

S U M M E R 2 0 0 5

Rising stars and sitting tenants

A picture of deputy headship in
one London borough and how some
of its schools are preparing their
deputies for headship

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How should headteachers influence their deputies to encourage them into headship? What is their role in developing a programme of school-based preparation for headship?

Introduction

Teachers are entering deputy headship and then deciding not to become headteachers. This is a double problem for the profession. Firstly, potential headteachers are being lost to that role, and secondly, these deputies become “sitting tenants” blocking the route to headship and preventing “rising stars” from getting that essential management experience that will effectively prepare them for headship.

In Bromley, where this study was carried out, some deputies are getting good advice and support from their headteachers, are given real leadership development opportunities, and are going on to become effective headteachers. However, some deputies are given low-grade tasks and do not receive the support and encouragement from their headteachers that will lead them towards headship. Finally, there are some deputies who, although in a supportive environment, have decided that headship is not for them.

My view is that, as a profession, we must ensure that rising stars are encouraged to become headteachers. In particular deputy headteachers must be given the leadership opportunities and the support that will enable them to fulfil the role of the headteacher. Many headteachers do realise the importance that the development of their deputy has to the profession, and support their deputies into headship. I suggest that deputies have an entitlement to good support within the school.

The project

Initially, a short survey of all primary schools in Bromley was conducted to gain an overall picture of deputy headship in Bromley. All schools were contacted to find out whether the deputy at the school was interested in becoming a headteacher at some stage in the future.

During a period of 12 weeks, 11 primary headteachers were interviewed together with a senior local authority adviser. Following the interviews, two short case studies were constructed, describing more fully two unusual but innovative approaches to deputy headship recruitment and training.

The aim of the work was to gain a picture of the state of deputy headship in one London borough and to establish what activities were occurring in primary schools in Bromley to prepare deputy headteachers for headship. Headteachers may like to compare the results of this study in Bromley to the situation they are familiar with in their own local authority.

A survey

The results of the small survey were enlightening. Of the 76 primary schools in Bromley, only 22 deputies and assistant heads were actively considering headship out of a total of 87 (25 per cent). A further eight said they may be interested at some time in the future. Five schools had no deputy at the time of the survey. If this pattern is repeated throughout the country, this must have significant implications for the future development of our school leaders. Not only has a large proportion of our deputy headteachers decided that headship is not for them, but this also means that career deputies acting as “sitting tenants” impede the route to headship for others.

The 25 per cent of deputies and assistant heads looking to headship in Bromley contrasts with other research. In a recent national study, for example, over a third of deputies (37 per cent) say they have no plans to take up headship (MORI, 2005).

In my survey, I found many capable and effective deputies who had decided not to go on to headship. There was a variety of reasons why they chose not to become headteachers including impending retirement, family commitments, illness, and a negative perception of headship. In-depth interviews of new and experienced headteachers investigated how they were prepared for headship and how they, in turn, are training their own deputy for headship.

Findings and conclusions

From in-depth interviews of 11 headteachers, I found some excellent practice in terms of preparation for headship. However, not every deputy receives a positive experience.

- The majority of deputies in Bromley do not want to be headteachers. In a survey of primary schools in Bromley, I found only 22 deputy headteachers or assistant headteachers out of a total of 87 who were interested in headship (25 per cent).

- In a time of headteacher shortage, career deputies are not only a loss to headship but as sitting tenants they block the route to headship.
- A successful deputy headship that effectively prepares a deputy for headship is dependent on:
 - the relationship between the head and the deputy
 - the experiences and opportunities given to the deputy
 - an ambitious deputy who will take advantage of the above

A model

My discussions suggest that the ideal model for the school-based development of any deputy headteacher is a symbiotic relationship where the deputy and the headteacher draw on each other's strengths and each uses his or her own individual assets to augment the skills of the other.

The headteacher and the school will particularly benefit from an ambitious deputy who will be anxious to learn all aspects of the job. A successful deputy headship with a record of effectively implementing management initiatives is invaluable to take into headship interview and on into first headship.

This relationship will be one in which the headteacher sees the deputy as an equal in the school, has the courage to share the leadership of the school, and presents the deputy to the governors and staff as a parallel professional who carries his or her full support and confidence.

Headteachers should give their deputy real responsibility, involving them in all decision making, large and small. Rather than minor management tasks such as organising rotas or arranging courses, for example, an ambitious deputy might be allowed to run staff meetings and INSET sessions, possibly given the responsibility for implementing certain government initiatives. They will, of course, need the time to complete those tasks, but a headteacher will find considerable strength in having someone who shares and actively supports his or her vision for the school.

In an ideal model the headteacher's time is freely given to discuss issues and solutions with the deputy as they are mentored from appointment to headship and beyond, with headteachers even advising the deputy on when and where to apply for headship. Deputies will need to be funded and supported through the NPQH programme, given release time as necessary, and the headteacher should engineer opportunities for the deputy to manage the whole school from time to time.

In return a headteacher can expect an ambitious deputy to be enthusiastic and willing to take on tasks from the head. In sharing leadership they will help shape and manage the curriculum together, working in partnership to manage staff and deal with discipline and parental problems. Class observation, scrutiny of work, and monitoring planning are all high-level tasks that can be shared with the deputy.

In this model, headteachers can enjoy the experience of seeing their "rising star" mature into headship. They will not only get considerable pleasure from the development of their deputy but will also be supporting the profession as a whole by ensuring that a new, effective and competent headteacher emerges from their school.

Recommendations

This study is small-scale. Nevertheless it does suggest that:

- Headteachers should be offered guidance on how to prepare deputies for headship.
- Deputy headship could be considered a training position. Ideally, it should be a temporary post – after five years a deputy with no interest in headship could become "senior teacher" with no loss of pay or status. This would prevent deputy head teachers from becoming sitting tenants, freeing up the deputy head's position for an ambitious teacher to move through to headship.
- Local authorities need to monitor the development of deputy headteachers from their appointment to their move into headship. Authorities should interview deputies who decide not to move into headship to determine whether a different school or a course could re-establish their ambition.
- Local authorities might facilitate the movement of ambitious deputies between schools to develop their skills.
- The government and NCSL must continue to raise the positive profile of headteachers within the profession, and within society more generally, in order to increase the numbers of teachers wanting to move into school leadership.

Reference

MORI (2005) *The State of School Leadership in England*, DfES Research Report 633

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