

# Under the microscope

Leading in a climate of close  
public scrutiny

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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## Introduction

In 2002 the first City Academy opened and with it brought a new set of senior educational leadership challenges. Initially, the then DfES announced plans to establish 200 academies by 2010. This figure has since been increased to 400 to be in operation within a similar timescale.

The Academies programme aims to challenge the culture of educational under-attainment and to deliver real improvements in standards. All Academies are located in areas of disadvantage. They either replace one or more existing schools facing challenging circumstances or are established where there is a need for additional school places or to share outstanding practice.

Each Academy promises to provide an excellent environment for teaching and learning that is comparable with the best available in the maintained sector, whilst offering a broad and balanced curriculum to students of all abilities focusing especially on one or more subject areas.

Academies are, in reality at present, the last attempt at giving some of the poorest achieving and worst resourced schools a final radical boost in terms of buildings, resources, staffing and curriculum. As a highly political programme and arguably an expensive one at face value, it was from the outset destined to be at the centre of public attention. As a result, Academies cannot be allowed to fail and the spotlight has remained on them since their inception.

### The research aims to:

- investigate the leadership strategies, approaches and skills which enable Academies to transform themselves within a climate of close public scrutiny.

While leaders of non-academies may be less likely to face such sustained national attention, this study and its recommendations may nevertheless be of value to school leaders in general and especially to those whose schools are in challenging circumstances.

## Methodology

Factors which influenced the research project included:

- the lack of any previous research on the leadership of Academies in general, and specifically within the context of close public scrutiny;
- a desire to identify strategies for new leaders of Academies and other schools facing similar challenges to cope with the pressure of leading under intense public scrutiny

This qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews with Principals, focuses on 12 Academies which had been open and in operation for three or more years at the time of writing. The sample reflects a breadth of geographical location, gender of Principals, specialism of their particular Academy and type of sponsor.

## Significance of the research

Whilst considerable research has been undertaken into school effectiveness and school improvement linked to leadership inputs and outcomes, historically very little has focused on schools in high-poverty areas or schools with above average levels of deprivation.

With some notable exceptions (Barth et al. 1999; Leithwood and Steinbach 2002; Borman et al. 2000; Harris and Chapman, 2002; and Harris et al. 2006), the contemporary school improvement literature has not been overly concerned with schools facing difficult or challenging circumstances.

The key premise of this research lies in the well-known and validated fact that a school's leadership plays a significant role in determining a school's success and promoting school improvement (Seven strong claims about successful school leadership, NCSL, 2006). The additional dimension for this study concentrates on the ways in which this is done in a continuous climate of close public scrutiny and how this impacts upon the way in which leadership operates to secure successful outcomes for a school.

## Main findings

- Amongst the twelve Academy Principals interviewed there was a general consensus that they had all received, mostly unwelcome, media attention during their first three years in post.
- Leaders of academies identified a need for political and entrepreneurial leadership skills to cope with the demands of this context. Distributed leadership was also found to be an important and effective strategy.
- Academy leaders need to be aware of political developments at both the macro and micro level. While important in any school, the need for such leadership skills in academies is particularly marked.
- The Principal respondents reported the maturation of bodies such as the Academies Division at the Department for Children Schools and Families, have helped to address broader concerns reported in the media.
- Changes in both local and national political climates during the period of research were felt to have impacted positively on the way in which Academies were viewed by the media and local communities.
- The international interest which the Academies programme seems to have generated has added a different dimension to the way in which Academies are seeing themselves and their work.
- The incorporation and formal recognition of Academies into the Special Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) has had a significant impact on their national profile amongst secondary schools.
- As a very publicly high profile programme the government has made use of several of the new Academies as centres from which to launch the announcement of major new national initiatives. This has brought with it extensive national media coverage including television. Respondents talked of the very positive impact such media exposure has had for their Academy.
- Respondents talked of the importance of involving the local community in the work of the Academy. They also commented on the impact of engaging the community in improving attitudes to learning and generating a culture of aspiration through winning their confidence.

## Recommendation and Conclusions

### 1. Political/political awareness

When faced with a highly demanding job of raising standards from an extremely low base, maintaining awareness of Political developments is critical to the overall success of academies.

### 2. Prepare your staff and listen to them

Academy Principals, experienced, resilient and confident about their own motivations for taking the job, need to be mindful of the experiences of their staff, who may experience a degree of hostility and challenge over issues as the Academy develops. Preparing staff to deal with these situations and ensuring they are well informed and supported is necessary to secure an Academy in the wider community and profession.

### 3. Take the lead: involve and invite

By proactively inviting the community and parents into their Academy, Principals felt able to gain greater control of their domain and establish relationships with these groups on a more positive footing.

### 4. Make the local press work for you

Purposefully building relationships with the local press and providing them with items to run which focus on the achievements of the students can help to promote a positive image of the school in media. In this way, schools are in a stronger position to deal with unforeseen negative stories when they arise and may be able to secure a more sympathetic ear.

### 6. Engage professionally and open the door

Some principals believed that opening the door professionally for the benefit of the children and staff has been an effective way to break down any actual or perceived hostility. Running training on some of the areas of excellence in an Academy for other schools can be an eye-opening positive experience for those previously reluctant, suspicious or wary of Academies.

## 7. Network professionally

The opportunity for Academy Principals to forge both formal and informal links to support one another and share positive strategies to secure successful outcomes cannot be underestimated. Extending such associations through both links with Local Authorities and other specialist schools is a priority if Academies with their pioneering work, are to be assimilated into the broader educational arena.

## References

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