

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

International symposium paper

Leadership for the 21st century
15 -16 June 2009

Resource

The symposium was a high-level event involving a select group of 24 national and international thinkers and practitioners with first-hand experience of the English, Australian, Canadian, North American, and Hong Kong school systems.

It focused for two days on three key issues facing school leaders in England today:

- reducing variability
- narrowing the gap
- enhancing sustainability

Its aim was to produce a set of practical strategies and recommendations for how policy-makers, practitioners (especially school leaders) and the National College in its leadership development provision and strategic interventions, could work better to address the challenges.

Presentations and discussion workshops were held on each of the three themes to draw out lessons and advice for implementation. The following is a summary of the presentations and key points raised¹.

¹ The Chatham House rule was invoked for the entire symposium. Comments are not attributed to individual attendees.

The national context

An opening presentation set the broader context for education policy and how it aims to address future challenges.

- By 2020, there would be no room in the British economy for young people with low or no skills. The skills required were also changing and a mix of softer and cognitive skills was becoming increasingly important. The system had to prepare young people for dealing with these changes, yet within schools there was great variability of achievement between young people and stark inequalities on gender, class and ethnicity.
- Getting the right quality of school leaders and teachers into the system and training and supporting them was vital in reducing within-school variation and breaking the link between socio-economic background, economic disadvantage and low educational attainment.
- A big shift was required in the quality and culture of continuing professional development (CPD) both in and across schools. Headteachers will need to deploy teachers differently and schools will need to connect with other services to make early and sustained interventions and tackle wider barriers to learning.
- National leaders of education (NLEs), federations, trusts and other partnerships between schools had shown that school-to-school and peer-to-peer models could raise the lowest levels of student attainment. It was important to differentiate the support offered to enable schools to choose the type of support they needed.

The National College

The second presentation headlined the National College's work to tackle the three challenges.

Reducing variability

- England needed consistency of practice in every classroom, department and subject. Effective leadership of teaching and learning had been shown to make a difference. But weak school management not prepared to confront inconsistency was a barrier, as were modest teachers who didn't feel comfortable sharing their effective practice, small schools where the range of teaching excellence was more limited, and secondary schools where teachers felt they couldn't learn from those who taught a different subject.
- Learning on the job was the most effective way for people to develop themselves, but if that took place in schools where the quality of teaching was generally poor it could recycle inadequacies. To be effective, CPD needed to provide credible peers and mentors, opportunities to see outstanding practice elsewhere, challenges to a person's thinking and opportunities to look at research and reflect.
- School leaders who engaged with the National College were more likely to get better outcomes, but more work was needed to tackle within-school variation, encourage leaders to disseminate best practice in their own schools and reach the 10 per cent of schools that didn't yet engage.
- The National College was making the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and all its other programmes more challenging and personalised. It was testing a new model of leadership development that would reach greater numbers of middle leaders by supporting, licensing and quality-assuring clusters of schools to run middle leadership programmes themselves. In 2009, 39 pilots (including 3 international and 3 multi-agency) would put the leadership of teaching and learning at the core of its leadership curriculum.
- System leadership was the best way to tackle between-school variation by using the best leaders more effectively across the system. The plan was to increase the 300 NLEs with their national support schools to 500 by 2012 and expand the use of these system leaders in particularly challenging contexts. Local leaders of education (LLEs) were also helping to provide additional mentoring and coaching support to headteachers, particularly in the City Challenge regions that are at or below the floor targets. The National College was identifying good leaders who could mentor new headteachers.

Narrowing the gap

- The UK had one of the strongest links between the socio-economic group a child was born into and adult outcomes.
- Schools had to engage with the broader children's services agenda to address more complex issues. The National College was now taking responsibility for the leadership development of senior leaders of children's services as well as school leaders. It was also exploring whether the school-based system leadership model could work with directors of children's services (DCSs) at children's services authority and children's trust level.
- The National College is supporting school leaders in developing multi-agency approaches, running a National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) for Sure Start children's centres, and including the development of outward-facing leadership in all its leadership provision.

Enhancing sustainability

- The teaching profession was ageing, with 28 per cent of heads aged over 55 and expected to retire before 2012. Also, headship was not seen as an attractive option because it involved less contact with children, less teaching, too much accountability, bureaucracy and stress and a poor work life balance.
- The challenge was to make the role more attractive and help school leaders see the appointment, retention, motivation and development of good staff as their core role so that successful performance could be sustained even when key staff left.
- The National College had developed a local solutions approach to succession planning, working with people in their local context to draw up a strategy and identify and share best practice. There had been some success and predicted increases in temporarily filled headship posts had not happened.
- The National College was also trying to bring more people into the profession from outside via the Future Leaders and Accelerate to Headship programmes, as well as looking at new leadership models such as co-heads, school business managers (SBMs) and executive heads.
- It was also funding 56 schools to research environmental sustainability.

Reducing variability

The first of three presentations looked at levels of variability in student learning outcomes.

- Variation between schools was small, but at class level (ie, within schools) it was large. The largest level of variability however – 52 per cent was at student level and grew over the years of schooling.
- Policies and practices that worked attracted the best people into teaching and then directed them to students with the greatest learning needs, making smart use of data to establish starting points and guide instruction. These people took a strategic approach and focused on early intervention, teaching to the student, not the curriculum. They also brought system leaders, school leaders and teachers together to focus on classroom practice, with coaching and observation/demonstration of teaching by and for all.

The second presentation looked at potential structural changes that could disrupt and/or improve the system.

- Taking strategies that worked well for individual schools or authorities and applying them nationally, top down, didn't work because change had to be driven by teachers and leaders in their own context.
- Major reforms could work, however, by holding failing schools to account whilst, at the same time, enabling social entrepreneurs with innovative ideas to enter the system and create new chains of schools with their own processes and the ability to grow their own teachers and leaders.
- Introducing an additional per-pupil payment for disadvantaged children could incentivise providers to open schools in communities where there were fewer educational options, and enable them to pay higher salaries to attract the best teachers.
- The government could also develop a network of prestigious training schools which, like teaching hospitals, would be centres of professional learning for their area.
- To improve measures of variability within schools in the short term, the system could look to a wider set of data, such as teacher turnover and truancy levels. In the longer term, it could follow the example of schools in New Zealand which use internal tests to measure the effects of their teaching on individual pupils. Ofsted inspections might also be more valuable if they focused on a school's ability to track its own effectiveness in a more rigorous way.

The third presentation drew lessons from school effectiveness research.

- Research showed the difference between classrooms was the quality of teaching. In a group of 50 teachers, students taught by the best teacher would learn in 6 months what they would learn in a year from an average teacher, or in 2 years from the least effective teacher.
- One solution was to replace existing poor teachers with better ones. Further professional qualifications, however, made less than 5 per cent difference to teacher quality, and pedagogical knowledge made only 10 – 15 per cent difference. The aim was to have a good teacher in every classroom rather than necessarily a highly qualified teacher, so there was possibly a need for new ways of evaluating entrants to the profession, such as letting people try out teaching and letting them go quickly if they didn't shape up.
- Another solution was to improve the effectiveness of existing teachers. This was about structuring time and supporting teachers to reflect on their experiences and devise focused interventions on things that made a difference, as well as focusing CPD on formative assessment.
- Just as teachers had to commit to continuous improvement of practice, leaders had to commit to engineering effective learning environments by providing time, space and support for innovation and risk-taking.
- The incentive to improve as a practitioner was not 'because I'm not good enough' but 'because I can be better'.

Following the three presentations, delegates agreed there was a need to raise the profile of variability and find better ways of measuring it.

Early intervention was crucial, but the learning gap grew over the years of schooling, so it was also important to consistently put the best teachers with the most disadvantaged/vulnerable students even if currently counter-cultural and to ensure teachers got involved in the wider Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda.

All teachers could improve, but leaders had to help it happen by setting high expectations and nailing down consistency on teaching and learning.

Narrowing the gap

The first presentation looked at how some schools were narrowing gaps in student achievement.

- Some primary schools in disadvantaged areas excelled against the odds because rather than dismissing pupils' problems at home as a matter for social services, headteachers saw them as barriers to learning progress. In these schools, staff worked as a team and each member knew and supported every child. One school employed a social worker as a family liaison officer; another had a counsellor who toured classes to check on children who seemed out of sorts. These kinds of interventions helped solve problems early in a child's school life, improving their attainment chances later.
- Outstanding secondary schools that excelled against the odds also shared common characteristics, including being highly inclusive and providing outstanding teaching and learning. They were consistent and had high-quality leadership and carefully planned strategies, but they were also constantly looking for ways to improve further.

The second presentation looked at the longitudinal study of young people in England (LSYPE), being carried out by the University of Warwick, which is tracking the progress of pupils who were 14 years old in 2004.

- The study showed a small gender gap in attainment and progress at age 16, a larger ethnic gap (more than 3 times as big) in which white British pupils scored substantially lower than Indian pupils but substantially higher than black Caribbean pupils, and an even wider social class gap (more than 6 times the size of the gender gap) between students whose parents were in higher managerial/professional occupations and students whose parents had never worked or were long-term unemployed.
- It was not just about class, ethnicity or gender there was a need to think in a more nuanced way about how the gaps interrelated and about other causal factors including pupils' and parents' educational aspirations and pupils' academic self-concept.
- The study's findings had implications for early intervention – the gaps were apparent in three year olds – and for school quality because the gaps increased over time. They also had implications for the curriculum, which wasn't seen as serving the needs of many working class students.

The third presentation looked at work on closing the achievement gap in the US.

- A small but growing number of schools was dramatically closing the gap by saying that, regardless of a student's background, they would do what was needed to ensure everyone achieved at high levels. In 10 years, the movement had expanded to 100 schools, a number of which had developed into networks run by the same organisations, the most successful of which were mission-driven non-profit-making organisations.
- These schools, which some have viewed as almost cult-like in their dedication to addressing disadvantage, used formative assessment data to drive skilful teaching with a focus on literacy and numeracy. The schools had high expectations and a motivational culture that gave keen attention to behaviour and communication with parents. They had strategies of inclusion support for students who were struggling and they spent a lot of time on the talent management of leaders and teachers.
- Some of their characteristics were viewed as extreme, for example removing disruptive students from class without negotiation and having longer days and school years. Their absolute focus on literacy and numeracy was also controversial. It raised the question: 'Does the breadth of the curriculum in the UK unintentionally bias against students from lower-income families?'

Following the three presentations, delegates felt the fundamental aim was not to narrow the gap but to get everyone to a high floor with no ceiling – ‘everyone proficient, many advanced’. They also identified a need to vary the curriculum for different students who had a range of aspirations.

Narrowing the gap went beyond educational attainment into issues of health and well-being, calling for a partnership approach between education and children’s services: the team around the child.

Delegates agreed that governance was an issue because governors did not challenge headteachers as they should and were too often content with low-level performance.

Enhancing sustainability

The first presentation gave a US perspective.

- In the US, the problem wasn't the lack of principals, but their quality and distribution because university-based principal preparation programmes were increasingly obsolete and there were barriers to really good people taking leadership positions in the most challenged schools. For example, the system didn't balance its strong accountability with improvements in support or rewards, and principals had little say in picking their staff or controlling resources, often taking a pay cut in hourly wage terms in order to be a principal.
- There were strategies for addressing the problem. New York City, for example, had developed a memorandum of agreement with its principals which stated what they were accountable for and what control and resources they would receive in return. The city had also broken up its 1,200 schools to create 1,500 smaller schools with a different set of leadership requirements. The new regime had helped it dramatically change the profile of its school leaders dramatically over 8 years so that nearly a quarter were now aged under 40 and a fifth had fewer than 5 years' teaching experience.
- In contrast, one of the most effective districts was Long Beach, California, which had 6 high schools, all with 4,000 pupils and a very strong performance improvement record over 15 years. The model here was to put two principals in each school.
- The most important piece of the strategy was the growth of new providers because they gave far better leadership development and training than the universities. Many urban districts had also developed 'grow your own' principalship programmes.
- The US now needed deregulation coupled with a performance-based evaluation of providers. It had a lot to learn from the UK about strategies for thinking about leadership development and supply across the system and creating new roles for the very best principals in order to extend their influence.

The second presentation looked at the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the US.

- The Foundation's goal was to 'erase the greatest inequalities in the world'. To this end, it invested \$3 billion a year in education and in developing countries and worked with leaders at every level.
- Its new long-term strategy was focused on the job of leaders, creating a long-term pipeline and sustainability for leadership, and providing powerful teaching and learning tools to drive quality.
- The Foundation believed the way to get better leadership was to put effective teachers in every classroom and have them change the conditions in schools over time. It was working with teaching unions and researchers to define effective teaching and create more reliable measures of teacher effectiveness. It was still working out how to successfully move good practice to scale.
- The Foundation was creating a set of innovations that would 'disrupt school as we know it' because they focused on leading learning, not schools. Students didn't necessarily need schools, just the connection to peers and adults, and there were many other ways of achieving that which weren't being recognised.

The third presentation looked at the National College's approach to securing, retaining and sustaining great leaders.

- It had developed a local solutions approach to succession planning in which national succession consultants (NSCs) worked with local authorities and clusters of schools in their local context to draw up a strategy and identify and share best practice, using a framework for action comprising 12 principles and 5 foundations for success.
- The approach presented an opportunity to address issues beyond demographics, including developing a long-term culture of talent and leadership development across the system and encouraging more young women and black and minority ethnic (BME) teachers into leadership positions.
- Research showed there were three main drivers bringing outstanding heads to headship and keeping them there: their personal faith, philosophy, values and moral purpose; inspirational role models; and effective and ongoing CPD and professional relationships with colleagues.
- Providing more management support, sabbaticals, more opportunities for shared headship and a phased approach to retirement could help retain heads longer in post. Distributing leadership was making the headteacher job more do-able and school business managers (SBMs) were proving a big success – they saved up to 30 per cent of headteacher time and had paid for themselves in 3 years.
- Work on system leadership was providing heads with opportunities to develop their careers while still in post, via new roles such as NLEs, LLEs and school improvement partners (SIPs).
- The National College saw system leadership and local solutions as the two major planks of its work to promote development of a self-sustaining, self-improving system.

Following the presentations, delegates felt that sustainability was about leading the present and seeding the future. Within that, there were three key aspects: support, learning and teamwork.

There was a need for personalised and contextual support, including coaching, to address the loneliness of the headteacher role. Secondments to healthcare or social services leadership positions was seen as a possible way for senior leaders to renew themselves.

Looking to the future, it was important to understand that today's students were digital natives who were doing as much learning outside the classroom as in it. The education system had to keep up.

Solutions

Following the presentations, the three discussion workshops came together in a final plenary before sharing their findings and advice for going forward.

- The first group felt efforts to raise achievement needed to be more forensic and accompanied by differential funding to address the gaps. Schools should also have clear educational plans for their 10 most challenged/vulnerable young people.
- How to share good practice effectively was still an uncracked issue, but a library of videos of good practice made available by the National College would be a start. Another idea was a common project bringing together leaders of children's services, children's centres and schools to look at the journeys of vulnerable children.
- The most important lever for change was better teaching and learning, but the conditions had to be right for that to happen. All leaders should develop human capital, lead and manage performance and development and target support on schools with the greatest variability. Governance plays a crucial role in improvement and new governance arrangements were necessary to ensure this was done more effectively.
- The National College should begin leading the future by providing support for leadership of start-ups and new providers in the system and, in partnership with others, by defining what a 21st-century teaching and learning profession should look like.

- The second group set out the ambition to: reduce variability through consistently high-quality teaching and learning; lift the floor and maximise potential for all; enhance sustainability of leadership and improvements; create 21st-century learning and learners; and ensure all schools were responsible for creating the conditions for achievement.
- The implications for leadership affirmed the direction the National College was already heading in: individual heads leading strong teams, having the skills to lead learning and teaching, taking on wider roles and leading multiple schools; and local authority leaders with strong strategic commissioning skills.
- Implications for policy included looking at the structure and quality of governance – potentially training governors – and refocusing key performance indicators.

- The third group confirmed the need to focus on getting better teachers into the system and improving the skills of all teachers. Leaders in turn needed contextualised and personalised support that included coaching as a matter of course.
- There was scope for local solutions, but a common core of values and strong practice were crucial in securing the best outcomes for all, as was early intervention. It was also time to unlock a public debate about the aims of education and the nature of teaching and learning.
- The current accountability system had to become more focused, perhaps with different accountability structures for schools in different contexts.
- The National College needed to focus more distinctly on its role of developing middle leaders and how enabling them to move in and out of leadership roles at different stages of their careers might get them involved in tackling some of the major challenges.

Implications

At the end of the symposium, the National College took away the following key messages for further consideration.

The National College should:

- ensure a continued, rigorous focus on the leadership of teaching and learning at the heart of its provision, including the leadership of assessment for learning, in order to improve student outcomes
- do even more to support and develop middle leaders, given their importance to the system, in particular, through schools and cluster-based leadership development approach that is currently being piloted (see page 4)
- consider how its existing work with national and local leaders of education could be taken wider, so that the best school leaders have opportunities to lead more widely in chains, federations, collaboratives, clusters etc
- find ways to bring together and develop leaders of children's centres, children's services and schools to ensure a focus on working with vulnerable children
- continue with its local solutions approach to succession planning and explore ways to apply it in other areas of work, so that schools and localities increasingly take ownership of their own improvement agenda with appropriate national support
- as the system becomes ever more diverse, get even smarter at commissioning to meet different niche markets and develop different kinds of leaders for different contexts

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services is committed to excellence and dedicated to inclusiveness. We exist to develop and inspire great leaders of schools, early years settings and children's services. We share the same ambition – to make a positive difference to the lives of children and young people.

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

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