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Leading between: leadership and trust in a network society

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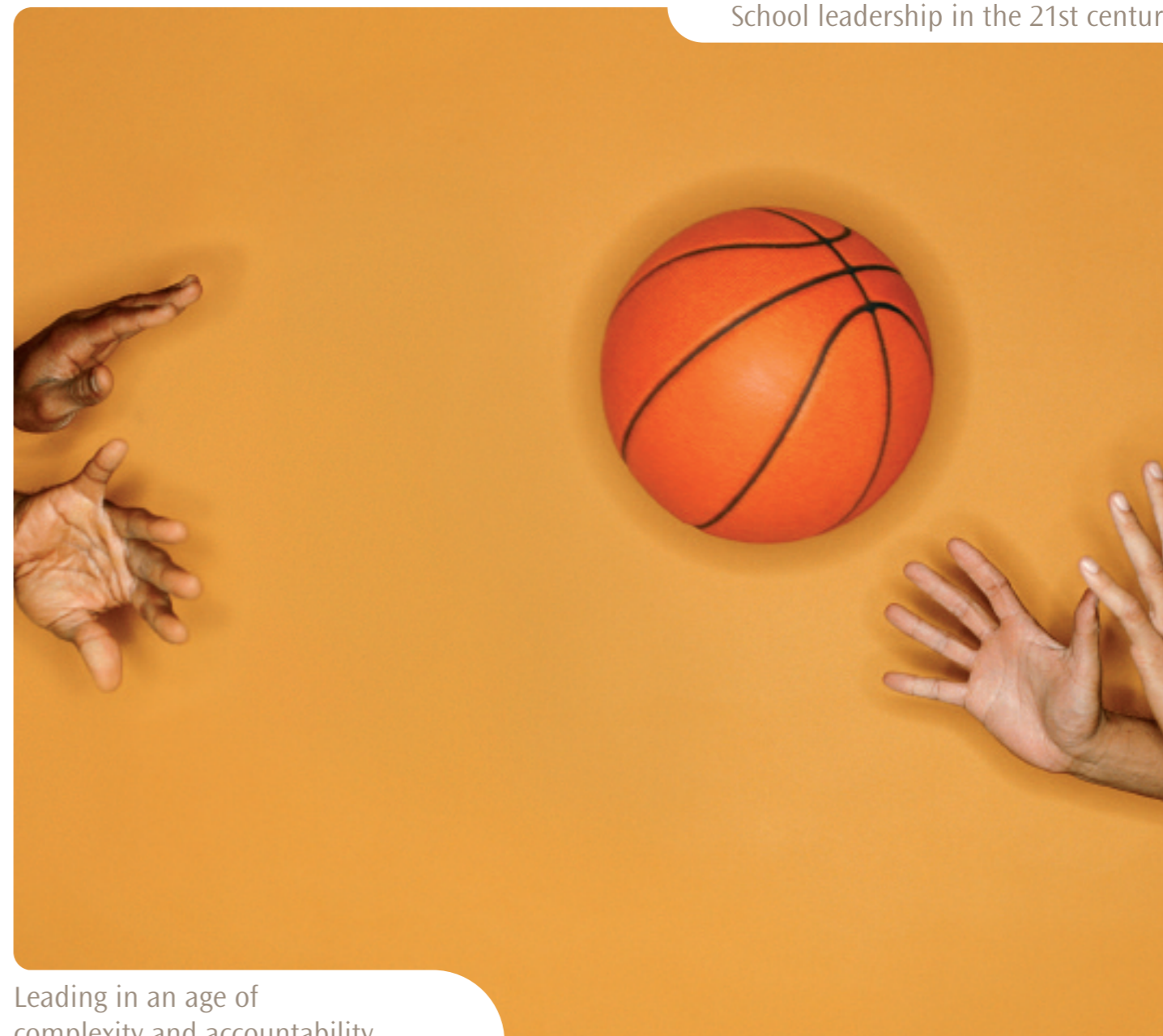
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Networked Learning Communities

Learning from each other Learning with each other Learning on behalf of each other

School leadership in the 21st century



Leading in an age of
complexity and accountability

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All organisations, whether they are in the public or the private sectors, are under strain. They are constantly struggling to meet the combined expectations of their customers and the demands of accountability. They are learning that to satisfy both these pressures they need to participate in networks of different organisations that bring together people, knowledge and resources in new ways. Splendid isolation is out. Collaboration is in. And schools, more often than not, are leading the way. But this radical disruption also spells trouble for many of the assumptions we have about what good leadership means. This increasing interconnectedness does not reduce our requirement for leadership, it actively increases it.

The question is, what kind of leadership do we need?

Networks challenge our conceptions of leadership, which too often are still rooted in an out-moded ‘great man’ theory that mistakes the formal authority of status, rank or station with the exercise of leadership. When you ask people about the leadership of an organisation, most people reach for the organ-o-gram and point to the top. When it comes to leading across networks there are no such easy answers. We need to take a different starting point.

In *Leadership without easy answers*, Ronald Heifetz argues that leaders do not try to impose change. Instead they make the case for why change is necessary, and then make the space for it to occur. This simple insight is profound in relation to leadership within an organisation.

But it is revolutionary in helping us to see the challenge of leadership across networks. Divorced from formal positions of authority, leadership – mobilising people to do ‘adaptive work’ – is as feasible between organisations as it is within them, even if the resources deployed and constraints experienced vary depending on the context.

So what is it that network leaders do?

The six characteristics of network leadership:

■ Network leaders lead from the outside-in

As the Global Business Network notes, many firms think about their strategy from the inside-out, beginning with the organisation’s purpose and core strengths, then working out to explore its marketplaces and only then looking externally for broader, underlying shifts that might matter.¹ The problem is that by the time they get there they have imposed so many filters that they’re not seeing the real world at all. They are looking through the lens of their own perspectives and assumptions about what matters, not those of the customers, users or citizens they are there to serve.

■ Network leaders mobilise disparate supplies of energy, resource and conversation

Douglas Rushkoff argues that the real power and attraction of the internet is not the knowledge or facts or ideas it supplies but the opportunity to interact with others:

*“Content is not king. Contact is king.”*²

The same goes for leadership. Network leaders know that they cannot provide some definitive vision statement, but they can structure the right kind of conversation. They can create a language that enables people to cross boundaries – within or beyond their organisation – that they otherwise would not.

■ Network leaders foster trust and empower others to act

But deliberation does not mean inaction. Networked leadership is not leadership by committee, where the sole criterion for action is the lowest common denominator. As Danny Chesterman argues in his study of leadership in local multi-agency partnerships:

*“The first assumption is that consensus is necessary by all before any partnership can act collaboratively... We talk as if agreement is a precondition for action. It isn’t. But sufficient trust is.”*³

Network leaders understand that different actors will not always agree on the appropriate course of action, not least because in a complex world the correct path will rarely be clear, and stumbling upon it may require processes of trial and error and learning by doing.

■ Network leaders help people grow out of their comfort zones

In the public sector, multi-agency working is now de rigeur, with local service delivery of everything from education (such as Excellence in Cities clusters) to economic development (like local strategic partnerships), structured around networks of agencies. Unfortunately, partnership is often treated as a structure rather than an activity, and formal mechanisms for decision-making are put in place before the different actors have had a chance to move out of their particular silos.⁴

■ Network leaders are lead learners not all-knowers

“The original meaning of authority”, Fritjof Capra has noted, *“is not ‘power to command’ but a ‘firm basis for knowing and acting’”*.⁵

Given the complexity of modern organisational life, it seems the only firm basis for acting is to be a permanent learner. Network leaders do not see themselves as all-knowers but as lead learners. They understand that a large part of leadership is about shutting up and listening. Network leaders make a point of not having all the answers.

■ Network leaders nurture other leaders

At Lipson Community College, a large secondary school in Plymouth, the pool of potential leadership talent is drawn very widely. In fact, it extends to students themselves. Older students have received coaching as mediators to help younger pupils settle disputes or other problems getting in the way of their learning without involving staff. Candidates for new teaching posts are asked to teach a lesson, and students in the class give feedback on their performance to the school’s management team. Smaller groups of students who have been given special training then comprise one of the interview panels, and often have the main say in who is appointed. Steve Baker talks of “playing a long game” through a sustained programme of activities that brings in, reaches out to, and raises expectations of the whole community.

Trust, betrayal and network leadership

Network leadership is increasingly necessary if organisations are to satisfy the needs of those they serve. But the mental leap involved in accepting network leadership is not easy. Perhaps the most important commodity for this new conception of leadership to take hold is trust. Leaders in hierarchies rely on chains of command and clear lines of accountability to ensure that the ‘right’ decisions are made, and the ‘right’ people censured if they fail. Network leadership rejects that model of authority, and the blame games it promotes. But network leaders nonetheless carry responsibility to preserve the trust on which their networks depend.

It is much more convenient to think that leaders will be saviours – and that we have someone to blame when things do not go our way. But if network leadership wakes us up to the potential within each of us to solve our own problems, then so much the better.

References

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⁴ Chesterman, D, with Horne, M, 2003, *Local authority?* London, Demos
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Paul Skidmore specialises in governance, civic renewal and political leadership. A version of this article was first published in *Network Logic, who governs in an interconnected world?* For more information visit www.demos.co.uk





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Leadership networks add value

Ray Tarleton, NCSL Leadership Network

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Leadership networks add value

Individuals can never be perfect, Belbin tells us, but a team can be. We know that schools working in teams, or networks, can run into numerous problems. Networking can be time-consuming and takes key people out of school. Feelings of guilt or panic can result as the day-to-day work is left for others to do back in school. Added to this, differing school cultures cause tensions. Relationships between colleagues who are unused to working together can be fragile. Nevertheless, successful networks are driven by key individuals in the belief that an idea can be developed most powerfully in collaboration with others, and that teams of schools can add value to learning and contribute to school improvement.

NCSL’s Leadership Network brings school leaders together from across England. Ray Tarleton reports on the work of 25 schools from within the network which are working together to pool their collective knowledge and experience to tackle the complex problem of within-school variation.



Seeking solutions from within

NCSL’s Leadership Network (LN) consists of over 250 forward-looking heads from primary and secondary phases, including special schools. We are committed to evidence-based, practitioner-supported enquiry, seeking solutions to school improvement from within. From the LN, 25 schools have worked to develop their approaches to tackling what Richard Harrison, former Deputy Director of the DfES, Standards and Effectiveness Unit, called “the greatest educational issue of our time.” That is, the variation in performance between departments and teachers in any school.

This is a major factor in overall levels of pupil attainment in both secondary and primary phases. A lower than expected performance in just one subject at the end of a key stage can seriously depress a school’s achievement and, more importantly, children’s opportunities. If you take groups of boys and girls in English, maths and science, for example, 80 per cent of schools show value-added scores significantly higher or lower than expected in at least one group. Also, 50 per cent have at least one subject in which progress is in the top 20 per cent nationally. This degree of variation is high by international standards and a barrier to improvement.

The challenge for the Leadership Network was to demonstrate evidence-based practice which could be translated into tools and policies for other schools. The process began not with a research hypothesis to be tested, but with the rather messy attempts to refine and define the elements of practice which were already working. Often these were based on gut feelings rather than researched evidence. Our initial free-thinking time was provided by the research directors at the College, Colin Conner and Jane Creasy, with external consultancy from Professor David Reynolds, the international expert in the field of high reliability.

We need clarity and consistency across the system

Several aspects have emerged from this project, which is about to double in size as a second cohort of schools joins us to test what we have learned. It has become clear that within-school variation is a matter for school leaders, and that they can move towards ensuring reliability and low variation in standards across all subjects, from all children and through all year groups by attending to the following:

- the systematic use of data.
- matching pupils with appropriate learning styles and courses (with pupil voice a developing feature of this aspect).
- teacher learning through formal pairings and observation.
- informed and rigorous middle leadership, with the headteacher as a driving force at all levels.

Because each school has created its own system for the use of data we have built in unreliability. Many of us, for example, will recognise the sorts of terminology currently in use at Key Stage 4: predicted grades, potential grades, target grades, mock grades, attainment grades. But in any school do the users, teachers, students and parents share a precise definition of each? Until we have clarity and consistency across the system, there will be room for inaccuracies and variation.

There is a real need for central guidance in offering a national system of data use that is:

- cross-phase – using the same descriptions of attainment and progress for a child entering school through to internal assessments at Key Stage 4
- appropriate for any school
- based on the best of currently available practice

The LN has also begun to gather evidence of the power of professional development through subject or teacher pairings, with classroom observations based on observer as learner rather than assessor. A systematic approach to these pairings and ideas about how to make them work is demonstrating transformational possibilities, as is mentor training for subject leaders.

Working for pupils, not for ourselves

What will our outcomes be? First, we will have refined strategies and demonstrations that they work. We plan to create sets of training materials, differentiated for use by different groups. Ideally, these could be highlighted for use during training days. At the same time, an easy measure of variation could be used by the DfES and provided for each school through, for example, its Performance and Assessment Reports (PANDA), to allow us to see the extent of the variation in our schools.

For the first time, there has been the opportunity for in-depth research by school leaders for the purpose of school improvement rather than academic qualifications. The combination of practitioner and leader, with NCSL research directors and an external consultant, provides the winning formula that will move us, like the best teams, towards our aspiration: perfection.



More information about the outcomes of the within-school variation project can be found in the NCSL Leading Practice seminar report *Tackling within-school variation*. This can be downloaded from www.ncsl.org.uk/research



To find out more about NCSL’s Leadership Network visit ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork





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Networking for personalisation

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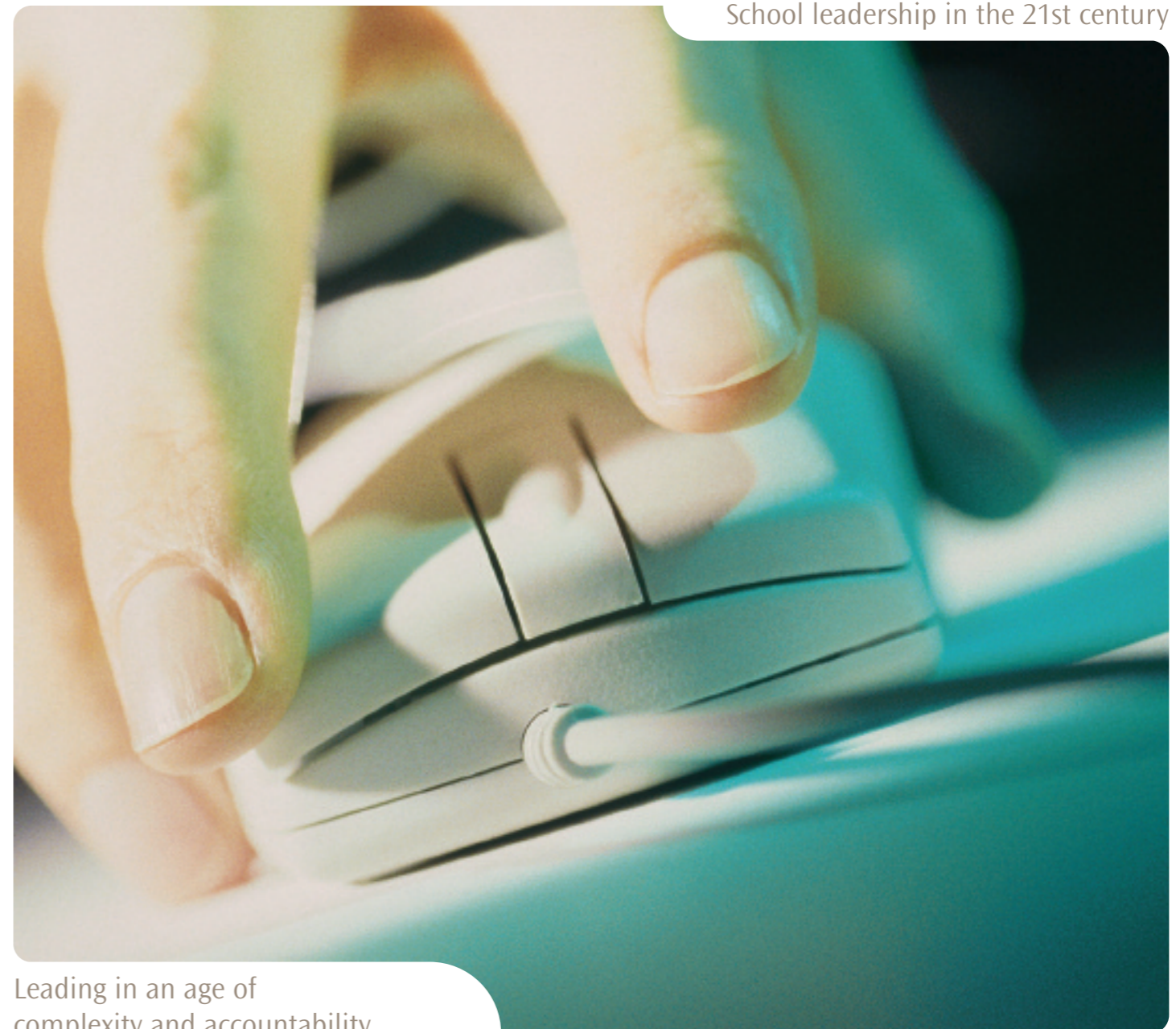
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Networking for personalisation

The Rossendale Virtual School is tackling the complex issue of personalisation and improving outcomes for hard-to-reach learners. Community is the driving force for this work. Schools in Rossendale have worked together for many years to provide 360 degree support for all their pupils. The aim is to create a coherent programme of curricular and personal development throughout each child’s school career and beyond. One of the most successful and ground-breaking ventures is the creation of a Virtual School. It is available for any pupil who has to be away from school, but is particularly useful in improving contact with hard-to-reach students. It provides them with a personalised curriculum, ensures that they do not fall behind with their work and reduces the risk that they will end up in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). It is a visible demonstration of the accountability of the network to ensure that these pupils remain part of the wider Rossendale community.

Each school posts work on to a shared website, allowing any student who is unable to attend lessons to access a wider curriculum easily and effectively. Disruptive pupils remain on roll in their current school wherever possible and access the Virtual School while physically dispersed throughout the network, not brought together in a PRU. Each is supported by a learning mentor.

This collaboration enhances students’ experience in three key ways:

■ Their environment is personalised, as learning is no longer confined to the classroom. Students have generally responded well to online learning. Lessons are stimulating and they enjoy continual personal feedback.

“This format really turns the children on to learning.”
Marie, learning mentor

■ Students are encouraged to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and helped to tailor a personalised learning plan accordingly. They can be taken out of specific lessons to avoid problem spots, or off timetable altogether for short periods.

“I go to college for two days a week and use the Virtual School for maths and English and people skills. The rest of the time I’m apprenticed to my dad. I’m doing practical qualifications but I’ll be taking some GCSEs as well.”
Year 10 student, Alder Grange School

■ Assessment is flexible and can therefore be individualised.

Learners in the wider social community

A student referral to the Virtual School is a collaborative process, involving the student, parents, head of year and the designated learning mentor. The student’s personal background, educational past and present, and hopes for the future are all taken into account in the planning stage. Learning mentors work both one-to-one with students and in small groups focused on behavioural development. This can cause friction at first, but it is an important part of the learning process and encourages students to feel part of a community that extends beyond school.

The drive to support the whole person within his or her social context has led to significant inter-agency work with many community organisations, including legal, health and safety, youth and community services as well as local libraries, Action Research, ICT services and the Housing Agency. A Groundwork team offers certificated vocational training.

The community knows we are working to provide the best for all our children.

It took visionary individuals at the Local Authority to maximise the potential of this collaboration. On a practical level they provided £200,000 to the Virtual School and have promised £100,000 for next year. They are also negotiating with the DfES to secure additional funding. The local authority’s ability to work with schools and to bring them together round a common purpose enabled the personalisation agenda to develop.

The decision to launch a Virtual School brought schools into a much closer partnership. At first they came together with 30 different agendas round one table. Shaping that into a single, agreed framework was only possible because of the tremendous help received from the local authority. Underpinning that effort is a philosophy that aims to put the education of Rossendale Valley children at the heart of every conversation and every decision. The wider community understands this and is prepared to accept schools’ judgement in the knowledge that we are trying to deliver the best service to all children.

For this network of schools, collaboration has brought an innovative technological solution to the personalisation of learning for a group of young people who were previously difficult to reach. In doing so, it offers new possibilities for all children.


“It shows these children that we’re still interested in them, that we’re willing to invest in them.”


Past Rossendale schools helped each other in their bids for specialist status. There is now a spread of specialist schools which reduces competitiveness and maximises opportunities for pupils. An established project to standardise record-keeping between schools has introduced a consistency of approach which reduces staff workload and eases cross-phase and inter-school transition.

It has also helped to build a closer relationship between primary and secondary staff. As members of a network, schools are actively working to create a healthy learning environment and to help children achieve emotional well-being.

Present The first four Alder Grange pupils to complete a Virtual School programme were each considered to be at serious risk of permanent exclusion. All are currently back in school and working well. Their behaviour is “visibly improved.”

...and future Schools may be able to work from a common timetable, allowing students to take lessons at the strongest school in any particular subject. There is more scope for sharing resources and perhaps for continuing personal and curricular development programmes beyond 18. Schools are working with universities to explore ways of improving access to higher education for students who might otherwise not have the opportunity.

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For more information about the Rossendale Virtual School please visit www.vsr.lancs_ngfl.ac.uk
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To find out about the work of the LHSP Pupil Emotional Health network please visit www.lhsp.org.uk

