

School Business Managers: their role in distributed leadership

How can SBMs/Bursars compliment
and support distributed leadership

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Background

A number of factors have come together that have increased the focus on the potential role of the School Business Manager (SBM) or bursar in schools. These relate to:

Changes in the nature of leadership in school.

- Awareness of the range of alternative school leadership models has increased, resulting in more schools adopting approaches based on ideas of distributed and shared leadership. Factors in this include increased levels of retirement of experienced headteachers as a result of demographic factors.
- In addition, the publication of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers [2006] 'independent study into school leadership' also identified the need for increasing leadership capacity and highlight the potential contribution of SBMs/bursars in this respect.

Changes in the level of support offered.

- The level of support offered by local authorities (LAs) to schools on 'core' business functions has reduced in recent years, in line with business and local government practice to flatten the organisational structure (McMillan 2002). This places greater emphasis on schools to develop their own capacity in these areas.
- At the same time, there has been an increase in the professional development offered to SBMs/bursars, for instance NCSL's bursar training programmes.

External policy drivers.

- There is a greater emphasis placed on schools now to secure funding through discretionary funding streams, requiring the development of competency in bidding for such monies. Increased pressure is being placed on all public organisations to demonstrate value for money, thereby increasing attention on approaches that can promote efficiency based savings.
(Wright and Colquham 2007)

- Data from the recent evaluation of the Bursars Development Programme found participants made major contributions in each of these areas. For instance on average graduates from this programme reported securing between £50-60 additional funding per student, depending upon their phase.
- SBMs also provide considerable support to help promote the focus on learning and teaching by making significant contributions to the management of non-teaching related business issues, which in the past had distracted headteachers from the core business of their school. Examples of these included facilities, financial management, risk management and human resources. Evidence from the bursars development programme again found considerable evidence of contributions in these areas.
- Other policy initiatives such as extended schools, personalisation of learning and Every Child Matters, have increased the scope of schools and the associated demands on school leaders.
- This study aims to describe existing practice in the use of SBMs/bursars and the factors that both facilitate or inhibit their use.

Method

A structured questionnaire was used to gather information from graduates and current students of the Certificate or Diploma of School Business Management (CSBM/ DSBM). Data was gathered electronically via NCSL's 'talk2learn' online discussion forum. Responses were received from 75 individuals. Nearly two-thirds of these individuals were from a primary school. Supporting comments were also received via a related Hotseat discussion, which received 353 contributions. In addition 3,279 individuals visited the hot seat. All fieldwork was completed between February and July 2007.

Findings

Prevalence of SBMs/ bursars in schools

- 69 per cent of respondents to the survey indicated their school had a SBM/bursar.
- Funding and teacher perceptions were the main barriers to not having a bursar. While headteachers broadly supported the SBM/bursar role, comments indicated that in practice, this support related largely to the SBM/bursar authorising involvement in professional development programmes and less to an understanding of the wider value of the role within the school.
- Completion of the CSBM/ DSBM, staff changes and the introduction of the Department for Schools, Families and Children's Financial Management Standards in Schools were quoted as the main drivers in SBMs/bursars becoming members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).
- SBM/bursar roles have existed in primaries on average only for two years, compared with five years for secondaries. This suggests that primaries are still in the process of adapting to SBMs/bursars, a point supported by comments received in the Hotseat discussions, which noted a lack of understanding of the role and of the potential for change.

Nature of the SBM/ bursar role

- 59 per cent of bursars were on the SLT. In many cases, their responsibilities were restricted to managing aspects of the office team. Furthermore, the 'average' bursar only oversaw around 40 per cent of support staff, indicating that in a number of schools, the SLT and headteacher continue to retain control over many support functions.
- The work of SBMs in primary schools was more likely to be restricted to operational issues relating to finance, personnel and office issues, than was the case in secondary schools. Insufficient financial resources in these schools may be factor in this. However, a small number of primary schools have employed SBMs in place of deputies as a way of overcoming this funding gap.
- SBMs in secondary schools were far more likely to operate at a senior or strategic level than their primary counterparts. Organisational size was likely to be a major factor in this, as larger budgets and staff numbers offer greater flexibility to operate. Also, the notion of SBMs appears better established in secondary schools and as such, the understanding of the potential value of this role was more established.
- 52 per cent of SBMs/bursars are paid at or below Newly Qualified Teacher rates. Some SBMs felt this reflected poorly on the perceived value of their work and in some instances led to resentment. Respondents indicated that a lack of funding and teacher/ governor/ local authority perceptions were factors in perpetuating this pay gap. Many felt that further national guidelines were needed to help address this.

Qualifications and professional development

- 33 per cent of SBM respondents possessed a degree level or higher qualification. This figure rose to 85 per cent when the CSBM/ DSBM qualifications were taken into account. Respondents indicated that increased take-up of the CSBM/DSBM would help to reduce both perceived and real inequalities in the professional status of teaching and school business staff.
- Around one third of CSBM/DSBM graduates expressed interest in continued professional development.

Potential implications and way forward

Recent years have witnessed a number of developments, which have increased the scope of leadership skills required for the effective leadership of our schools. At the heart of these is increased pressure on schools to continue to improve standards whilst at the same time, more effectively managing their resources. Changes in levels of support offered to schools in this area have also increased pressures on them to develop their own in-house expertise on business management issues.

The SBM role has worked effectively in the independent school sector and in business for many years. Furthermore, there is increased evidence to demonstrate the ways in which state schools have benefited from restructuring their leadership teams to include SBMs (eg DfES 2003, Teachernet 2007). Examples of these include increased efficiency in areas such as financial management, health & safety, project management and personnel. Meanwhile, the Certificate and Diploma for School Business Managers have made a significant contribution in training a cadre of professional school managers to fulfil these roles.

Lack of understanding of the nature of a SBM's work and the ways in which schools can benefit from this, appears to be the main inhibitor to wider recruitment of SBMs. This exists at several levels. Firstly, school staff in general may be confused or uneasy over the nature of this role and its implications for their own work. Governors and other school leaders may also be unaware of the diversity of SBM/bursar roles and the potential contribution they may make to the effective running of the school.

Awareness raising sessions and sharing case studies of other schools' experiences of SBMs could help to address these concerns. Schools may also benefit from greater understanding of the ways in which they could use the introduction or expansion of new initiatives to review their leadership structure and introduce SBMs/bursars into positions where they may add value. These could include inputs from headteachers in schools where these arrangements work particularly well, thereby providing the opportunity for such heads to act as 'champions' for SBMs.

Adopting a remodelling approach which considers the existing strengths and weaknesses of the school's culture, opportunities and threats and the school environment, to identify the potential need for a SBM/bursar and to help implement such a change, can aid this process.

References

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the bursars that helped with the development and completion of the questionnaire. Those that contributed to the hotseat, the research group and Peter Smith for his support.

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