network community. This has led to members of the lead learner group being drawn into professional development work beyond the network. Schools from outside Tweedmouth have visited to learn about what has been created.

Developing learning and leadership in parallel

Janus NLC

How was the group identified, what is its purpose and what are the opportunities it offers?

The headteacher group, which forms the strategic leadership of this network, identified two key areas in which they wanted to develop network wide activity. The first of these was in the transition from foundation stage to Key Stage 1, the second was in the development of writing in the middle years of Key Stage 2. The network chose to identify two key groups of teachers, to develop each of these focuses. In identifying the teachers, current commitment was a key factor but also there was a conscious decision to identify teachers from beyond the existing formal leadership of each school. The network offered those teachers who were identified, or in some cases who stepped forward, both substantial personal professional development and the time and space to work together.

How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

In the first phase of their work each of the groups met to learn together about existing good practice within their schools and to share what was known about best practice. This drew on curricular expertise identified by the headteacher group and upon the external expertise of a critical friend to the network. This process encouraged the group to make use of their own current practice as a starting point. This led to the co-designing of lessons, the creation of new resources and materials, and reflecting together about what difference had been made and how this might be improved.

How does the learning of the group make a wider difference in their schools?

Within each of the development groups a network-wide expertise developed in the two areas of focus. At the same time a group of the headteachers had engaged in a programme of professional development in the leadership of change. As a result of this, the headteachers developed a similar programme for the two groups of key network activists. In this way the activists developed both their pedagogic understanding and their skills to influence change within their own schools. This led to network-wide dissemination through conference events and individually in their own schools. The network has consequently built its capacity to influence change in all of its classrooms.

Steering group members from all levels

Pendle Small Schools NLC

How was the group identified, what is its purpose and what are the opportunities it offers?

This is a well established network of small primary schools in a semi rural context. The headteachers had met regularly over a number of years, working on issues of joint concern, co-ordinating activity across their schools. A step change came when it was decided to widen involvement in the leadership of the network. The route they chose was to create key groups at various levels in the network; groups of both teachers and support staff. It was also decided that representatives of each of these groups would be invited to join a Network Steering Group, representing all schools at all levels of the network.

How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

The Network Steering Group is a place at which all of the active groups in the network can report on progress. This strategic group can ensure that wherever this activity is located, its learning can be shared across and within all of the member schools. The membership of the group also ensures that the strategic direction of the network is informed by a full understanding of all network activity. The group works in parallel with the network headteacher group, meaning that the strategic planning of the network is both informed and owned by the widest possible constituency from across the network.

How does the learning of the group make a wider difference in their schools?

The purpose and function of the group is to lead knowledge transfer and strategic direction. The activity in the network which relates to teaching and learning is itself led by three sub-groups of schools within the network. Within each of those sub-groups schools are working together on an area of mutual interest, working on behalf of the other schools to generate something of value to all of them. The Network Steering Group provides a forum in which that learning can be shared across the whole network. Within this structural form there is a pervading sense of mutuality, a sense that each sub-group, aware of the hard work going on elsewhere in the network, feels happy and obliged to reciprocate. A genuine sense of groups of schools learning on behalf of one another exists, in no small part a result of the deliberately diverse membership of the steering group.

Teachers leading collaborative research and enquiry

North Hartlepool PNSLN

How was the group identified, what is its purpose and what are the opportunities it offers?

The leaders of North Hartlepool Primary National Strategy Learning Network (PNSLN) agreed that their focus should be on some aspect of numeracy and literacy. During this conversation about focus, the idea emerged to draw together a group of teachers who could work together to engage with the issues that they felt were emerging in their own classrooms, rather than looking externally for guidance: to work from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

In order to put some structure and form around what could have become diverse and unfocused activity, the leadership of the network decided to employ the Research Lesson Study methodology. Three teachers from each school were identified, some volunteers, others after encouragement. They formed a network-wide group to investigate aspects of their professional practice through the Research Lesson Study methodology. Training in this methodology was offered and the time and space to work together was assured.

How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

The project was launched with an event for all of the identified teachers and members of the leadership of the network. Facilitated externally, the event had two distinct parts. The first familiarised the participants with the Research Lesson Study process, building competence and confidence to carry out a series of research lessons. In the second part of the day the participants formed into groups of three, each from a different school but with a common focus. The triads worked together on their common project, sharpening the area of focus and planning the practicalities of carrying out the first three-lesson cycle.

The triads meet regularly for review and planning of co-designed lessons. The network provides the resource to release the teachers to meet. On other occasions they meet to consider a piece of theory around their chosen area of focus and at other times they work alongside colleagues in each others' schools. This range of structure creates opportunities for genuine dialogue about lesson development and what this means for their future practice.

How does the learning of the group make a wider difference in their schools?

The focus of the activity of these groups is owned by the teachers, something which they felt was important, based on questions which were emerging for them from their classroom practice. Research Lesson methodology is a powerful vehicle for those participating, but lessons learned may also be valuable for other teachers. At the end of the first three-lesson cycle the group was drawn back together for what the leadership of the network called a writing day. Each group brought with them their findings. During this day these were shaped into accounts which summarised the questions under investigation, the interventions they had created together and what the learning had been. The aim is to produce a document which can be utilised across the network to provoke discussion about the issues they identified and enquired into.

That document will be one way of ensuring the learning from the group will travel more widely across the network. One of the headteachers identified the other capacity building outcome:

❝ I now have three teachers in my school with an expertise in the Research Lesson method. I can form them into groups with other teachers to engage with other issues within school. Gradually we'll all know how to use it to move things on. ❞

Headteacher

Ensuring reach and depth through distributed leadership

Bransholme NLC

How was the group identified, what is its purpose and what are the opportunities it offers?

Bransholme is a huge housing estate on the northern edge of Hull, reputedly the largest council housing estate in Europe at one time. Changing demographics means that the population is falling and so are school rolls. School closures and amalgamations make Bransholme an interesting place for school-to-school collaboration. The network includes all of the primary schools and the two high schools in Bransholme.

Growing out of the work of the local EAZ, some of the schools had adopted an American literacy programme called 'Success for All'. Other schools had been reluctant to join them but were interested in co-operative learning, a pedagogical approach embedded within Success for All. A programme for the network-wide adoption of co-operative learning was created by a mixed group, including staff from the EAZ, Hull University, three of the primary schools which had already adopted Success for All and from one of the local secondary schools. This programme is informed by the Success for All materials but is distinctively owned by the network. This collaborative group became the key change agent in introducing the programme into other schools and other parts of the high school.

How does the group come together to work on behalf of all of their schools?

The leadership of the network decided to roll out the co-operative learning package in waves. In the first wave each of the three Success for All schools were partnered with another school. The members of the co-operative learning development group became the coaches to each of those schools, offering leadership of staff meetings, working alongside teachers and providing consultative support to the leadership of the school. The group which had met regularly to develop the materials continued to meet, learning from one another about the implementation of the programme and sharing the successes and difficulties encountered in each of the schools.

How does the learning of the group make a wider difference in their schools?

At the end of the first year the leadership of the network could have easily chosen to use the same team to introduce the co-operative learning programme into the next wave of schools. However, they felt that a better strategy would be to identify key teachers in each of the first wave schools to be the lead coaches in the three second wave schools. These teachers received continuing support from the team who had originally developed the programme. Indeed, they became drawn into that group, creating an environment in which their own confidence and expertise could grow. This 'waved approach' to developing and building leadership capacity has resulted in the co-operative learning programme becoming more strongly embedded in each of their own schools.

Following successive waves of implementation, co-operative learning now pervades all of the primary schools in the Bransholme network. And in drawing in the high school the children feeding into that school from the local primary schools experience the same pedagogical approach. Co-operative learning has come to be the way things are done in Bransholme schools. ☐

End Note

The five short vignettes in this piece serve as examples of the many ways in which a network can create new leadership roles. If a network has an agreed and shared learning focus then leadership opportunities can be distributed with confidence. At all levels in each school and across the network, staff can be given the time and space to lead activities with a common goal. Helping to build leadership capacity is undoubtedly at the heart of ensuring sustainability. ☐

What are we
learning about...?

The six titles in the series focus on:
What are we learning about…?

- LEA involvement in school networks

- Establishing a network of schools

- Community leadership in networks

- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks

- Facilitation within school networks

- **Sustaining a network of schools**