

www.ncsl.org.uk

Local authority in a network-based system

David Jackson and Valerie Hannon

*“...sooner or later – kicking, screaming or
rejoicing – this is the way our too-insulated
world of education will go.”*

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

Local authority in a network-based system

One central **premise** informs this article. There is also one **proposition** and one **question**.

The **premise** is that we are moving towards an increasingly network-based system and that significant policy opportunities exist to forward this direction of travel.

The **proposition** is that it will happen with or without the support of Local Authorities, but that Authorities can grasp the opportunity to broker networks, to facilitate lateral learning relationships and to re-configure their own functions to support networks as new 'units of engagement'.

The **question** is whether Local Authorities (LAs) can and will grasp this opportunity.

Valerie Hannon (Valerie.Hannon@dfes.gsi.gov.uk) is a Director of the Innovation Unit. David Jackson (David.Jackson@ncsl.org.uk) is Director of the Networked Learning Group of NCSL. They are currently working with LEAs committed to network approaches and would be keen to receive feedback on this article, or on interesting LEA practice.

Kicking, screaming or rejoicing

In a recently written article, Valerie Hannon¹ has argued of education networks that “sooner or later – kicking, screaming or rejoicing – this is the way our too-insulated world of education will go.”

There is also widespread international support for the perspective that education lags behind. Manuel Castells² argues that power no longer resides in institutions or corporations - not even in the state. Instead, he says, it is located in the networks that structure society. The evidence for this is all around us. Leading edge private sector companies, that once competed, now collaborate as the only means to sustain innovation and leading edge practice. International ICT giants know that survival depends upon a culture of collaboration. In this country the health service is demonstrating the power of collaboratives in stimulating what David Hargreaves³ calls ‘disciplined innovation’ and in transferring leading edge practice. The influential think tank, Demos⁴, writes that: “a profoundly disruptive shift has occurred in our societies, making networks the most important organisational form of our time.”

This has pressing relevance for education. Michael Fullan⁵ is one of many who is advocating an increasingly network-based system in pursuit of innovation, peer learning, knowledge transfer, contextual solutions and the mobilisation of system leadership capacity.

We are also waking to an understanding that to move beyond mere rhetoric about supporting every child to be successful will require collaboration - within school networks and between networks and a range of other public service, voluntary and community providers⁶.

If it were just theory, we may or may not be on the brink of an exciting breakthrough. However, the premise mentioned earlier is supported by two other significant drivers:

1. A national policy framework that offers major opportunities to advance network-based practices.⁷
2. Emerging evidence in a range of Local Authorities that this is a direction of travel – and that it works.

¹ See Valerie Hannon, *Intelligent Networks* (2004), in “The Future is Networked”, NCSL *Ldr* Special Supplement, available free from NCSL.

² See, for example, Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000), Blackwell.

³ Readers can access a pdf version of David Hargreaves’ *Working Laterally* (2004) via the DfES or Demos websites – or Google.

⁴ Demos has published extensively about networks, and the essay collection *Network Logic: Who governs in an interconnected world* (2004) is particularly useful (available via www.demos.co.uk).

⁵ Michael Fullan has written extensively on this theme, but *Leadership for Sustainability: System thinkers in action* (2005), Corwin Press, is a good place to start.

⁶ NCSL’s work on community leadership is one of many sources of writing on this theme – please refer to *What Are We Learning About Community Leadership in Networks*. Contact nlc@ncsl.org.uk for more information.

⁷ Refer also to the five principles set out at the start of the *Five Year Strategy* – which can only be maintained in a networked system.

Adapting policy for local purposes

Every Child Matters is a landmark piece of legislation. Commitment to the success of every child, and of the whole child, within the context of inter-agency and community support offers a radical and inspiring agenda. It chimes with the moral purposes of the public sector. We just don't know yet how to do it well and to scale.

What we do know is that solutions will be problem-solved locally, collaboratively, within each particular Local Authority and community context. We know that they will look very different from the 'balkanised' ways of working of the past. We know that how they work in urban contexts will inevitably differ from dispersed rural Authorities.

What we perhaps also know is that, if *Every Child Matters* represents a core framework of aspirations, other individual policies will provide the leverage and impetus to establish the direction of travel.

Four of the current policies directed mainly at schools' work stand out as offering genuine potential (individually and in combination) to drive the move towards a networked-based system supporting success for every young person. They are:

1. Primary Strategy Learning Networks
2. Education Improvement Partnerships
3. 14-19 Reforms
4. Personalisation

These four will have more power if implemented coherently and in synergy than they will if seen as separate policy strands. This point is so central it is worth explaining in more detail – and the role of Local Authorities is crucial.

An Authority-wide vision – making it happen

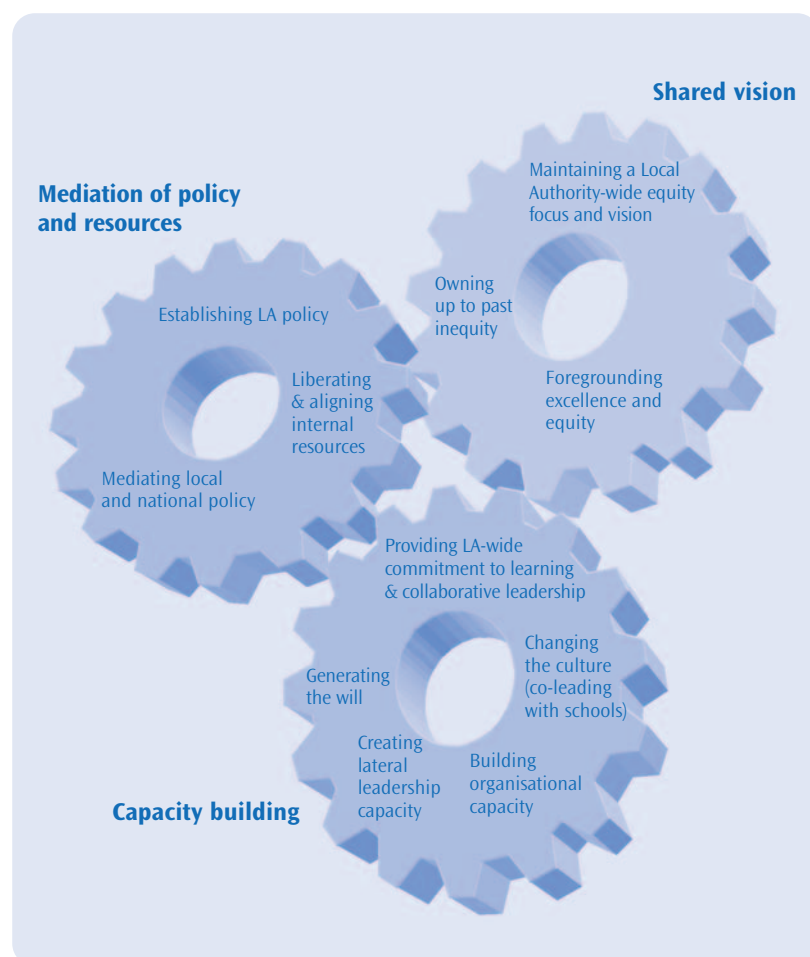
Research on successful Local Authority or School District change is relatively thin.^a However, there is some evidence, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, about the characteristics of Local Authorities that both raise achievement and close the achievement gap.

Figure 1^a suggests that the three key domains of a **shared vision**, **capacity building** and **mediation** work most powerfully when they are fully articulated or inter-related.

It is drawn from a study of successful school districts in the USA. It groups the common findings into those contributing to an uncompromising vision; those that relate to aspects of capacity-building, co-leadership and system learning; and those involving mediation and a facilitation. An overarching message, though, is coherence.

The four current policies mentioned earlier could be regarded as separate, unrelated strands. However, each is an opportunity to drive local collaborative working towards an Authority-wide vision. How Primary Strategy Learning Networks are implemented should be critically determined by the aspirations for excellence and equity in the local system. This will not be separate from how Education Improvement Partnerships, or 14-19 Collaboratives will be implemented. They are pieces of a local mosaic; capacities to problem-solve local context; repeated opportunities to house the values of the Authority vision within local implementation of national policy.

Figure 1
What can we learn from research?



^a NCSL commissioned an extensive LEA literature review in 2004 to inform the LEarning Project – a project involving 19 LEAs (www.ncsl.org.uk and click 'learning with leas' on the left screen menu).

^a The diagram has been adapted for the UK context from Rorrer, A. Skrla, L. and Scheurich, J. *School Districts' Roles as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity* (2004), a paper presented at the AERA Conference in San Diego, April 2004.

Local brokerage

The crucial issue, though, is that none of this will happen by accident.

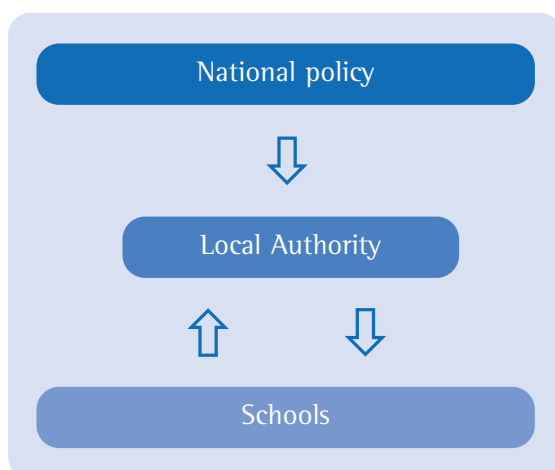
Figure 2 below presents an image of the world as we like to believe it was, with simple lines of delivery and communication.

Whilst it might never have been this straightforward, it is certainly more complex now.

Figure 3 offers a very different system representation – one which suggests possibilities of new roles, alternative configurations and new ways of working in the interests of all children. Two key questions for making sense of this model are:

1. What needs to happen for the red arrows to be two-directional in the places that they occur?
2. What is the significance of the red circles and what might go on there?

Figure 2
How we imagine we remember it...



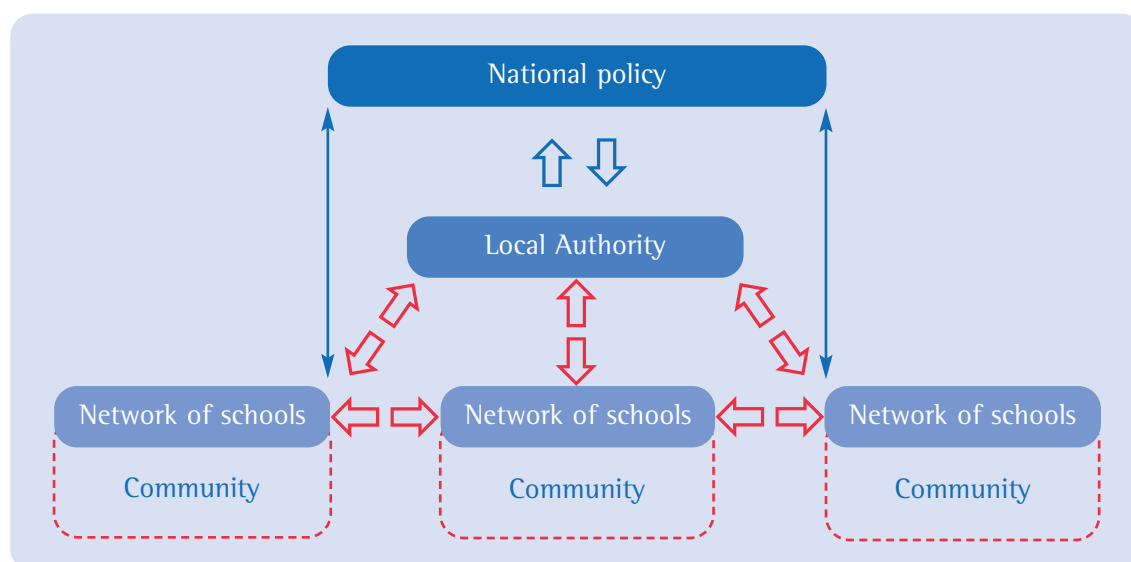
At NCSL we have coined the term Local Authority ‘brokerage’ for the very different roles and relationships required to stimulate co-design and co-leadership conversations between Local Authority staff and school/network leaders (these new conversations are indicated by the two-directional arrows). Such authentic dialogue can turn the competition and mutual suspicion of the past into trust-based network relationships. It is happening in Local Authorities as diverse as Knowsley and West Sussex, or Leicester and Cornwall, or Redbridge and Liverpool. Such honest conversations, over time, fundamentally change the local culture and give rise to previously unforeseen possibilities.

Our work with Local Authorities suggests that there are five dimensions of this brokerage role¹⁹:

1. Brokering network membership that is inclusive and diverse
2. Brokering internal relationships between network schools
3. Brokering partnerships beyond the network
4. Brokering the network’s access to resources
5. Brokering the transfer of knowledge between networks.

The second area of interest lies within the red circles. We are coming to terms with the realisation that it is not possible to deliver on *Every Child Matters* unless the system’s components collaborate around that objective. That will mean multi-agency partnerships within Local Authority services at one end and collaborative working within local communities, between partners and agencies, at the other. One thing we know – if services do not come together at the local level, we do not have integrated services. To make sense of that, we will need ‘units of engagement’ more meaningful than individual schools – and networks of schools offer optimistic possibilities.

Figure 3
Future roles in a network-based system



Conclusion

If the opening premise is accepted – that we are moving towards a network-based future – then the proposition is that this possible future offers huge potential for a new role for Local Authorities, as the active advocates of ‘excellence and equity’ and as brokers and partners in the system redesign that will be required to achieve it.

Which leaves just the initial question – and the answer, that some Local Authorities are already leading the way, offering operational images of practice and process from which others can learn. Some are also doing so through Authority-to-Authority collaboration, learning together how to broker a new local system on behalf of all children.

¹⁰ For a full discussion of the theory and practice behind these elements of Local Authority brokerage see *What Are We Learning About LEA Involvement in School Networks*. To request a copy or for more information contact nlc@ncsl.org.uk

**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