



# What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?

## Succession planning

### Resource

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# Background

## Context

In April 2005, NCSL (now National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services) hosted a Leading Practice seminar to explore 'What's Good About Leading a School in Challenging Circumstances?'. Accepting that discussions of such schools too often focus upon the difficulties they face, the seminar sought to gather delegates' stories of what makes the work in such schools so rewarding and how the leaders of such schools are supported, sustained and developed in their work. It was hoped that by capturing such stories, other leaders and stakeholders could gain a better appreciation of delegates' enthusiasm for and learning from working in what are traditionally seen as challenging schools.

The event was facilitated by Professor Yiannis Gabriel of Imperial College London who provided a theoretical underpinning to the analysis, interpretation and utilisation of stories as vehicles of communication, learning and leadership in organisational life (Gabriel, 2000).

As a follow-up to this seminar, an National College research associate, who was himself formerly the headteacher of a school facing challenging circumstances, was commissioned to conduct a small series of semi-structured interviews with participants in the seminar who remained as headteachers of such schools. These interviews focused on the following areas.

1. What *energises* them, ie what is good about leading such a school?
2. What *drives* them, ie what is their values base and how did it develop?
3. What *sustains* such leaders, ie what are personal sustainability and corporate support strategies and how effective are they when tested by critical incidents?
4. What *characterises* these leaders, ie what are their specific professional characteristics?
5. What can be *learnt* from these leaders, ie what main messages can be transmitted to leadership teams and new and aspirant heads of such schools and those with a concern for their professional development?

### Leading Practice

National College's programme of Leading Practice seminars seeks to capture and reflect school leaders' voice and to enrich them by bringing together research and best practice. In this way it aims to produce new, shared understandings of significant aspects of leadership that will inform debate and generate materials for ongoing professional development. Further information on Leading Practice can be obtained from National College's website at [www.nationalcollege.org.uk/leadingpractice](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/leadingpractice).

As part of this study, eight participant headteachers from primary, middle and secondary phases were interviewed during the period December 2005 to January 2006. The headteachers' ready willingness to participate in the interview process, notwithstanding the pressures of school life, may in itself be seen as a measure of practitioner enthusiasm to recount the stories of leadership in such schools.

The main findings from these interviews and the seminar itself are outlined in this report.

## Summary of key findings

1. Headteachers interviewed in this sample of schools in challenging contexts are energised by challenge and by the drive to make a difference to both their schools and their communities. They have a strong belief in the potential for success of such schools. They are energised by the excitement and unpredictability of the leadership role and relish the capacity to have an immediate impact and secure rapid tangible progress within a wide canvas of change potential. They are also motivated by the prospect of achieving a wide range of successes, both within the school and in its wider community development.
2. The actions of such headteachers are driven by core values that are people-centred and combine moral purpose with the promotion of collaboration. They have egalitarian instincts with a high respect for others as individuals and a concern for their needs. They also possess a strong belief in the capacity of all to succeed in an inclusive environment. Challenging circumstances are not accepted as excuses for low expectations.
3. Such headteachers are sustained by supportive teams that they have actively constructed and developed, and by networks of like-minded headteacher colleagues. Such networks are felt to work best when they are not externally imposed, lacking a commonality of values and contexts. There is an expressed need for a national strategy to legitimise, support and sustain networks of leaders of schools in challenging circumstances. Such headteachers draw sustenance from the leadership stories of colleagues facing similar circumstances. They are characterised by a capacity to compartmentalise and often preserve a work-life balance by engagement with interests beyond the world of education.
4. These headteachers display professional characteristics focused on personal conviction and respect for others, tenacity in advocacy for young people and resilience in standing by them. These are tempered by a degree of personal humility. They combine high levels of emotional intelligence and a confidence in risk taking with a passion for the development of the pupils, for the school and for the role of headteacher.
5. Their main messages are the need to remain true to and model core values, the support of symbiotic teams, and the importance of promoting the positives of what is good about leading schools facing challenging circumstances.

# Main findings regarding the headteachers

## 1. What energises them?

### Making a difference

Historically, secondary schools in challenging circumstances were defined by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as those where 25 per cent or fewer of the pupils achieved five or more grades A\*-C in GCSE and equivalent examinations. Similar definitions were applied to primary schools, using key stage assessments as the benchmark. More recently, DfES has termed such schools as 'vulnerable to missing the floor targets', using the term 'schools in challenging circumstances' decreasingly.

The notion of schools in challenging circumstances has also been extended to include all schools with 35 per cent or more pupils on free school meals (Ofsted, 2002). Many schools in challenging contexts also serve communities with high levels of social and economic deprivation, low levels of pupil attainment on entry coupled with low levels of parental education, and in some cases high levels of pupil mobility. Such factors are not always fully reflected in the surrogate measure of free school meals entitlement, nor are they solely to be found in schools serving urban communities (Keys et al, 2003).

Such community challenges are also often accompanied by a number of school-related issues, such as unsatisfactory buildings, staff recruitment difficulties, low levels of parental involvement and expectation, and pupil behaviour management problems. The schools in this research sample faced in whole or in part such challenging circumstances, with free school meal indicators of up to 54 per cent; in some cases they had received Ofsted judgements of serious weaknesses or special measures.

All but one of the headteachers interviewed had embarked on at least their second headship in schools in such challenging circumstances and had an average total headship experience in such schools of around eight years. In every case, when asked to describe what had brought them to this particular school and its circumstances, the word 'challenge' was used. In some cases it was seen as being '*a different challenge*', having moved on from achieving success in another challenging school, or feeling able to build on the confidence of '*having been round the block a couple of times*'. In others it was '*the challenge to make a difference*' in a difficult environment. Indeed, the '*drive to make a difference*' was a universally recurring theme.

It was felt that the capacity to make such a difference by '*having the chance to make rapid changes and see significant, fast improvements*' allowed colleagues to convert their motivational '*yearning to get things done*' into visible, tangible progress as a result of '*quick fixes which gained us rapid recognition from the community*'. There was a

universal and powerfully optimistic recognition that in such schools, for all their challenging circumstances, there remained a potential to succeed: *'You can feel it here (viscerally) that you can do it'*. Colleagues drew what was termed *'the buzz ... the adrenaline rush'* from realising that potential for success.

When asked to describe what was good about leading a school facing challenging circumstances, it was that *'capacity to have an immediate impact'* and the ability to gain rapid supportive feedback on success that retained and reinforced motivation: *'You can see the changes; you can see your vision being realised as sustainable transformation'*.

There was felt to be a favourable ratio of effort to progress: *'there is so far to go that it is easier to move it'*, and a perceived acceptance of the need for change, especially in a school facing negative Ofsted judgements, creating what was termed *'a wide canvas of change potential'* within which *'you can have small tastes of success ... and they taste good'*.

Colleagues were often able to recount compelling micro-narratives of a wide range of successes often undetected by conventional success indicators. For example, one head spoke of the joy that came from successfully integrating pupils with challenging behaviour after their exclusion from elsewhere and helping them to achieve by developing projects far removed from normal curricular experiences. Similarly, satisfaction was derived by supporting colleagues who may have been struggling: *'the buzz of seeing staff who were in danger of going under when you arrived, develop and grow to the point where paradoxically losing your staff to promotion becomes one of the achievements'*.

Another head described the satisfaction of seeing *'the behaviourally challenging pupil with Tourette Syndrome being given a praise sticker for good work and responding "I've waited all my life for that"'*. A third spoke of *'the arrival of the parent of a very difficult pupil who had come back to school on his son's final day to thank me for persevering with him and not banishing [sic] him. He had succeeded academically and was not excluded.'*

Another broadly recognised motivating factor involved having a positive influence on community development, by *'operating as a community worker as well as being the head'*, and being able to work with and bring on side so-called *'in-your-face parents'* to the point of receiving positive affirmative feedback from them, such as: *'We didn't know that school could be like this.'* This was drawn from the realisation that *'what you do can affect the quality of life for **everyone** in this community'*.

## Unpredictability

The excitement and unpredictability of working in such schools were also motivational factors:

*Schools like this, facing challenging circumstances, are exciting places to be. **We** are the driving force [because] we have the power to make a difference ... a difference to children's and the community's life chances ... and to empower others to do the same.*



*No two days are ever the same ... it is never boring.*

*Every day is potentially exciting as you can never guarantee what's going to happen ... the adrenaline rush when crises develop is strangely alluring.*

This excitement was reinforced by seeing the difference that could be achieved realised, for instance, by seeing the most difficult children achieve success or receiving affirmative feedback from a deprived community.

## 2. What drives them?

### Core values

Previous research into effective leadership of schools facing challenging circumstances identified effective leaders of such schools as having 'to cope with unpredictability, conflict and dissent on a daily basis without discarding core values' (Harris and Chapman, 2002:2).

To do this, their actions have to be 'people-centred ... underpinned by a set of personal and professional values that placed human needs before organisational needs ...'; the headteachers 'combined moral purpose with a willingness to collaborate and to promote collaboration amongst colleagues' (Harris and Chapman, 2002:2). The headteachers interviewed for this study described both foundational value systems and leadership approaches that reinforced these findings.

The expressed desire to make a difference was rooted in a moral base of core values that regarded all as equal and therefore worthy of equal respect. Such value systems, often laid down through upbringing or developed from a faith-based perspective, therefore avowed the importance of all within the school:

*Everyone is important, everyone matters, everyone has a voice.*

This was frequently displayed in a spirit of 'inclusive individualism', where the specific needs of everyone in the schools are recognised:

*We are a community of 730 **individuals** with individual needs and aspirations.*

*We recognise the importance of doing as you would be done by, treating others as you would want your own children to be treated.*

This people-centred moral was evidenced in a belief that all were capable of achieving and that challenging circumstances were no excuse for low expectations:

*Believe in yourself, dream dreams, and realise them.*

*Set the bar high ... break through the glass ceiling.*

*Strive for excellence ... to be the best that we can be.*

*We can **all** always do better, we can **all** always learn.*

There were times when their core values were buffeted by the pressures of external events and critical incidents, but these leaders had remained strong. In schools where challenging pupil behaviours and pressures militated against inclusion, it was sometimes important to restate the fundamental principles that were not negotiable and by which the school stood and fell:

*It is sometimes necessary to remind your staff that these are your lines in the sand, your non-negotiables ... and to be prepared to take decisive action to stand on them and be counted.*

*I have to remain true to my belief that schools exist for the benefit of pupils [and to state to others] these are my values; you need to be with me on this.*

Leaders interviewed were aware that such a stance sometimes incurred a cost. In particular, interviewees noted that it could have implications for the recruitment and retention of staff, with some individuals uncomfortable with the overtly moral stance taken.

Despite this danger, these leaders believed that it was necessary to 'stick with your convictions, to make clear what you believe in and stick to it ... or you will not survive'. Often the experience of having to do so was personally developing and left them feeling stronger. As one head noted:

*It [the challenge of differing staff expectations to what I had expected] shook my faith system about what I stand for, but then paradoxically led to a reaffirmation and strengthening of what my core values actually are.*

### 3. What sustains them?

#### Supportive teams

The view that 'teams, not individuals, change schools' (National College, 2002) was echoed by the participants throughout this work. Not only did they see it as their role to encourage collaboration, they drew sustaining strength from it:

*You need a supportive team ... a team founded on trust and confidence where there can be mutual off-loading of concerns and supporting of each other ... you can't do it on your own.*

In such a supportive team, especially at senior leadership level, there is a symbiotic relationship whereby support bred support:

*My strong, supportive leadership team 'watch my back'. In return, I give them space to grow.*

In a number of instances, heads have deliberately put together teams to support this approach:

*I poached [sic] two key members of staff whom I knew had the same values as me. They support and energise me.*

*I brought some staff with me [from my last school], my sort of people, motivated to do the job. After all, all's fair in love and war.*

Teams were developed by delegating and distributing leadership flexibly within a system of collective responsibility:

*I've grown and developed a lot of my own people ... and made them my people.*

### Networks of support

Beyond the school, support was often drawn from networks of colleagues with like minds and a similar value system. The capacity to grow one's own corporate networks of support, described by one head as 'an ad hoc networked learning community', was felt to be an essential skill. Externally imposed networks, such as Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) groups or local authority clusters, were not felt likely to work well unless they shared a similar context and set of values. Instead, and above all, individuals involved had to be committed to the principles of networking and determined to make it work:

*Our networks are strong because of the sort of people we are ... our **chosen** networks we will **make** work.*

Despite these reservations, externally developed networks were still seen to play an important role in legitimising the need for such support and facilitating access to assistance.

As well as providing cathartic personal nurturing support, mutual reflection opportunities and information flow, networks also compensate for a perceived sense of isolation and permit valuable exchanges of experience. Hearing other leaders' stories of leadership in similar schools facing challenging circumstances was felt to be a powerful support mechanism:

*Wrapping it up in a story makes it more powerful and memorable. It gives you self-confidence and an awareness that you are not alone.*

### Compartmentalisation

Heads interviewed also noted that underpinning these professional networks was the clear need to preserve a life elsewhere. At the heart of this was a capacity to compartmentalise, often in quite different areas from professional life, be it church, networks of friends outside education, or family life. As one head noted:

*You have to have a life outside school. I go home to be Mum. It's a good role model for my staff, too.*

This need for compartmentalisation is also a consistent theme that runs through earlier work on the support and sustainability of headteachers (Flintham, 2003).

## 4. What characterises headteachers of schools in challenging circumstances?

While recognising the small size of the sample in this study, a number of similarities were identified that may serve as a basis for considering the characteristics of headteachers in schools in challenging circumstances.

### Conviction and respect

When asked to identify any specific professional characteristics deemed desirable, if not essential, in leading a school in a challenging context, the headteachers interviewed focused on personal conviction and reiterated the need for respect for others. These had featured in the core value systems previously described in Section 2:

*... to build a culture of respect and acknowledgement of self-worth for all.*

Personal conviction was evidenced in strong underpinning belief systems, even when faced with external accountability pressures:

*You have to have the confidence to stand by your values and not to be pushed around by every wind of change. Irrespective of the national agenda, if it is good for our children, we will do it ... and carry the can if necessary.*

### Tenacity, humility and emotional intelligence

Such personal conviction in the rightness of one's beliefs, tenacity in advocacy for young people and a resilience to take the pain in standing by them, was tempered by personal humility:

*I haven't got all the answers.*

*I project confidence whether I've got it or not, but I'm prepared to admit my mistakes when I get it wrong.*

There was the perceived need for high levels of emotional intelligence to generate trust through building relationships, showing respect for others, and displaying integrity and honesty:

The quality of relationships is key. Emotional intelligence is paramount: not just awareness of self but empathy for others.

### Passion and risk taking

Running through all the responses was the consistent theme of expressed passion: for the development of the pupils, their school, and for the role of the headteacher. This passion was seen as a key reason why such headteachers had often opted to work in a number of challenging schools during their careers as teachers and leaders:

*A strong belief system and a **passion** to carry on making a difference ... that's what makes me 'a serial offender' in schools in challenging circumstances.*

Such so-called 'serial offenders', in second or multiple headships in schools in challenging circumstances, recognised a development of capacity as their leadership experience progressed and their repertoire of situation experience developed, leading to greater confidence and less constraint in calculated or instinctive risk taking to drive the school forward:

*I was a quiet risk taker at the beginning but I can now be more upfront as I have grown in confidence. I've become a calculated risk taker, but with an intuitive instinct: you know this is going to pay off.*

The main attributes and values identified by respondents in this study are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Key attributes and values identified as important for leaders of schools in challenging circumstances**

Attributes	Values
High Emotional Intelligence	People-centred
Respect	Moral purpose
Tenacity	Respect for others
Conviction	High aspirations
Commitment	Inclusivity
Optimism	Making a difference
Ability to compartmentalise	
Risk taking	
Humility	

# Conclusions

## What can be learnt from these headteachers?

This paper concludes by reviewing the key messages participants wished to transmit to their leadership teams, new and aspirant headteachers of similar schools and those charged with their formation and development.

A number of powerful restatements of previously expressed points were offered. These are summarised below in the words of the respondents themselves.

- **Find** the people who share the same values. Never accept the job if you can't find them.
- **Build** your own team: talk about relationships, reflect and evaluate together.
- **Develop** your team as a leadership group, not a management group: privy to your thinking, supportive of you and each other ... and watch them grow.
- **Preserve** your internal compass; be true to your value system. Integrity is fundamental: model the behaviour you want; do what you say you will do.
- **Want it** - if you are going to be in it, you have to want to be in it.
- **Model it**, in terms of work-life balance, commitment and collaboration.
- **Take it** outside the school: your passion gives the energy that enables you to operate on a wider front as an advocate for your community.
- **Promote it**: schools in challenging circumstances are a subject we are passionate about. Complex schools get bad press, and that needs to be redressed.

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