

# The Emergence of System Leadership

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SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

Even a dozen years ago few would have predicted the amount of collaboration and mutual support in the schools system today. The shift from competition to collaboration, from top-down control to organisational autonomy has been quite remarkable. So too has been the emergence of the role of ‘system leader’ – someone in a leadership capacity who is as concerned about the progress of another school, college or children’s centre as they are about their own.

This pamphlet traces the emergence of this vitally important role – one that has the capacity to transform our whole educational system.

## A brief history of system leadership

School leadership in England has changed dramatically over the past twenty years.<sup>2</sup> There is also a clear storyline about the way in which school (and now children's centre) leadership has evolved over this period of time.

The somewhat *laissez faire* and paternalistic culture of leadership in the 1980s changed radically as a direct consequence of the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the Education Reform Act (1988) that allowed all schools to be taken out of the direct financial control of local authorities.

By devolving resource allocation and priorities from local authorities to governors, headteachers became considerably more autonomous. This autonomy however was tempered by the highly developed national accountability framework that held them accountable for school performance and subject to significant areas of national prescription.

The publication of exam results and a national inspection regime where reports on the performance of individual schools became publicly available put considerable pressure on headteachers and served to encourage the high degree of competitiveness between schools in the mid-1990s.

This competitive environment was mitigated somewhat by the establishment of NCSL in 2001 and the increasing professionalism with which school leadership was being regarded.

This trend was enhanced by the significant commitment to collaboration incentivised by a wide range of government initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, the Leadership Incentive Grant, Primary Networks as well as NCSL's Networked Learning Communities and Primary Leadership Programme.

The Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) launched by the Department for Education and Skills in 2002 encouraged collaboration between further education colleges and schools to improve vocational opportunities for 14–16 year olds and was the forerunner to much school-college collaboration that followed as part of the 14–19 agenda.

The New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) was a further attempt by government to develop a more mature and equal balance between the centre and the frontline and to streamline accountability and bureaucratic processes to ensure a more personalised education for students.

Inevitably the policy challenges for school leaders have increased dramatically over this period. Two critical and current examples are the balance between standards and welfare and the impetus for school diversity and parental choice.

But whatever the general and specific challenges of policy implementation, the ability to work and lead beyond an individual school or children's centre is of increasing importance. It is estimated that nearly all schools in England are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking.

This is leading to a more collaborative approach to schooling where school and children's centre leaders are having a significantly more substantive engagement with other schools, settings and agencies in order to bring about improvement that leads to system transformation, as epitomised by National and Local Leaders of Education (NLE and LLE). This is currently termed 'system leadership', where leaders, in a variety of roles, are now playing both an active and explicit role in system reform.

In short, the past twenty years has seen a remarkable movement from schooling<sup>3</sup> as a 'secret garden' to significantly increased levels of accountability and autonomy that led to overt competition. This is now rapidly being replaced by sophisticated forms of collaboration that is leading in turn to a transformation of the landscape of school education, all in the pursuit of higher standards of learning and achievement of students. And it is the school leader who is increasingly in the vanguard of this movement.

The role of school leader has also become more central as a result of the English experiment with large scale reform. The argument goes something like this:

Most agreed that standards were too low and too varied in the 1970s and 80s and that some form of direct state intervention was necessary. The resultant ‘national prescription’ proved very successful particularly in raising standards in primary schools – progress confirmed by international comparisons.

But progress plateaued after 2002 and whilst a bit more improvement was squeezed out nationally, and considerably more in underperforming schools, one had to question whether prescription still offered the recipe for sustained large scale reform in the medium and long term.

There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform. But, if the hypothesis is correct, and this is much contested terrain, it must categorically not be a naïve return to the not so halcyon days of the 1970s when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted.

The implication is that we need a transition from an era of prescription to an era of professionalism – in which the balance between national prescription and schools leading reform will change significantly.

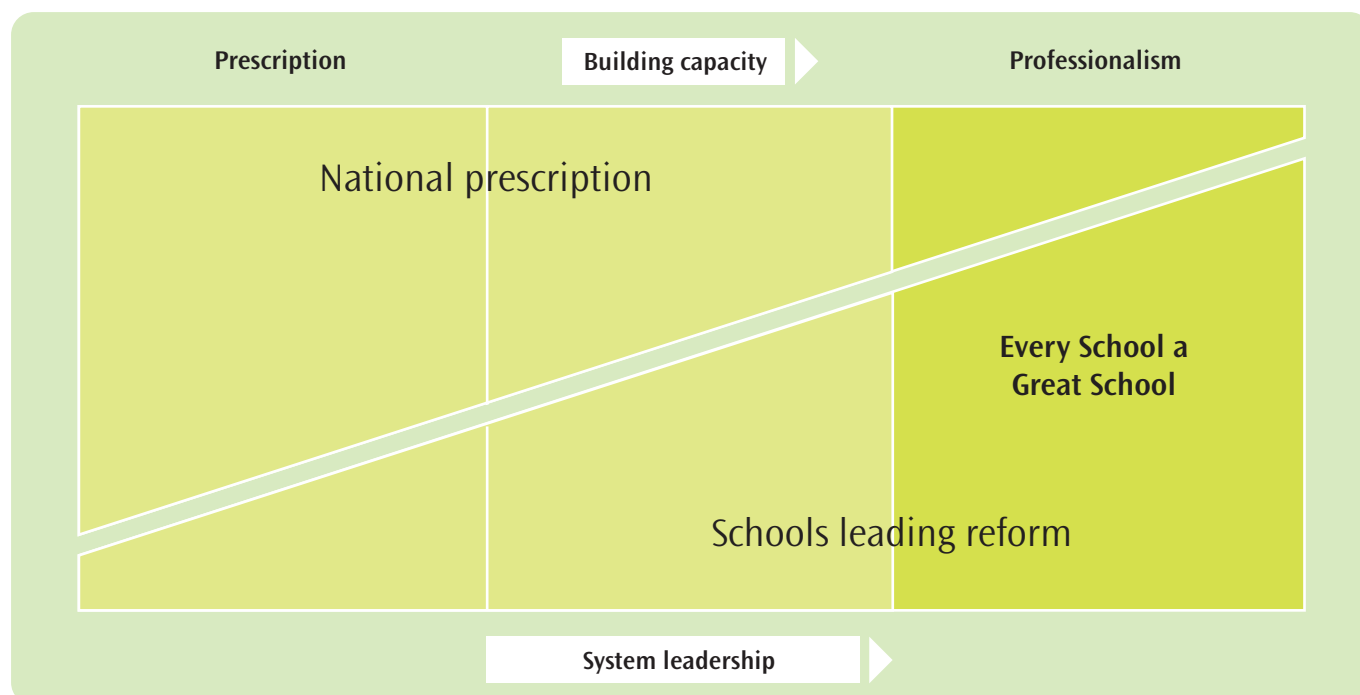
However, achieving this shift is not straight forward. As Michael Fullan<sup>4</sup> has commented, it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to ‘professionalism’ provides the basis of a new approach. Fullan also recognised early on the importance of leadership in system reform. In *System Thinkers in Action* he<sup>5</sup> argued that:

*... a new kind of leadership is necessary to break through the status quo. Systematic forces, sometimes called inertia, have the upper hand in preventing system shifts. Therefore, it will take powerful, proactive forces to change the existing system (to change context). This can be done directly and indirectly through systems thinking in action. These new theoreticians are leaders who work intensely in their own schools, or national agencies, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organizations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics.*

### Schools leading reform – a new era

As so often Fullan got it exactly right. The key question though is ‘how do we get there?’, because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. It is this progression that is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1 – Towards large scale sustainable reform**



It is worth taking a little more time unpacking the thinking underlying the diagram. Four further points need to be made.

The first is to emphasise that this is not an argument against ‘top down’ change. Neither ‘top down’ nor ‘bottom up’ change work just by themselves, they have to be in balance – in creative tension. The balance between the two at any one time will of course depend on context.

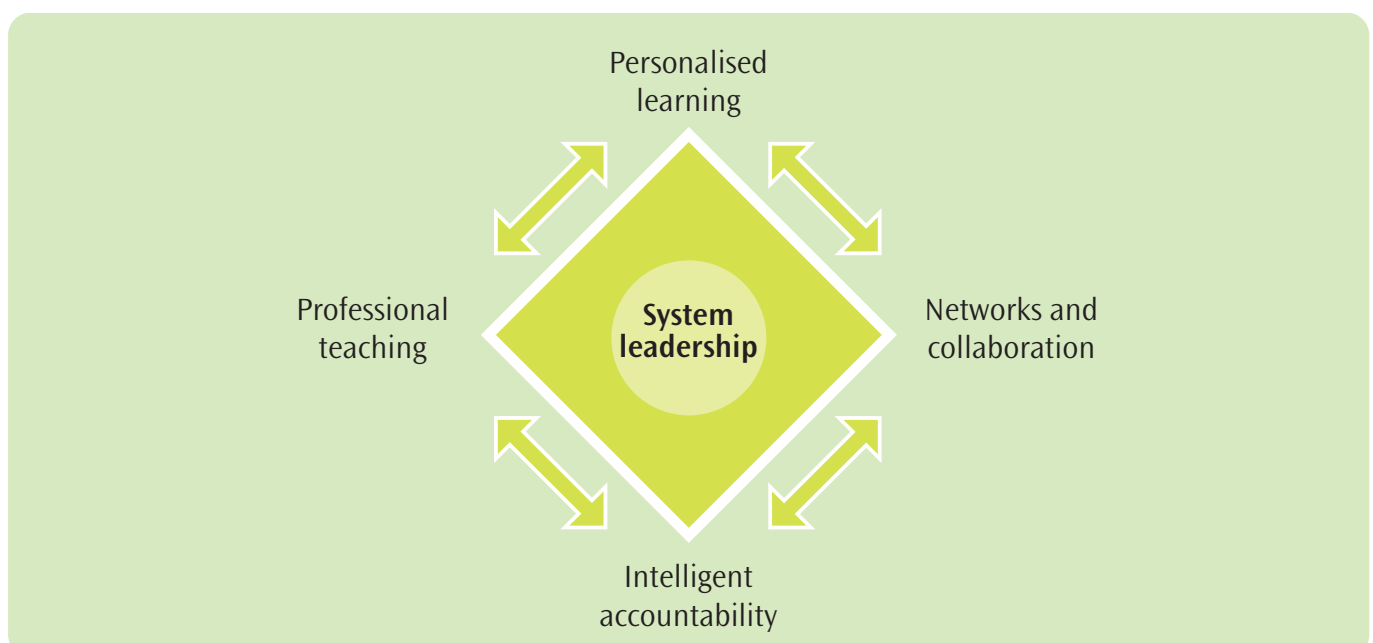
Secondly, it must be realised that in England in 1997 it was clear that more central direction was needed. This reflects the balance towards national prescription as seen in the left hand segment of the diagram. If we assume that time moves from left to right in the diagram, then it is most probably correct to say that in terms of both policy and practice England is currently located in the middle segment of the diagram. This is contested terrain and there is no guarantee that there will be an inevitable movement into the right hand segment although the portents currently look good.

Third it should be no surprise to realise that the right hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from what we know now. The main difficulty in imagining this landscape is that the thinking of most people is constrained by their experiences within the power structure and norms of the left hand segment of the diagram.

Finally, of course there is no suggestion that one always has to start from the left hand side of the diagram and move in some sort of uniform way to the right. That is just how it was in England in 1997. Some systems may well start from the middle and move into the right hand segment, others may initially believe that they are already in the right hand segment. If this diagram has any value it is as a heuristic – its purpose is to help people think rather than tell them what to do.

It needs to be re-iterated that the transition from ‘prescription’ to ‘professionalism’ is not straightforward. In order to move from one to the other strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity within the system. This point is key, one cannot continue the drive to raise standards in a directive way, one also needs to develop social, intellectual and organisational capital. Building capacity demands that we replace numerous central initiatives with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. The four drivers of personalised learning, professionalised teaching, networks and collaboration and intelligent accountability provide the core strategy for systemic improvement. They are the canvas on which system leadership is exercised.

**Figure 2 – Four key drivers for system reform**



As seen in the ‘diamond of reform’ (**Figure 2**) the four trends coalesce and mould to context through the exercise of responsible system leadership. A system leader may be defined as a someone who is willing and able to shoulder wider system roles and in doing so is just as concerned with the success and attainment of children and young people in other settings as they are with their own. This trend has been enhanced in recent years by the increasing importance of the ECM agenda, extended schooling and how schools meet the challenge of the Children’s Plan.

### System leadership in practice

In *Every School a Great School?* it was suggested that the five striking characteristics of system leaders are that they:

- Measure success when working with other schools in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, in terms of both raising the bar and narrowing the gap(s).
- Are fundamentally committed to the improvement of teaching and learning. They engage deeply with the organisation of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment in order to ensure that learning is increasingly personalised for students.

- Develop schools as personal and professional learning communities, with relationships built across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities.
- Strive for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture. This is not just about eradicating poverty, as important as that is. It is also about giving communities a sense of worth and empowerment.
- Realise in a deep way that the classroom, school and system levels all impact on each other. Crucially they understand that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.

Building on these key capabilities it is possible to offer a model of system leadership practice that emerges inductively from the actions of the current cadre of system leaders. This is set out in **Figure 3** below.

The model exhibits a logic that flows from the ‘inside-out’.

**Figure 3: A model of system leadership practice**



At the centre, leaders driven by a moral purpose related to the enhancement of student learning, seek to empower teachers and others to make schools and children's centres a critical force for improving communities and the conditions in which their children live. This is premised on the argument already made, that sustainable educational development requires educational leaders who are willing to shoulder broader leadership roles.

It is also clear from the research<sup>8</sup> of Ken Leithwood and his colleagues among others, that system leaders share a characteristic set of behaviours and skills. As illustrated in the second inner ring of the diagram these are of two types. First, system leaders engage in 'personal development' usually informally through benchmarking themselves against their peers and developing their skill base in response to the context they find themselves working in. Secondly, all system leaders seem to have a strategic capability; they are able to translate their vision or moral purpose into operational principles that have tangible outcomes.

As is denoted in the third ring of the model, the moral purpose, personal qualities and strategic capacity of the system leader find focus in three key domains of action – managing the teaching and learning process, developing people and developing the organisation.

Finally, although there are a growing number of outstanding leaders that exemplify these qualities and determinations, they are not necessarily 'system leaders'. A system leader not only needs these aspirations and capabilities but in addition, as seen in the outer ring of the model, works to change other contexts by engaging with the wider system in a meaningful way.

Following research<sup>9</sup> to map the emerging system leadership landscape, five key categories of system leadership practice have been proposed. These emerging roles include leaders who:

- develop and **lead a successful educational improvement partnership** across local communities to support welfare and potential, usually as a result of the ECM agenda
- choose to **lead and improve a school or centre in extremely challenging circumstances** and then sustain them as high valued added institutions over a significant period of time, the academies movement has proved important in this regard

- **partner another school facing difficulties and improve it** including Executive Heads of 'hard' federations and leaders of more informal improvement arrangements
- act as a **curriculum or pedagogic innovator** who with their staff develop exemplary and increasingly precise curriculum, teaching and assessment practices and systematically share them with others
- work as **change agents** or experts leaders such as National Succession Consultants (NSCs) or School Improvement Partners (SIPs)

Within the context of the National Challenge, NLEs and LLEs act in all these roles to help improve some of our most challenged schools.

In concluding, it is worth briefly reflecting on the distinction between system leaders working in national programmes and those working in locally organised often ad hoc roles. The majority of system leaders operate in national programmes that incentivise activity through organisation, funding and professional development that in turn create new opportunities for leaders. It is important here to recognise the role of NCSL who has led the initiative to establish NLEs and LLEs, provided the training and assessment of SIPs and through its research, publications and national statements has enthusiastically supported this way of working. The College has also led the way in promoting local solutions approaches to national challenges. The succession planning programme, for example, is co-ordinated by an NCSL team but relies on the involvement of successful and experienced local leaders (NSCs) in collaboration with local stakeholders to define and implement appropriate responses to local needs.

A greater degree of freedom exists where roles are locally identified and developed. In such activity, professionals not only deploy their experience and skill to lead improvements, they also define the terms on which such activity is undertaken and sustained. With no single framework or protocol, a range of models are developed in relation to specific needs (and times). Some centrally driven momentum is sacrificed, but on the principle that system leadership must inherently be a professionally led agenda. Here the activity of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) with their extensive local networks is particularly important as is the principled work of the dioceses and those philanthropists with a moral purpose.

## The future of system leadership

There are of course variations to this bottom up/top down distinction. Happily, our leading local authorities are now taking the opportunities of the 2006 Act<sup>10</sup> seriously and imaginatively creating the conditions for schools to support each other. For instance, strategic local leadership partnerships already exist between school and centre leaders and local authorities. In one such model the authority retains legal responsibility for value for money whilst delegating decision making to a partnership of headteachers who bring coherence and accountability to local collaboration. There are many possibilities, but if a shared criterion is to develop effective system leadership in a growing number of schools, then the following suggestions may prove instructive.

**Suggestion one: incentivise rather than legislate.** The argument here is that this leadership now needs to come more from headteachers themselves or from agencies committed to working with them in authentic ways. It is clear that the more bureaucratic the response the less likely it will be to work. A more lateral approach may be to create the conditions within the system to promote system leadership and collaborative activity. NCSL endorse this suggestion by promoting local solutions approaches and building capacity through the development and support of NLEs and LLEs to address local challenges.

**Suggestion two: place the agency close to the school.** There are now in England, a number of emerging change agent roles within the system – Consultant Leader, National Leader of Education, Local Leader of Education and School Improvement Partners whose remit is specifically school improvement. The intention that must be maintained is that instead of creating a new bureaucracy their brief is increasingly focused on facilitating relationships between schools to maximise the potential of purposive collaboration.

**Suggestion three: use school ‘independence’ collaboratively to tackle underperformance.** The underlying assumption here is that schools freed of local control but working collaboratively is a particularly appropriate organisational format for schools, usually those in the inner cities, where rapid transformation of standards and support for students is most needed. The crucial condition is that these schools accept responsibility for the education of all the students within their geographic area.

System leadership represents a powerful combination of practices that give us a glimpse of leadership in a new educational landscape. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience creates much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions. Realising this landscape is however dependent on giving school leaders more freedom to take the lead – in short to light their own fires. The future is certainly theirs.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> David Hopkins is the HSBC iNet Chair in International Leadership. Between 2002 and 2005 he served three Secretary of States as the Chief Adviser on School Standards at the Department for Education and Skills. With thanks to Rob Higham, Elpida Ahtaridou and Trish Franey.
- <sup>2</sup> Higham, R, Hopkins, D & Ahtaridou, E, 2007, *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report for England*, Available from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/45/39279379.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Throughout this document in using the terms school and schooling we acknowledge the emergence of children's centres and extended service settings.
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- <sup>9</sup> Hopkins, D & Higham R, 2007, System Leadership: Mapping the Landscape. In *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 27, 2, pp.147–166
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The Leadership Network brings together the experience and ideas of school leaders across the country to create a powerful focus for change and development in school leadership. [www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork)

The Leadership Library is a free unique resource bringing together some of the best leadership and management thinking from around the world. [www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershiplibrary](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershiplibrary)

The Learning Gateway is a single access point to all NCSL's online learning tools and resources. It provides access to talk2learn, a vibrant online community of over 120,000 members. [www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway)

The Tomorrow's Leaders Today campaign is about finding, developing and keeping great headteachers. [www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday)

ECM Leadership Direct is an online resource exploring the implications for Every Child Matters for schools and school leaders. [www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect)

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