**Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives**

School leadership in England: contemporary challenges, innovative responses and future trends

Report

School leadership in England: contemporary challenges, innovative responses and future trends

David Hopkins, Rob Higham and Elpida Ahtaridou[1]

This is an abbreviated version of the recent review of school leadership in England for the OECD[2] – *Improving School Leadership: Country Report for England*. The report sets out the broad forces impacting on school leaders over the past twenty years, the specific challenges these created and the ways in which school leaders and the education system more generally have responded. It also describes how school leadership in England has evolved over this period of time.

The somewhat *laissez faire* and paternalistic culture of leadership in the 1980s changed radically as a direct consequence of the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the Education Reform Act (1988) that allowed all schools to be taken out of the direct financial control of local authorities.

By devolving resource allocation and priorities from local authorities to governors, headteachers became considerably more autonomous. This autonomy however was tempered by the highly developed national accountability framework that held them accountable for school performance and subject to significant areas of national prescription.

The publication of exam results and a national inspection regime where reports on the performance of individual schools became publicly available put considerable pressure on headteachers and served to encourage the high degree of competitiveness between schools in the mid-1990s.

This competitive environment was mitigated somewhat by the establishment of NCSL in 2001 and the increasing professionalism with which school leadership was being regarded. This trend was enhanced by the significant commitment to collaboration incentivised by a wide range of government initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, the Leadership Incentive Grant, Primary Networks as well as NCSL's Networked Learning Communities and Primary Leadership Programme.

The Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) launched by the Department for Education and Skills in 2002 encouraged collaboration between further education colleges and schools to improve vocational opportunities for 14–16 year olds and was the forerunner to much school-college collaboration that followed as part of the 14–19 agenda.

The New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) was a further attempt by government to develop a more mature and equal balance between the centre and the front line and to streamline accountability and bureaucratic processes to ensure a more personalised education for students.

Inevitably the policy challenges for school leaders have increased dramatically over this period. Two critical and current examples are the balance between standards and welfare and the impetus for school diversity and parental choice.

But whatever the general and specific challenges of policy implementation, the ability to work and lead beyond an individual school is of increasing importance. It is estimated that nearly all schools in England are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking.

This in turn is leading to a more collaborative approach to schooling where school leaders are having a significantly more substantive engagement with other schools in order to bring about school improvement that leads to system transformation, as epitomised by National and Local Leaders of Education (NLEs and LLEs). This is currently termed 'system leadership', where school leaders, in a variety of roles, are now playing both an active and explicit role in system reform.

In short, the past twenty years has seen a remarkable movement from schooling as a 'secret garden' to significantly increased levels of accountability and autonomy that led to overt competition. This is now rapidly being replaced by sophisticated forms of collaboration that is leading in turn to a transformation of the landscape of school education, all in the pursuit of higher standards of learning and achievement of students. And it is the school leader who is increasingly in the vanguard of this movement.

In order to understand the current role and contribution of school leadership in this new educational landscape in this paper we will:

- define school leadership in England

- outline the regulatory framework within which school leaders now operate and their responsibilities

- discuss the challenges facing school leaders

- explore the collaborative networks in operation

- examine innovative approaches of school leadership

- identify six key trends for the future of school leaders

1

Defining school leadership

Reviewing the broad literature on school leadership for the NCSL, Bush and Glover [3] propose the following definition:

'Leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision.'

This is a useful starting point in understanding how school leadership is conceptualised in England and draws together the focus on influence, values and vision that school leaders need to bring to the task. Given, however, the now two decade-long focus on school standards in England, it is also important to recognise the strong link between school leadership and school improvement. Indeed, for Leithwoood and his colleagues [4]:

'Our generic definition of leadership – not just effective leadership – is very simple, then; it is about direction and influence. Stability is the goal of what is often called "management." Improvement is the goal of leadership. It is clear that both are very important.'

The means by which such leadership for improvement is translated into action is, for NCSL [5] (reporting on Ofsted inspection findings), through the vital connection between what leaders do and what happens in the classroom:

'Effective headteachers provide a clear vision and sense of direction for the school. They prioritise. They focus the attention of staff on what is important and do not let them get diverted and sidetracked with initiatives that will have little impact on the work of the pupils. They know what is going on in their classrooms. They have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of their staff. They know how to build on the strengths and reduce the weaknesses. They can focus their programme of staff development on the real needs of their staff and school. They gain this view through a systematic programme of monitoring and evaluation. Their clarity of thought, sense of purpose and knowledge of what is going on mean that effective headteachers can get the best out of their staff, which is the key to influencing work in the classroom and to raising the standards achieved by pupils.'

The above definitions are an outline of the broad territory[6] of school leadership. Drawing on Leithwood and Reihl the central tenants might best be summarised as four central domains of setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people; and developing the organisation[7]. Table 1 below sets out these practices.

Table 1 reinforces the argument that enhancing learning and teaching is a key priority for school leadership. Contemporarily, trends towards personalising education to individual student needs and interests, coupled with a greater responsibility for student welfare as part of the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, represent real challenges for school leaders as they attempt to continue to raise school standards and offer a broad and balanced education.

An important influence on how school leaders respond to these and other challenges is the regulatory framework and the related distribution of leadership responsibilities. In turning now to these regulations, we detail the statutory responsibilities on school leadership as a means to explore their impact on the freedoms and flexibilities school leaders can deploy in responding to contemporary challenges.

Table 1 – Leithwood and Riehl, 2005, A conceptualisation of the capabilities for school leaders.

Core practices	Key school leadership components
Setting direction	Total commitment to enable every learner to reach their potential with a strategic vision that extends into the future and brings immediacy to the delivery of improvements for students.
	Ability to translate vision into whole school programmes that extend the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms, departments and schools.
Managing teaching and learning	Ensure every child is inspired and challenged through appropriate curriculum and a repertoire of teaching styles and skills that underpin personalised learning.
	Develop a high degree of clarity about and consistency of teaching quality to both create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and enable sharing of best practice and innovation.
Developing people	Enable students to become more active learners, develop thinking and learning skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning. Involve parents and the community to promote the valuing of positive attitudes to learning and minimise the impact of challenging circumstances on expectations and achievement.
	Develop schools as professional learning communities, with relationships built and fostered across and beyond schools to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities for staff.
Developing the organisation	Create an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by student data, with self-evaluation and external support used to seek out approaches to school improvement that are most appropriate to specific contextual needs.
	Managing resources, workforce reform and the environment to support learning and well-being; and extend an organisation's vision of learning to involve networks of schools collaborating to build, for instance, curriculum diversity, professional support, extended and welfare services.

2

Regulatory framework and the distribution of responsibilities

The regulation and distribution of responsibilities for school leaders in England are described in several key documents. First, and perhaps most importantly, the DfEE's [8] *Education (School Government) (Terms of Reference) Regulations* 2000 sets out the regulatory framework of roles and responsibilities for headteachers and governing bodies. Significantly, the majority of statutory responsibilities reside with the governing body. Indeed it is a distinctive feature of the English system that governing bodies, as opposed to local government and headteachers, are responsible for the conduct of the school and have a range of legal powers and duties in order to allow them to carry out this responsibility. Specific duties in relation to budget, staffing, curriculum, performance management, target setting, exclusions, admissions, religious education, collective worship, premises, school organisation, information for parents and governing body procedures are set out in several separate statutory instruments. However, decisions and responsibilities rest with the governing body. The headteacher has to report to the governing body at least once a year on the progress made towards achieving the aims and objectives and in particular specific targets.

Second, the *School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document* [9] sets out a range of responsibilities for school leaders including: formulating the school's aims; the appointment and management of staff; liaison with staff unions and associations; the determination, organisation and management of the curriculum; appraising, training and inducting staff; responsibility for standards in teaching and learning; developing effective relationships with the governing body, local authority and other organisations.

Third, with regards specifically to the role of the headteacher, the National Standards for Headteachers identify core professional leadership and management practices in six key areas. These apply to all phases and types of schools and are in turn subdivided into the knowledge, professional qualities (skills, dispositions and personal capabilities) and actions needed to achieve them [10]. The standards are currently being reviewed, but their existing format is as follows:

- **Shaping the future:** creating a shared vision and strategic plan for the school (in collaboration with the governing body) that motivates staff and others in the community.

- **Leading learning and teaching:** raising the quality of teaching and learning and for pupils' achievement. This implies setting high expectations and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of learning outcomes. A successful learning culture will enable pupils to become effective, enthusiastic, independent learners, committed to life-long learning.

- **Developing self and working with others:** building effective relationships and building a professional learning community through performance management and effective professional development for staff.

- **Managing the organisation:** improving organisational structures through self-evaluation, organisation and management of people and resources in order to build capacity across the workforce and deploy cost effective resources.

- **Securing accountability:** headteachers are accountable to pupils, parents, carers, governors, the local authority and the whole community to provide a high quality of education for promoting collective responsibility within the whole school community and for contributing to the education service more widely.

- **Strengthening community:** creating links and collaborating with other schools, parents, carers and other agencies to share expertise and ensure children's well-being.

Complementary to these government documents is the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report commissioned by the then DfES[11] which outlines six mains areas of responsibility that headteachers self-identified: Accountability (time spent fulfilling the legal and other responsibilities of heads); strategy (setting the strategic ethos of the school and improvement planning); managing teaching and learning; staffing issues (including recruitment and professional development); networking (with other schools and other appropriate organisations); and operations (the day-to-day management of the school). Deputy heads described their responsibilities as: the curriculum, timetabling, aspects of whole school provision and professional development; the day-to-day management of the school; liaising between staff and the headteacher; sharing responsibilities with the headteacher; and assuming significant leadership responsibility when the headteacher is absent.

As is apparent, many leadership and management decisions are taken at a school level. The background to this is well known – it is a direct consequence of the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the Education Reform Act (1988) that allowed all schools to be taken out of the direct financial control of local authorities by devolving autonomy on resource allocation and priorities from local authorities to governors. However, whilst funding, leadership and management control were flowing to schools, this new autonomy coincided with a significant centralisation of decision making over curriculum, assessment and accountability. Through the Education Reform Act (1988), the government introduced:

- The National Curriculum, which made it compulsory for schools to teach certain subjects and syllabuses. Previously the choice of subjects had been up to schools.

- National Curriculum assessments at the end of Key Stages 1 to 4 (ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 respectively). At Key Stage 4 (age 16), the assessments were made from the GCSE exam. A direct consequence has been the publication in newspapers of league tables showing performance statistics for each school.

- And then later, in 1992, the creation of Ofsted and a comprehensive programme for the inspection of all schools in England.

So despite new freedoms, schools leaders are held accountable for school performance through a highly developed national accountability framework. This framework includes individual target setting for each school, the publication of exam results and a national inspection regime where reports on the performance of individual schools are publicly available and parents are encouraged to examine these reports when choosing a school for their child. The considerable autonomy and control that school leaders have in some areas is thus linked to high levels of accountability and areas of national prescription.

Furthermore, the current government's focus on education as a national priority has led to a range of central initiatives that school leaders have either been required or encouraged to implement. This 'initiative-itis' has been criticised by several teacher unions and professional associations. For instance, headteacher respondents to NUT commissioned research[12] identified '58 types of externally-imposed initiatives [during their time as a head], but were hard put to think of any tasks that had been taken away from them other than those they had delegated'.

In this context, there are ongoing debates about the freedom and flexibilities of school leaders and teachers as well as the issue of work-life balance. For instance, specific instruction and pedagogical policies are a matter for schools, and more recently schools have been encouraged to develop more innovative and flexible programmes and curricula, particularly in the drive to provide a broad and balanced primary learning experience and to improve and widen the offer in the 14–19 phase. Teacher unions however have called for greater flexibility from the national curriculum and an end to Key Stage tests and the publishing of school results that they argue distort the focus of classroom teaching and learning. In partial recognition of this position the government announced the removal of Key Stage 3 SATs test from 2009.

The government also committed to a New Relationship with Schools to reduce bureaucracy and data collection demands, and pave the way for, on the one hand, new flexibilities and 'inspection holidays' for schools deemed to be outstanding whilst, on the other hand, for sharper intervention in schools judged to be unsatisfactory. However, whilst welcoming aspects of the NRwS, headteacher associations, have called for more intelligent accountability, more flexibility on staff pay and conditions and, in particular, 'more support and less pressure' for school leaders from national agencies, Ofsted and central government [13].

Given the flow of leadership power and control towards both schools and central government, the role of local authorities has diminished over the past two decades. This continues in the present. Recent legislation has given schools the power to form Education Improvement Partnerships so as to formalise the devolution of defined delivery responsibilities and resources from their local authority [14]. The government is also developing a Trust School Programme that will enable schools to achieve foundation status, supported by a charitable foundation or Trust, that will employ its own staff, and manage its own land and assets and set its own admission arrangements (in line with the national School Admissions Code). This latest move has been described by some as creating 'independent state schools'.

In practice, however, there are a number of key strategic local leadership roles that remain within local authorities which have been crystallised in the recent drive to join up the often disparate and unco-ordinated local government responsibilities for the education, social care and health of young people. The resultant ongoing creation of local authority children's services, under the remit of a single director of children's services, clarifies the role of local authorities in planning needs-based local provision, commissioning services to meet identified need, co-ordinating the delivery of such services, championing high standards of service delivery and ensuring fair access (local admission policy) [15]. Regarding education, the basic principles governing the relationship between local authorities and schools are now that 'good schools manage themselves; and that authorities only intervene in schools' management in inverse proportion to those schools' success' [16].

We have set out the broad context within which school leaders operate. We now turn to the contemporary challenges they face.

3

Challenges facing school leaders

There are a set of key challenges at the heart of school leadership. As we have seen this includes: ensuring consistently good teaching and learning; integrating a sound grasp of basic knowledge and skills within a broad and balanced curriculum; managing behaviour and attendance; strategically managing resources and the environment; building the school as a professional learning community; and developing partnerships beyond the school to encourage parental support for learning and new learning opportunities.

There is also a set of specific contemporary challenges that stem from broader social change and government led reform [17]. These include:

The synergy between standards and welfare: school leaders are now asked to retain a rigorous focus on raising pupil attainment whilst at the same time leading improvements in provision that enable children to be safe, healthy, enjoy and achieve and make a positive contribution to society. The latter 'Welfare agenda' and ECM agenda includes the development of extended provision (including before and after school clubs) as well as the co-organisation of multi-agency children's services. This stems not only from concerns for child safety and protection, but also as an important strand in national approaches to tackle the pervasive impact of social class on educational achievement. The creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families gives an increased emphasis on and voice to the every child matters agenda. Indeed, the Secretary of State for the DCSF has referred to his department several times as "the Department for Every Child Matters".

The drive to increasingly personalise the learning experience of students: this demands, amongst other things, that leaders embed assessment for learning and the use of data on pupil achievement as whole school professional practices in the design of learning experiences that really stretch individual pupils. According to Ofsted [18] the use of assessment (in secondary schools) is good or better in less than four in ten schools. In both cases school leaders will also be expected to work collaboratively to deliver the entitlement for every young person to study a Diploma by 2013, and that this collaborative working will involve not just working with other schools, but with the further education sector, employers and work based learning providers. School leaders are further expected to recognise the importance of extended schools in delivering personalisation. The challenges for improvement are both technical and cultural.

The implementation of workforce reform: the national workforce agreement underpins reform to devolve administrative tasks from teachers to support staff, to limit requirements on teachers to cover absent colleagues and to achieve an overall reduction in workload and a reasonable work-life balance. The challenge for school leaders is not only to ensure that this does not undermine stability but moreover to ensure a wider range of school staff is effectively deployed to support student progression and attainment.

The impetus for school diversity and parental choice: particularly in the secondary phase schools are encouraged to diversify away from a common comprehensive school model towards a wide range of school types in terms of both curriculum (specialist status) and leadership and governance (trusts and federations). This has been coupled with an explicit move to provide parents with greater choice in the school(s) they send their children to in terms of both admissions procedures and the construction of new schools (academies). Both the diversity and choice agendas are seen by government as drivers of improvement. The challenge of school leaders is to make sense of these initiatives at their local level, engaging with the broader system in a meaningful way whilst protecting their students, staff and school ethos from uncoordinated or even unnecessary change.

The progression of particular groups of students, including: specific minority ethnic and social economic groups (including black boys and white students on free school meals); students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) particularly in urban areas; students with the potential for high attainment so as to ensure there are really stretched and engaged; children with special educational needs, particularly where they are moved from special schools into mainstream schools (as part of the governments Inclusion agenda). A range of progression pilots have been launched in local authorities.

In addition to these specific challenges, school leaders are also faced with a range of other issues including:

Planning their own succession in the face of a potential shortage in the supply of leaders. The implications of a retiring 'baby-boomer' generation during the next 10 years, coupled with evidence that some deputy and assistant leaders are not attracted to headteacher posts, has increased senior leadership recruitment and retention pressures in schools. It does, however, need to be remembered that headteachers themselves find their roles highly fulfilling. For instance, 97 per cent of 1,000 headteachers at NCSL's annual conference in June 2007 voted that 'being a headteacher is one of the most worthwhile and rewarding jobs you can have'.

- Staying abreast of and implementing curriculum and assessment changes across the Key Stages and 14–19.

- Managing potential falls in student numbers in particular local areas.

- Managing key external relationships and the politics of these, including with other schools, the local authority and a range of national agencies.

- In some contexts, deploying their expertise to help schools facing challenging circumstances.

To meet these challenges, leaders are increasingly expected to:

- Use the full innovative potential of workforce reform to deploy teachers, higher level teaching assistants and other support staff to extend curricular and learning pathways (especially in the 14–19 phase) and extend services before and after the school day.

- Build professional learning communities within and beyond schools that develop and widen learning and teaching strategies to respond to a range of student learning needs.

- Consider new models of leadership and governance to appropriately distribute an increasing range of responsibilities to a wider and differentiated pool of leadership expertise.

Many of the most innovative responses to these school leadership challenges have been developed within collaborative networks. The emergence of collaborative networks has been of increasing importance in recent years and it is to these that we turn our attention.

4

Collaborative networks

The ability to work and lead beyond an individual school is of increasing importance. It is estimated that nearly all schools in England are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking and many are involved in four or five partnerships [19].

A vast range of central initiatives have and continue to promote and sponsor collaborative networks often under the guiding theme of school improvement. These have included:

- The Excellence in Cities programme which developed school partnerships and shared responsibility for, amongst other things, opportunities for gifted and talented students, City Learning Centres and learning mentors.

- The Leadership Incentive Grant, introduced in 2003, to strengthen school leadership in schools facing challenges through collaborative professional development and mentoring.

- Specialist school networks that share best practice in curriculum areas.

- The Leading Edge Programme that connects 200 high performing schools with 800 partners to share innovation in teaching and learning.

- The Networked Learning Communities (introduced in 2002) that brought together groups of schools, local authorities, higher education institutions and the wider community together with the aim of raising standards and improving learning opportunities for pupils.

And more recently:

- The ECM agenda, that, as mentioned earlier, is about closing the attainment gap, raising standards for all and keeping young people safe from harm. It is also a driver for schools and other agencies to collaborate so as to enhance pupil welfare. The role of extended schools is becoming increasing important.

- The 14–19 agenda, that is encouraging schools and colleges to form consortia capable of delivering a variety of curriculum pathways.

- The Primary Strategy Learning Networks (introduced in 2005) that encourage schools to work together in a particular area of learning aiming to improve standards in literacy and maths, the curriculum and performance.

- Education Improvement Partnerships, (introduced in 2005) to formalise the devolution of defined delivery responsibilities and resources from a local authority to groups of schools working together for improvement [20].

- Federations (introduced in the Education Act, 2002) which allow for the creation of a single governing body or a joint governing body committee across two and up to five schools to provide the basis for schools to work together to, amongst other things, 'raise standards, promote inclusion, share approaches to teaching and learning and build capacity between schools in a coherent manner' [21].

Yet, partnership working remains a complex process. It depends crucially on trust between professional institutions in the negotiation of 'collaborative advantage'[22]. Moreover, whilst the current government sponsors collaboration, there is a wide debate about how to reconcile this impetus for collaboration with an accountability system focused on individual schools – which has, in turn, the potential to further instil competition between schools (especially following an era in which this was explicitly encouraged through 'markets in education').

Despite these issues, however, the PwC report found that most headteachers who carry out external responsibilities report benefits for their schools and that also networking can improve their strategic planning. Collaboration is, therefore, at the forefront of leadership innovation. It is through collaboration, as mentioned earlier, that other innovative approaches of school leadership are often being developed in England.

5

Innovative approaches leading to system leadership

John Dunford, the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, in an address to the National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust[23] argued that:

"The greatest challenge on our leadership journey is how we can bring about system improvement. How can we contribute to the raising of standards, not only in our own school, but in others and colleges too? What types of leaders are needed for this task? What style of leadership is required if we are to achieve the sea-change in performance that is demanded of us?"

This implies a significantly more substantive engagement with other schools in order to bring about system transformation. This is being termed system leadership. Specifically, a system leader may be defined as a school leader who is willing and able to shoulder wider system roles and in doing so is almost as concerned with the success and attainment of students in other schools as they are with their own[24].

The concept of system leadership was endorsed by the government in the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*[25]. Specifically, the White Paper set out the government's intention to:

- Develop better career paths for: school leaders who have the talent and experience to be considered as national leaders of education; those with the ability to run our most challenging schools; and those with the talent to be school leaders of the future.

- Ask NCSL, working in partnership with the National Strategies, to develop the leaders of our most complex schools, – those facing multiple disadvantage, and federations.

- Encourage the growth of federations and other partnership arrangements which ensure our most successful school leaders are used to best effect and are able to support our less successful schools.

In response, NCSL[26] stated that:

'This means the best leadership will get to the schools that need it most, more quickly. …Complex schools include academies, federations of schools, schools with serious weaknesses and schools facing challenging circumstances. …Pupils and staff in these schools will benefit from the influence of national leaders of education. …NCSL will be disseminating good practice and guidance on the skills required for these complex roles, and will be commissioning development and support activities for existing, newly appointed and aspirant executive headteachers.'

Taken together research, informed comment and government policy suggests that the concept of 'system leadership' is an idea whose time has come. One can summarise a range of stakeholder aspirations by saying that system leadership is seen to have the potential to provide:

- A wider resource for school improvement, making more of our most successful leaders by encouraging and enabling them to: identify and transfer best practice; reduce the risk of innovation and change

in other schools; and develop and lead partnerships that improve and diversify educational pathways for students within and across localities.

- A wider and authentic response to low attaining schools. Currently schools in special measures or serious weaknesses are responsible for approximately 300,000 pupils. Strong leadership is vital to turn these schools around. However, a central challenge is that these schools are often the least able to attract suitable leaders. Our most successful heads hold the potential to impact on these schools, which need their expertise, by working to develop and mobilise leadership capacity in the pursuit of whole school improvement.

- As a potential means to resolve, in the longer term, the emerging and related challenges of a declining demographic supply of well-qualified school leaders, falling student rolls and hence increasingly non-viable schools, and yet ongoing pressures to sustain educational provision in all localities. As NCSL[27] suggests, system leadership solutions may include fewer headteachers across some groups of schools, new challenges and incentives for the retention of the most experienced headteachers, as well as new development opportunities for deputies and middle leaders to experience aspects of headship at first hand before taking on full headteacher responsibilities.

Following research to map the emerging system leadership landscape, Hopkins and Higham[28] propose five key categories as innovative leadership practice. These emerging roles include heads who:

- Develop and **lead a successful educational improvement partnership** across local communities to support welfare and potential. These are most usually focused on a set of specific themes that have clear outcomes and reach beyond the capacity of any one single institution.

- Choose to **lead and improve a school in extremely challenging circumstances** and then sustain them as high valued added institutions over a significant period of time.

- **Partner another school facing difficulties and improve it**. This category includes executive heads and leaders of more informal improvement arrangements.

- Act as a **community leader** to broker and shape partnerships or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children's welfare and potential.

- Work as **change agents** or experts leaders as a National Leader of Education, School Improvement Partner or Consultant Leader.

These system leadership roles are perhaps the most advanced example of a contemporary trend that complements (or perhaps counterpoises) the conventional model of state intervention. Expert school leaders, working for sustainable improvement both in their own schools and for the wider system, are at the vanguard of attempts to drive systemic improvement from within the school system. This emerging trend is towards greater responsibility *and* an expectation on experienced school leaders to work for systemic improvement. There will be differences in how this develops in different contexts, and between the secondary and primary sectors. But as system leaders hold out the wider potential for a rebalancing towards professionally led reform, following several decades dominated by state prescription, the key focuses of system leadership will on enhancing teaching and learning across the whole system not just within one school.

Six key trends

In this paper we have provided a brief outline of the evolving educational landscape and the regulatory framework within which school leaders operate, their responsibilities and the challenges facing them, as well as some emerging responses to these challenges including, in particular, collaborative networks and system leadership. Based on this analysis, we now turn in this final section to a consideration of the future[29].

From our research, discussion with DCSF officials, evidence presented by social partners on the future of school leadership and other relevant sources, including STRB evidence, we have identified six key trends relevant to the future of school leaders in England. These are:

1. School Improvement: School standards will continue to be a central focus for government and school leaders in terms of both overall increases in student attainment and the narrowing of achievement gaps between specific social groups. Several trends are anticipated:

Accountability pressures on school leaders for student examination performance are likely to remain and in specific instances intensified. For instance, the National Challenge initiative (launched in June 2008) targets England's lowest-performing schools and requires every secondary school in England to surpass the 30 per cent five good GCSE benchmark within three years. These schools are provided with a range of support but if progress is not made 'failing' schools will be closed permanently and/or re-opened as academies or trust schools.

Refinement of this conventional model of state intervention will be complemented (or perhaps balanced) by attempts to drive improvement from within the school system. Greater responsibility and expectation will be placed on expert leaders to work for systemic improvement. Such 'system leadership roles' already includes, amongst others: National Leaders of Education; School Improvement Partners; Consultant leaders; Leading Edge school leaders. These roles are likely to become increasingly numerous and influential.

A key challenge at all levels of the system is the extent to which these two trends can be harnessed together rather than remaining separate and potentially divergent forces. For instance, will a greater cadre of system leaders receive more incentives (or fewer disincentives) to deploy their experience and their school's capacity to lead improvements in partner schools deemed to have serious weaknesses? Even more crucially, will school leaders not only measure their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, but are they also willing to continue to shoulder system leadership roles in the belief that in order to transform the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way?

2. Succession planning: The implications of a retiring 'baby-boomer' generation during the next 10 years, coupled with evidence that some deputy and assistant leaders are not attracted to headteacher posts, will increase the impact of senior leadership recruitment and retention pressures in schools. These pressures will also be felt at middle leadership level in shortage teacher curriculum areas. Several trends are anticipated:

Schools will need to specifically nurture and plan for sustainable leadership succession. In part this work is aided by growing recognition of the importance of distributed leadership. Building on this distribution of leadership, and in light of the recent modernisation of the workforce, schools will need to view the progression of potential future leaders as a central part of their

school development plan. In addition, existing leaders will increasingly need to view a seamless transfer to an appropriately prepared replacement as a key and final criterion of their own success.

The wider system will also need to improve overall recruitment and in particular retention rates of school leaders. It is clear that increasing bureaucratisation remains a significant deterrent. The New Relationship with Schools policy was in part developed to streamline data requests and reduce bureaucratic demands on leaders, but clearly more remains to be done.

In this context, a key challenge for the system will be how government can work with its social partners, local authorities and national agencies to support school leaders better and reduce the pressures upon them. For instance, how can harnessing the skills and experience of the whole workforce help develop sustainable approaches to leadership at the local level? What is the role of and incentives for experienced school leaders to develop future leaders both in their own school and for the system? How can social partners work to raise the public profile of and respect for the work of the school workforce generally and school leaders more specifically?

3. Governance: The governing body will remain a vitally important element of school leadership. School governing bodies are now legally responsible for providing – or for arranging for the provision of – extended services. They must first consult the local community on those services, so that the services reflect their needs. As all schools become extended schools, this will be an increasingly important role for governing bodies to fulfil. There are concerns about the size and effectiveness of some bodies. In response, central government has legislated to provide schools with the option of adopting tighter, more streamlined bodies to better drive the support and challenge of school leaders. There will also be a wider range of new governance structures. Several trends are anticipated:

There will be an increasing distance between the governance of some schools and the influence of local authorities. For instance, a growing number of academies will be chaired by sponsors or their appointees. Trust arrangements will be adopted by some schools so as to gain independent state school status and freedom from local control. Federations of schools, as well as Educational Improvement Partnerships, will formalise the devolution of defined delivery and governance responsibilities and resources from their local authorities.

There will also be a trend towards governing bodies partnering, joining or amalgamating together so as to accept responsibility for the education of all the students within their geographic area. This will be led by federations. But equally the freedoms associated with trust status (or trusts within a trust) could be used to promote collaboration and inclusion to directly address the needs of all students in a locality and bring together a range of policy initiatives including extended schooling, personalised learning, 14–19 reforms, high performing schools.

A key challenge will be in interpreting how these governance changes impact on school leaders, local government and the system more generally. So for example how can the role of the School Improvement Partner (SIP) that was originally designed to be an agent of system transformation fulfil that original purpose and not become merely the agent of a bureaucratic system? In particular, how will strategic leadership across a locality (for efficiency, effectiveness and equity) be assured across increasingly independent (groups of) state schools? This leads to the broader question of whether such an increasingly lateral system of school governance and inter-dependence can be taken to scale?

4. Personalised learning: The ultimate purpose of leadership will remain a broad and balanced education for every child and the creation of the school and classroom level conditions where every young person can feel secure and reach their potential. The system will need to ensure governance and structural changes do not divert that focus. Leadership of quality teaching and learning will need to remain the bedrock of large-scale long-term systemic improvement. In particular, there will be a continuing and increasing demand for schools to tailor education to the needs and interests of every child. Several personalisation trends are anticipated.

For children and young people, personalised learning will increasingly mean clear learning pathways through the education system and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, fulfilled, lifelong learners. This will demand whole school leadership of assessment for learning and meta-cognition, with a framework of learning skills being taught coherently across the curriculum.

For teachers and school leaders, personalised learning will mean a professional ethos that accepts and assumes every child comes to the classroom with a different knowledge base and skill set, as well as varying aptitudes

and aspirations and that, as a result, there will need to be a determination for every young person's needs to be assessed and their talents developed through diverse teaching strategies and appropriate curricula and assessment.

For school leaders, personalised learning will involve providing or giving access to the wide range of extended services. School leaders will be faced with ensuring access to extended services for all their pupils, and need to consider how they chose to do this: for example through contracting with the private, voluntary and independent sector to provide these services, or thorough having a contractor to manage the extended services and sub-contract their delivery.

A key challenge will be how different elements of personalisation can be joined-up for individual children. For instance, how will the link between pedagogy, curriculum and assessment be redesigned, including through ICT? Do school leaders have the capability and capacity to lead the required improvements in teaching and learning? Will schools demand or require greater freedoms to personalise education in specific localities and at specific phases, in for example the 14–19 sector? How will innovation be spread throughout the system? And how can the whole workforce be mobilised to contribute to this overriding goal? Specifically, the leadership challenge will be to ensure collaboration between and within schools actually delivers the sharing and refinement of best practices, disciplined innovation, and ultimately improvements in student learning that it promises.

5. Professionalism: Delivering an increasingly personalised education to raise standards and improve student progression will in turn demand the continuing development of professional leadership and teaching skills. Leaders will need to be increasingly strategic in clarifying their school's priorities and working towards them, in ensuring value for money, and in leading a more diverse workforce. Several 'professionalisation' trends are anticipated.

Leaders will increasingly be expected to build professional learning communities within and beyond schools. These will play a key role in enhancing teachers' repertoires of learning and teaching strategies. The leadership of learning communities will include encouraging evidence based practice with time for collective inquiry, facilitating collegial and coaching relationships, ensuring that performance management is effectively implemented

and designing professional development to tackle within-school variation and share internal best practice.

The leadership of professional learning will also include the development, management and strategic alignment to school priorities of networking and collaboration with other schools. There will also be a wider range of professionalisms in schools as part of both the ongoing workforce reform, ECM and 14–19 agendas. For instance, extended schooling, multi-agency co-sited approaches to welfare and inclusion, financial management across federations, and widening 14–19 pathways will all bring new leadership challenges.

A key challenge will be how the system generally, and government in particular, seek to build the capacity for such professionalism following several decades of state prescription. It is crucial that capacity is built at the same time as standards continue to rise. This means that there needs to be a major focus on the development of those professional skills across the workforce needed for the personalisation of learning rather than just structural changes. For example, besides the necessary teaching and learning skills, will school leadership be encouraged to develop a more 'intelligent accountability' system that rebalances external with more internal accountability and assessment – for instance with more curriculum innovation, rigorous self-evaluation linked to improvement strategies, moderated teacher assessment at more levels to develop assessment for learning and/or the primary use of contextual value added data to help identify strengths and weaknesses?

6. Training and standards: In responding to these challenges, the initial and continuous professional development of school leaders will remain a key priority for central government and NCSL. By 2009, all newly appointed headteachers will be required to have completed NPQH. Academy principals are already undertaking the Academies Principals Designate Programme. Advanced leadership programmes are being developed to cater for experienced leaders contemplating system leadership roles. Several trends are anticipated to guide leadership training and standards.

First, a focus on problem-based learning. Evaluations of leadership development efforts have found that exposure to new knowledge via training can bear only a small relationship to change in practice at the school. In accord, there will be demands for future development to be based on (a) more active learning, with opportunities for practice, and to engage in tasks carrying the responsibility, complexity and emotion of leadership, (b) more self-directed learning, that can be responsive to school context and specific capacity building needs [30] and (c) more effective transitions into new leadership roles and practice, with on-the-job experience supported by coaching, reflective practice and feedback.

Second, a focus on a wider repertoire of practice. We have seen earlier that there is an impressive array of evidence that individual leaders actually behave quite differently (and productively) depending on the circumstances they are facing and the people with whom they are working. This calls into question the belief in habitual leadership 'styles' and the search for a single best model of style. There is an important paradox here that needs to be recognised. In fact almost all successful school leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices. It is the enactment of the same basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – that is responsive to the context. The task of leadership therefore is to self consciously adapt the repertoire of practices to the context of their individual school.

The challenge, however, will be to ensure that training programmes and national standards are and remain responsive to emerging leadership roles, models and policy agendas. It will also be a challenge to ensure that training programmes and opportunities are;

a) sufficiently differentiated for the increasing range of leadership roles emerging within the system

b) be sufficiently sensitive to the learning needs of an increasingly sophisticated profession.

A final word

It is clear that these trends represent a wide and deep agenda for school leadership development in England. The agenda implicit in these trends is both practical and realisable. It is one that will demand a new compact between school leaders, local government, national agencies and central government. In particular, it demands a rebalancing from challenge towards support for school leaders, with more effective leadership of learning in schools, a greater focus on a smaller number of priorities encouraged and supported in individual schools and fewer short-term initiatives and bureaucratic demands from the centre.

But even this may not be enough. Perversely these trends are also at times contradictory both within the themes themselves and between them. The future is nothing if it is not about solving problems and meeting challenges for which there is no immediate solution and then to build the capacity for sustaining this capacity into the medium and long term. This, however, requires leadership of a different order.

It was Ron Heifetz[31] who focused attention on the concept of an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge is a problem situation for which solutions lie outside current ways of operating. This is in stark contrast to a technical problem for which the know-how already exists. This distinction has resonance for school leadership in England. Put simply, resolving a technical problem is a management issue; tackling adaptive challenges requires leadership.

Almost by definition, adaptive challenges demand learning as progress requires new ways of thinking and operating. Mobilising people to meet adaptive challenges is at the heart of leadership practice. In the short term, leadership helps people meet an immediate challenge. In the medium to long term, leadership generates capacity to enable people to meet an ongoing stream of adaptive challenges. Ultimately, adaptive work requires us to reflect on the moral purpose by which we seek to thrive and demands diagnostic enquiry into the realities we face that threaten the realisation of those purposes. We began this paper by reflecting on the development of the narrative of school leadership in England over the past twenty years. Tackling adaptive challenges represents the next phase of the journey.

This is an abbreviated version of Higham R, Hopkins D and Ahtaridou E, 2007, *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report for England*, Available from: http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/45/39279379.pdf

[1] **David Hopkins** is the HSBC iNet Chair in International Leadership. Between 2002 and 2005 he served three Secretary of States as the Chief Adviser on School Standards at the Department for Education and Skills. **Rob Higham** is the RCUK Research Fellow in the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education (IoE). Before joining the IoE, Rob spent four years working at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (then DfES), including as speech writer to David Miliband MP.
Elpida Ahtaridou is a Researcher at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education (IoE). She was previously a Lecturer in Education at the University of Central Lancashire and previous to that Lecture in Teacher Training (Post-compulsory) at the University of Plymouth.

[2] Higham, R, Hopkins, D and Ahtaridou, E, 2007, *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report for England*. Available from: http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/45/39279379.pdf

[3] Bush, T, Glover, D, 2003, *School leadership: Concepts and Evidence*, http://www.ncsl.org.uk/media/F7A/88/bush-school-leadership-full.pdf, p.8.

[4] There is of course a multitude of variations on a theme that seek to capture different leadership purposes, priorities and styles. Such proliferation has been criticised by, for instance, Leithwood et al, 2006, who argue: 'Leadership by adjective is a growth industry. We have instructional leadership, transformational leadership, moral leadership, constructivist leadership, servant leadership, cultural leadership, and primal leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002). A few of these qualify as leadership theories and several are actually tested leadership theories. But most are actually just slogans.' (p.7)

[5] Leithwood, K, Day, C, Sammons, P, Harris, A and Hopkins, D, 2006, *Successful School Leadership What It Is and How It Influences Pupil Learning*, Research Report RR800, Nottingham, DfES, NCSL, p.4

[6] National College for School Leadership, 2001, *Leadership in schools*, Nottingham, NCSL, p.1

[7] Leithwood, K and Riehl C, 2005, What we know about successful school leadership in Firestone W and Riehl C,

eds, *A New Agenda: Directions for research on educational leadership*, pp22–47, New York, Teachers College Press

[8] The DCSF was, prior to the DfES, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

[9] Department for Education and Skills, 2006d, *School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document 2006* http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/10996/Pay%20%20STPCD%202006%20SECTION %202%20(v).doc

[10] Department for Education and Skills, 2004, *National Standards for Headteachers* http://www.ashcombe.surrey.sch.uk/Information/new_staff/NS4HFinalpdf.pdf, p.4

[11] PricewatersCoopers, 2007, *Independent Study into School Leadership: Main Report*, London, Department for Education and Skills, p.17

[12] Smithers and Robinson, 2007, *School Headship. Present and Future*, http://www.nut.org.uk/resources/pdf/Headsfin.pdf, p.31

[13] Association of Schools and College Leaders, 2006b, *Strengthening Intelligent Accountability in England: An ASCL policy Statement*, London, ASCL

[14] Department for Education and Skills, 2005, *Education Improvement Partnerships: Local Collaboration for School Improvement and Better Service Delivery*, London, DfES

[15] Department for Education and Skills, 2006, *The Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Maintaining the Excellent Progress* http://www. dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategyprogress/docs/5yearstrategy-maintexcell.pdf

[16] Department for Education and Employment, 2000, *The Role of Local Education Authority in School Education*, London, DfEE.

[17] PriceWatersCoopers, 2007, *Independent Study into School Leadership: Main Report*, London, Department for Education and Skills

[18] Office for Standards in Education, 2004, Standards and Quality 2002/2003 – *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools*, 4 February 2004, 0–10-292677–8, The Stationery Office

[19] Hill R, 2006 Leadership that Lasts: Sustainable School Leadership in the 21st Century, London, ASCL.

[20] Department for Education and Skills, 2005, *Education Improvement Partnerships: Local Collaboration for School Improvement and Better Service Delivery*, London, DfES

[21] DfES Standards Website October 2005

[22] Huxham, C and Vangen, S, 2000, Leadership in the Shaping and Implementation of collaborative agendas: how things happen in a (not quite) joined up world, *Academy of Management Journal (Special Forum on Research for Millennium)*, **43**, No. 6, pp.1159–1175

[23] Dunford, J, 2005, *Watering the plants: leading schools and improving the system*, Address to the National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

[24] Hopkins, D and Higham, R, 2007, System Leadership: Mapping the Landscape' *School Leadership and Management*, **27**, No. 2, pp.147–166.

[25] Department for Education and Skills, 2005c, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, London, DfES

[26] National College for School Leadership, 2005, *Leadership in complex schools: Advice to the Secretary of State*, Nottingham, NCSL

[27] National School for School Leadership, 2006d, *School Leaders leading the System*, NCSL's Leadership Network in conference, Nottingham, NCSL

[28] Hopkins, D and Higham, R, 2007, System Leadership: Mapping the Landscape, School Leadership and Management, **27**, No. 2, pp.147–166

[29] This section has been informed by discussion with DCSF officials, evidence presented by social partners on the future of school leadership and other relevant sources, including STRB evidence.

[30] Leithwood, K, Day, C, Sammons, P, Harris, A and Hopkins, D, 2006, *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership*, Available from http://www.npbs.ca/ 2007-elements/pdfs/seven-strong%20claims.pdf and

National College for School Leadership, 2007, *What we Know about School Leadership*, Nottingham, NCSL Available from http://www.ncsl.org.uk/media/ 3E7/55/what-we-know-about-school-leadership.pdf

[31] Heifetz, R, 1994, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press