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Stepping up, stepping out:
learning about leadership in practice

NCSL's Leadership Network in conference

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In 2007 NCSL's Leadership Network annual conference 'Stepping up, stepping out' brought together over 500 school leaders and others in education-related roles to explore their learning about school leadership in the current context and share perspectives drawn from research, policy and practice.

This booklet presents snapshots of school leadership in practice in the 21st century. It summarises the leadership challenges and strategies identified by school leaders and invites you to consider next steps to action in your context.

Stepping up, stepping out: learning about leadership in practice

The snapshots of practice presented in this booklet draw on the work of NCSL's Leadership Network which aims to represent school leaders from all phases, contributing to leadership learning and drawing policy issues from professional practice. The Network is considered to be unique in its composition and its ability to link policy to practice. Its aspiration is to bring the best of school leadership into local, regional and national debate.

'Stepping up, stepping out' was the fourth annual conference of the Leadership Network. A combination of inputs and discussion forums examined new models of leadership and the associated implications for school leaders in stepping up and stepping out to leadership in the 21st century. In response to this focus, three key themes emerged as characterising the conference debate:

1. strategic leadership

2. building leadership capacity

3. leadership for 21st century learning

The views and reflections of conference participants were captured throughout and have been drawn upon in presenting the perspectives from practice outlined in this booklet.

For each theme, key points of discussion are presented derived from the conference conversations. Associated challenges for leadership are highlighted, along with any strategies that conference participants identified or were already testing. This is followed by a 'next steps to action' activity – designed to prompt you to consider what action you might take in your situation in developing your leadership practice in the future.

Linked resources

To access further practical examples of school leaders stepping up and stepping out to leadership, view the accounts of practice provided by Leadership Network members in the two short films 'Leading learning' and 'Growing leadership' presented on the DVD which accompanies this publication.

Strategic leadership

One of the key themes that threaded the conference was strategic leadership. The recent independent review of school leadership from PricewaterhouseCoopers presented at the conference has highlighted the increased complexity of the school leader role. There are new demands to work across the community, as well as to manage initiatives such as Building Schools for the Future and develop personalised learning, while still maintaining a sharp focus on raising standards. Participant discussions focused around the areas below.

Vision and strategic intent

The central importance of a *"simple and clear"* vision was reiterated. This should *"consider what the school is about beyond academic success"* – take the *"big picture"* and change it into something meaningful for the school. Some leaders related this to moral purpose. They committed themselves to gaining contributions from all stakeholders, with trust as the salient and necessary condition. Getting these ideas right was identified as more important than any detailed plan. These ideas are discussed more fully in Booklet 2: Leadership learning in perspective.

Strategic intent was seen as the distillation of priorities into a small number of significant purposes. Some expressed the view that this might be used to generate a new type of framework of accountabilities.

"What influences our strategic intent? Whilst moral purpose is uniquely felt, strategic intent is about picking up early on outside clues, judging which have a shelf-life and successfully making them priority growth areas."

At the same time, leaders did not want to simply react to the big ideas of government and external agencies.

"If a school has a clear vision focused on learning and what is best for children and whatever changes are imposed upon the school are thought about through those ideals and vision, then change doesn't mean losing the vision for the school. Relationships and discussion within the whole school community drives the school forward."

Vital is *"simple language"* and effective communication to secure real understanding: to staff, pupils, governors, local authority and external partners. Many leaders recognised that there were weaknesses to address here. A particularly critical element appeared to be dialogue with staff colleagues to convince them that strategic intent can be converted into the *"do-able"*

Involving pupils

Participants were inspired by the presentation of a case study from Cannon Lane First School that illustrated powerfully how pupils can both identify, shape and word strategic intent within 'our school book'. This promotes an inclusive spirit of *"how we do things round here"*.

"I'm thinking about new ways to involve the pupils in implementing changes. Their honesty and focus on improving their school can really drive changes on."

Balancing the strategic and the operational

"I often feel my strategic leadership is diverted by operational demand from both internal and external influences. I have a strong vision and strategic view of achieving it – but often end up filling quotas instead."

This was a common experience and school leaders struggled to see how they could preserve the time needed for reflection. There were a few ideas:

"You can make mundane tasks and operational issues easier by using ICT systems to help you in school improvement planning. Such systems involve other members of the school management team and enable them to see the bigger picture. This could create the time for strategic thinking."

The issue of accountability

Widespread concerns were expressed about the gap between current accountabilities and the emerging strategic agenda.

"I feel I am walking on a knife edge around the control of direction of strategic leadership. As head of a children's centre, I have local accountability for the school functions, but real conflict on accountabilities around childcare functions…This has been fed by national government not taking a legislative lead … A new holistic view of strategic leadership is required."

Challenges for strategic leadership

- Identifying a sharp and relevant focus with learning at the centre.
- Developing the strategic leadership skills of the school leader and leadership team.
- Addressing the fact that strategic leadership looks different at different stages of a school's life and journey.
- Building capacity in order to create the space, time and talent for strategic thinking.
- Generating a level of trust that will inspire staff, pupils and stakeholders to play a contributory role in the development of vision and strategic intent.
- Creating a process of engagement and communication appropriate for each constituency.
- Expressing vision and strategic intent in simple language to promote understanding and commitment.
- Finding a way of keeping in touch with the operational without being taken over by it.
- Developing and implementing a strategy for dealing with the urgent to ensure it does not supplant the important.

Strategies for strategic leadership

- ✔ *"My main aim at present is to develop the capacity of my leadership team to be more strategic."*
- ✔ *"Increase stakeholders' involvement in creation of strategic intent."*
- ✔ *"I am attempting to build a clear picture of trends over the next few years in order to identify likely expectations, demands, opportunities."*
- ✔ *"I want to deepen pupils' involvement in the SIP – produce a version they can understand and contribute to."*
- ✔ *"I need to set aside time in a week for capacity to think and imagine."*
- ✔ *"Stop associating or combining good ideas about school improvement and start to cohere big time, for example, having student voice as a good 'bolt-on' versus strengthening and improving our development plan via student voice... sounds a lot better than trying to stick new ideas together."*

Next steps to strategic leadership

What are the next steps to action in taking on the challenges of strategic leadership in your own situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

Building leadership capacity

Leadership Network members were keen to debate how the complex demands of the new agenda might be addressed. Building leadership capacity emerged as a necessary strategy. This focus potentially unlocks capacity both for strategic leadership and for the growth of new leaders. Professor Louise Stoll emphasised the value and meaning of working on this by drawing on the collective experience and thinking of the Leadership Network as a professional learning community.

Addressing the agenda

School leaders reflected on the need to create their own space for strategic thinking. This was identified as a difficult issue in smaller schools:

"It is important that capacity is in place so you have time to explore, risk-take and develop vision."

"There is currently too much on me. I need to develop others in the school – I think this is a problem for small schools where all staff wear many hats and embedding reflective practice is a major challenge."

Equally, given the new and diverse responsibilities of leadership, it was recognised that it is not possible for a single headteacher to be an expert at leading change across every domain. Participants identified Every Child Matters (ECM), extended schools, 14–19 development and Building Schools for the Future as offering potential leadership opportunities.

School leader intent and behaviour

Some school leaders at the conference recognised they would need to change their own approach and behaviour to make progress on this. Proposed shifts included sharing reflections on personal leadership practice, making leadership ideas more accessible and establishing a more inclusive climate where colleagues would feel confident to step up.

"I want to make sure I am modeling my own expectations."

Proof of a successful outcome was identified as the ability of the school to operate effectively without the headteacher's presence. This also raised questions about exit strategy.

"I am a mature head…. I need to lead a period of change including preparation for when I move on."

Growing leaders

Many delegates had already adopted or were contemplating practices for growing leaders. The following give a flavour of the range:

- *"We need to look at more of a matrix where more than one person leads."*
- *"I am clearly defining the roles of all leaders in school in order to have a greater impact on learning."*
- *"Develop the deputy head role as more operational, but share dialogues which help develop shared vision."*
- *"Giving emerging leaders increased opportunities with carefully structured guidance to support them."*

One key lever for change was perceived to be the role of governors and the need for headteachers to positively influence them. There were concerns that their preference would be the traditional leadership model.

"Engage governors in discussions to support innovative models of school leadership that can lead to sustainable development."

Leaders' stepping up, stepping out

One of the Leadership Network's regional leaders has implemented a leadership model to release her from school two days a week:

"Our school has an assistant head who leads one of the days I'm out and a senior manager who leads on the other. The senior manager's post was advertised internally and four staff members applied. This showed me there are people who want leadership roles… This model allows two teachers to step up into headship but with the support of me as a safety net …. These opportunities happened at a time when I needed sustenance as a head. The school benefits from having three leaders instead of one and is refreshed by new ideas from the younger leaders and by those I bring back in."

Challenges for building capacity

- Making leadership appealing.
- Questioning the appropriateness of a school leader's own leadership style preferences.
- Identifying opportunities for real responsibility.
- Balancing talent spotting and open invitations in order to foster a culture of aspiration.
- Utilising professional development that draws from a range of methods and that is fit for each purpose.
- Operating direction and support that is tight or loose as the situation requires.
- Being prepared to relinquish control.

Strategies for building capacity

At a school level…

- ✔ *"My main aim at present is to develop the capacity of my leadership team to be more strategic. I have taken on a team who were previously only involved in operational management and trying to enable them to be strategic and to be a leader is not as easy as I'd hoped. We are working with a coach to help the process."*
- ✔ *"The school is currently investing in senior and middle management CPD in order to build capacity."*
- ✔ *"Use internships and co-leadership opportunities to increase access to experiences."*

At a system level…

- ✔ *"Think more about how new leaders are developed, supported and mentored, ie more away from a like-for-like model towards a cross-phase approach based on leadership skills."*
- ✔ *"Being part of collaborative networks can provide insight into the leadership practice of excellent colleagues."*
- ✔ *"Involve deputies and assistant heads in Leadership Network conferences."*
- ✔ *"Celebrate the good bits about headship."*

Next steps to building leadership capacity

What are the next steps to action in taking on the challenges of building leadership capacity in your own situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

Leadership for 21st century learning

Current and forthcoming curriculum changes reinforce the desirability for school leaders to think and plan a diversified leadership strategy. Leadership responsibilities will need to be distributed among school staff and colleagues in other agencies encouraged to step up. This section gives a sense of the areas that are engaging the attention of Leadership Network members.

Personalising learning

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) has reframed this concept as 'personalising learning' and their working definition as introduced to the conference was: *"Meeting more of the educational needs of more students more fully than ever before"*. Their approach is elaborated more fully in Booklet 2: Leadership learning in perspective.

Discussions showed that school leaders have not yet fully articulated this for themselves or got far in formulating how it might be implemented. They were concerned about a number of tensions:

- The variation in funding between local authorities, given that all pupils should be regarded as having equal needs as individuals.
- *"Squaring the excellent ideas of personalised learning with the demands of league tables and school achievement. How do we enable children to develop at paces appropriate to their needs outside the constraints of fixed assessment periods?"*
- Ensuring that principles of inclusion are retained, for example, *"focusing on meeting special needs in an extended services setting."*

Approaches that were being tested were:

- *"Each student in Year 9 reviews progress and plans for Key Stage 4 choices with their tutor, a senior teacher and parent."*
- *"Groups of learners work with a mentor."*
- *"An 'expert writers' group of six children determine for themselves topic areas that will help them to develop their writing, for example, the army, wild animals, football."*
- *"Staff work with groups on literacy, particularly writing and then 'conference' 1:1. This approach is now extending to numeracy."*
- *"With lower juniors, individual and group needs and interests about any topic are established through two powerful questions: What do you know? What do you want to know? Pupils then log their learning journey."*
- *"New technologies are used to track progress and the results to help students and parents understand predicted grades."*

Creativity and innovation

School leaders have strengthening beliefs in the necessity to be creative and innovative. Some would like to see a move towards national minimum standards for provision to help generate more curriculum space.

Some specific focuses of current activity were mentioned:

- *"Moving the school to a more cross-curricular approach."*
- *"Introducing a skills-based 4–7 curriculum cutting across traditional subject content."*
- *"Developing Assessment for Learning."*
- *"Moving to deeper learning – higher order questioning needs to be modelled by all staff."*
- *"Exploring 14–19 practice across a consortium."*
- Substantial pupil involvement: *"We need to think further about children's ownership and understanding of the curriculum."*

However, many expressed the view that they feel vulnerable, and also frustrated that innovative development struggles to be accommodated within the current accountability framework. However, it was also acknowledged that:

"It is easier to take risks when networking or working in collaboration."

Learning from the practice of others

School leaders responded strongly to case studies and professional insights into practice provided at the conference. They want to learn from and be inspired by each other and are keen to develop an effective mechanism for achieving this. They recognised that each example will need reviewing and adapting to ensure relevance to their own context.

"How can we develop dialogue about practice that can be personalised in our own school teaching and learning context? Our created solution might then be shared through a directory of good practice available to all."

Challenges of leading 21st century learning

- *"Emotional drain"* of trying to balance desire to be creative against the constraints of the system.
- Debating what outcomes are and how they can be measured fairly and effectively.
- Securing the support of governors to undertake what they see as risky.
- Convincing parents that curriculum change will not prejudice results.
- Classroom teacher time for participation in enquiry and development.
- The quality of provision and of training.
- Making the teaching of skills creative.
- Ensuring students with special needs in mainstream schools are not marginalised and inclusion remains a priority.
- Enabling younger staff to be more confident about creativity in the curriculum – *"more challenging than for older colleagues who trained pre-national curriculum."*
- Personal access to ICT for all students.
- Predicting what provision will look like in the future.

Strategies for leading 21st century learning

- ✔ *"Set up networks, clusters and collaboration with other schools and across local authority boundaries to build ideas and capacity for innovation."*
- ✔ *"Calculate risk."*
- ✔ *"Find effective ways to share practice across schools and other settings."*
- ✔ *"Train staff on new initiatives such as personalising learning."*
- ✔ *"Undertake visits to other schools in the UK and tap into international practice."*
- ✔ *"Get families involved – parents should share responsibility for children's learning."*
- ✔ *"Harness student interest in ICT and using e-learning and virtual learning environments."*
- ✔ *"Involve students to gain their views on how to enrich the curriculum and in the co-construction of practice."*
- ✔ *"Recognise what is being done already, for example on personalising learning."*

Next steps to leading 21st century learning

What are the next steps to action in taking on the challenges of leading 21st century learning in your own situation?

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas