

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

School leadership for a self-improving system

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Resource

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of participants in the seminar and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

Executive summary

On 27 and 28 November 2012, the National College held a seminar in Nottingham with influential school leaders, policy makers, government officials and other stakeholders to consider the progress towards achieving a 'self-improving' education system in England.

The following emerged as key themes:

- There is no doubt that the government's focus on freeing up schools since 2010 has unleashed a wave of energy and entrepreneurial activity, with school leaders that have the confidence and capacity to shape their own destiny in the driving seat.
- The best leaders are working to build robust partnerships between schools so that teachers learn from and with each other; and capacity is shared so that pupil outcomes are improved. Equally, while the opportunities presented by the self-improving system to achieve wider improvement are being harnessed by some leaders, others are reluctant to engage. As a result, there is a risk of a two-tier system emerging in which some schools gain significantly from the enhanced continuing professional development (CPD), the sharing of expertise and peer evaluation and challenge that comes from working with other schools, while others find themselves increasingly isolated.
- Collaboration cannot be forced on those unengaged schools, but there are opportunities through which schools and government can demonstrate its potential to play a key role in improvement. For example, the implementation of the new national curriculum could provide impetus and opportunities to encourage collaboration between more schools.
- A key challenge for government is to clarify its vision for a self-improving system; in the eyes of some schools (particularly those in most need of support from other schools) it is currently largely synonymous with structural intervention. If government expects all leaders to engage with school-led approaches to improvement then it needs to make that more explicit and ensure policy encourages and empowers them to do so.
- Confident leadership of the kind required to lead this system can already be seen at work in many teaching school alliances, federations, academy chains and other school-led alliances. These approaches and models need to be captured and shared, particularly where they are already modelling the kind of 'deep' partnership which enables long-lasting improvement through activities such as joint practice development¹.
- To further embed and sustain a self-improving system, education needs to generate more hard evidence of what works in terms of school improvement strategies and interventions. It currently lacks the kind of data that health practitioners have access to. Again, those 'deep' partnerships already emerging have high potential to generate a rich and well-informed evidence base, for example through the teaching schools research and development network.
- The self-improving system does not yet exist at a national level. However, there are small sub systems, largely built around teaching school alliances, chains and federations, proving that it is possible. What is needed is an alignment of communication and approach across the system, whereby school-led models are increasingly advocated and used as the vehicle for improvement and reform by schools, government and other players.

¹ JPD was defined by Michael Fielding and colleagues as '...learning new ways of working through mutual engagement that opens up and shares practices with others'. It captures a process that is truly collaborative, not one-way, and the practice is being improved not just moved from one person or place to another (Sebba et al, 2012).

Introduction

The purpose of this seminar was to build on the 2011 event (see [The new landscape for schools and school leadership](#), 2012) to consider the current trends and momentum towards a self-improving school system, the issues that are emerging and the implications for leadership, the system, and the National College.

The self-improving system can be defined as one in which schools themselves, through greater autonomy and freedom, are in the driving seat of school improvement and professional development, working together to spread best practice, knowledge and experience to the benefit of schools across the system. Among other key developments such as the growth of academy chains and federations, teaching school alliances are key to this process through, for example, their focus on talent management, school to school improvement and research and development. The aim is that partnerships such as these will provide the drive locally and across the system to achieve improvement that would not otherwise be possible.

The seminar examined some of the progress to date on this front but also explored some of the barriers to further change, looking in particular at how partnerships between schools, the approaches to issues such as professional development, and schools' relationships with other organisations, including government, need to evolve to secure further improvement.

The seminar provided an opportunity to:

- consider current evidence and the perspectives of different stakeholders on how the school landscape is evolving
- draw upon different perspectives to assess the implications
- consider the issues for leadership in a diverse school system and for the College

It was structured around four key questions:

1. How is the school landscape evolving today, in England and abroad?
2. How far are we on the road to ensuring all leaders have the skills and confidence to make the best of autonomy and lead a self-improving system?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for leaders and leadership?
4. What are the implications for the College and wider system?

This report summarises the main issues raised, challenges and opportunities identified, and conclusions shared, with recommendations for the College, the Department for Education and the wider profession.

How is the school landscape evolving today, here and abroad?

This section summarises the presentations given throughout the seminar by leading academics and accomplished school leaders. The topics were:

- confident leadership and the issues that need to be addressed in order to create confident leadership in an autonomous and self-improving system
- models for a self-improving system driven specifically by schools

i. Setting the context

The context for the seminar was outlined through a review of the current landscape for education practice and policy and the implications for leadership, drawing on key research and thinking undertaken by the College in recent months.

Education is going through a period of unprecedented change. Some leaders are fearful and feel exposed; some aspirant leaders are rethinking whether to go for leadership now. But for others, this is an exciting time; they are optimistic about the future and have a growing sense of confidence in their own ability to take charge. Greater accountability is now on the agenda but there is more emphasis on this accountability being assumed collectively.

The link between the quality of teaching and learning and the quality of leadership and management is now widely acknowledged; Ofsted's annual report for 2010/11 (Ofsted, 2011) noted that, in 80 per cent of schools, the judgement on teaching was the same as that for leadership and Ofsted head Sir Michael Wilshaw has emphasised that leadership is key to driving up standards (Ofsted, 2012). The UK also scores highly internationally on the quality of school leadership with research by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) giving the UK 'the highest index of principal leadership' and praising its leaders for being focused on 'learning not administration'.

The challenge remains, however, that good and outstanding leadership is still not universal, with too few children benefiting from the best school leadership. Ofsted judged some 30 per cent of schools (around 7,000) to be satisfactory/in need of improvement and three per cent inadequate in 2011/12. The quality of governance was also uneven, varying across different types of school. Critically, there is a 'postcode' issue: a clear link between a child's socio-economic background and their academic achievement. The poorer a child is, the less likely they are to be in a school with good leadership and so realise their potential.

Partnerships have a key role to play in tackling this entrenched inequality. The high-calibre leaders who can take the reins and work with others in a collective response to the challenge are needed as never before, yet there are not enough of them. Research into the importance of 'family virtues' – the benefits derived from schools which work together – suggests that these virtues include being better able to meet the needs of all students and teachers, improving efficiency across all schools and building leadership capacity.

Various models of collaboration already exist in academy chains and other settings with a range of leadership benefits. They include peer-led inspection and evaluation, with leaders from each institution evaluating leadership and practice in other schools to inform improvement. There are also wider opportunities for professional development, and the ability to deploy leaders and teachers to areas requiring their specific expertise. Chains with a variety of settings and types of school also offer potentially greater and certainly more diverse opportunities for leadership development. Teaching schools exemplify this approach, enabling groups of schools to focus resources on school improvement through specialist leaders of education (SLEs), school-to-school support, professional development, succession planning and research and to share the findings and application across a far wider range of schools.

It seems clear that these approaches will only work if all leaders have the confidence to engage with them. In a review of school leadership by the Institute of Education (Earley et al, 2012), some 22 per cent of heads viewed the current government policy, with its drive for greater autonomy, positively and 12 per cent negatively. Between these were two other more ambivalent groups: one was less positive about the direction of government policy and cautious about autonomy in particular; the other group was 'moderately positive' about the likely impact of policy, though hesitant in embracing it.

As such, there is a very real risk of a two-tier system developing in which some school leaders embrace partnerships and a more autonomous role in driving improvement and others shy away from it, for different, often valid reasons.

The danger is that, as the system (that is, schools and leaders) itself replaces government and local authorities as the chief source of support, those who are not actively collaborating with others will be deprived of access to peer evaluation, challenge, CPD and other potential school improvement benefits. At the moment, on leadership development, for example, research by the College indicates that two-thirds of schools are leading their own, rather than collaborating with others, suggesting a lack of curiosity about what is happening in the rest of the system.

There is a particular fear around small primary schools, some of which could find that they are too small to support their own improvement, yet are in a local authority which no longer has the capacity to help.

Leaders were asked to consider the following during the course of the seminar:

- Do we recognise a two-tier schools system? If so, is it the sign of a system that is developing or is it a permanent feature? Why are some schools not engaging with change?
- Will teaching school alliances, chains and College licensees be able to grow a sustainable supply of school and system leaders for the future?
- Are we asking too much of system leaders and the schools they lead in driving the reform agenda?

ii. International perspectives: what are the issues we need to address in order to create confident leadership in an autonomous and self-improving system?

Continuing the theme of system reform and enabling leaders to take ownership of improvement for their schools and the system, colleagues at the seminar were presented with a North American (Ontario) perspective on building a confident school leadership profession. As in England, the demands on schools in Ontario are increasing and diversifying and there is also less respect for professionals.

It was suggested that confident leadership is built on two key tenets:

- leading teaching and learning – building pedagogical and team skills, the ability to motivate and ensuring that leaders are confident in focusing on evidence and research
- managing politics – leading a school or system is a political job but that aspect of it is neglected so people lack the support they need to do it (for example, they don't have training in conflict resolution). But political understanding is necessary for leaders in order to garner the support they need from stakeholders for their strategies. It is, therefore, central to managing autonomy confidently.

Other things matter but having too many requirements militates against good development: the school leader who has 12 different objectives to focus on will find his/her attention and energy soon becomes too dissipated to be effective.

Ontario has a 'tri-aligned' system – province-district-school - in which districts play a key role. People are hired to work for districts, not individual schools, so the district can move staff around and build a sense of community across schools as well as make strategic decisions about human capital.

School improvement strategy operates across the three, rather than being a stand-alone effort by one province or good school, and it focuses on everyday practice rather than being confined to exams, accountability and leadership qualifications, with a strong focus on lateral learning.

There is both a top-down and bottom-up approach in which the government empowers leaders and sets strategy in key areas but gives leaders the freedom to respond. For example, there is input from the ministry on areas such as succession planning but the government doesn't dictate to schools what or how they should deliver it. And at all levels, the culture is one of 'no shame, no blame'.

As a result of this approach, there is "an excess" of applications for school leadership positions.

Based on this experience, recommendations for the English school system include:

- try to avoid too many changes in policy
- monitor training carefully – who takes part, equity issues, effects
- build lateral learning capacity
- provide practical resources for leaders
- continue to coordinate strong links to research knowledge
- acknowledge the role of school leaders as advocates on social issues

An alternative perspective on building a confident school leadership profession was presented, citing examples from Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore.

Research was highlighted which revealed that the benefits of increasing autonomy may not be huge in terms of the impact on learning gain – as little as 0.3 per cent of a year, in fact. This may not be a surprise in that "when you increase autonomy, some people fail or don't grasp it at all."

Drawing from evidence around learning and teaching, the importance of behavioural – and sometimes cultural – change in driving improvement was presented. However, changing how people learn and what they learn is fundamentally the most difficult thing to do. People will change when:

- they have a clear purpose to do so
- they have consistent and credible role models
- they have the support, skills and capacity (to change behaviour)

Active professional collaboration – leaders and educators working and learning together – provides a platform for these elements to be realised, but in considering this we need to be clear about what we mean by effective collaboration. The OECD distinguishes between:

- the exchange and coordination of teaching material, discussion of individual students' development, attendance at team conferences and ensuring common standards; and
- the kind of active professional collaboration which features team teaching, peer observation and feedback to inform improvement

The latter approach is done much less but has the most impact.

It was stated that the conditions for building confident leadership across successful Asian systems have included the:

- rotation of school principals
- designation and deployment of master teachers (trained to Master's level)
- designation and deployment of curriculum leaders
- mentoring of teachers
- role of research as a natural strand of the teacher's remit

iii. Leaders' perspectives: what are the key leadership drivers for achieving an autonomous and self-improving system?

In this section, the seminar heard from leaders in different school settings, including executive headship, leadership of a large teaching school alliance and academy chains. These are the key themes that emerged from the presentations and subsequent discussion.

Identifying leadership talent

Developing confident leadership should start at the recruitment stage. Leaders should be identifying candidates who may have leadership potential as indicated through evidence of leadership ability, resilience and ambition, for the school, not just themselves. Heads should also look out for emerging leaders in their organisations at all levels, including teaching assistants.

It is important to encourage people to see themselves as leaders by getting them into networks where they will start to identify with other leaders and identify leadership qualities in themselves, as well as providing opportunities for them to learn how to manage difficult issues.

Creating development opportunities

Professional development for all staff is the foundation stone of improvement in one highly successful alliance. All staff, including support staff, spend two hours a week on CPD sessions where the models, systems and protocols that the chain uses are embedded.

Training people properly as leaders in school is critical and means more than entering them for NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship), said another leader. One school conducts evaluations like a "mini-Ofsted" to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses with an evidence-based approach.

Local authorities need to be more proactive in identifying people and encouraging them to go for leadership, rather than being directed to other non-school leadership roles.

Partnerships between schools can afford new and diverse opportunities to bring on senior leadership talent. Chains and federations, for example, can be a useful "proving ground" for new leaders in that people are encouraged to try headship knowing they have the support of an executive head above – "it's headship with stabilisers on."

Creating effective alliances

Building trust and tolerance, being entrepreneurial and, above all, ensuring shared values across the alliance are key to enabling confidence in all parties. One leader said the success of this approach in his alliance was reflected in a deep commitment to the partnership by all members and that "every time we meet as a partnership, every single person turns up and has done for three years".

Moral purpose

Describing their leadership of a large and complex teaching school alliance, one leader explained the pivotal importance of moral purpose across the partnership as expressed in "the will to help others and be professionally generous; to build strong relationships; and to provide equality of opportunity for all young people in the partnership".

Moral purpose is also explicit in the mission statement of one chain of schools where the founding principle is that "everything must reflect the single goal of what is right for children". In practice this translates into, for example, reflecting in the curriculum "what the children need" rather than the existing expertise of the staff and what they can provide.

However, while moral purpose is routinely and rightly treated as understood – everyone wants the best for children and that is at the heart of all decision-making – one leader pointed out that the premise may sometimes be stretched too far. In his alliance, the understanding that all the services schools provide to

each other – for example, evaluation by an NLE (national leader of education) or an LLE (local leader of education) – is paid for is critical to the continuation of the arrangement because “moral purpose can only go so far in ensuring sustainability”.

Accountability

Accountability, specifically the fact that systems such as Ofsted are set up to measure institutions not systems, remains an issue. However, one of the strong points of some alliances is their ability to build their own accountability systems, for example, by collaborating for self-evaluation, often with a joint monitoring and review process. In one partnership, each school begins with self-evaluation of its summer results and completion of the SEF (self-evaluation form). An annual review visit by another principal in the partnership gives each school verbal feedback, plus a written report which identifies any key needs. This scorecard is also shared with other heads. The partnership then brokers the support to meet those needs and there will be follow-up visits, if necessary.

In another example, one alliance organises compulsory ‘health checks’ for member schools. The checks give the schools a chance to check their own judgements with an NLE or LLEs who are members of the alliance, to an agenda set by the school. It includes a data check to help identify trends and areas of support, and a three day teaching and learning check which reviews the evidence the school is using as a basis for its teaching and learning strategies. The health check also provides data to inform the alliance’s own self-evaluation against its key performance indicators. A QA (quality assurance) framework is based on information gathered and reviewed by a school-to-school support group. All information is shared across the alliance so colleagues can hold each other to account, an element which can be difficult for some to accept.

Role of governors

School leaders who want to collaborate with others can face opposition from governors, as has often been noted in the past. The definition of what constitutes a ‘good’ head in the eyes of the profession and in the eyes of governors may differ. One colleague asked: “Do governors know what a ‘good’ head looks like?”

For governors, there is a different problem: good heads are in short supply and some are “not up to the job”.

How far are we on the road to ensuring all leaders have the skills and confidence to make the best of autonomy and lead a self-improving system?

The self-improving system has been defined as: 'One in which school improvement and professional development are conjoined in the life and work of a school in relation to its chosen partners.' (Hargreaves, 2012) Central to it is the concept of joint practice development (JPD) in which professionals work together to devise new approaches and solutions towards improving a given practice, rather than one side acting as 'donor' of good practice and the other a passive recipient. Because the relationship is mutually beneficial with both sides contributing, it is more likely to endure.

The self-improving system has been embraced by some confident leaders, who have seized the opportunity to collaborate and organise professional development to meet the collective priorities of their alliance, chain or group, as well as their own institution. For them, the self-improving system is the practical embodiment of the principle that the people in schools are the ones best placed to understand what will most benefit the children in those schools and that good practice needs to be developed in partnership so that as many children as possible feel the benefit.

Others are less enthusiastic. Some leaders do not necessarily accept or have confidence in the proposition that both autonomy and collaboration are necessary to secure improvement, for a variety of reasons. This could lead to some schools becoming increasingly isolated, as others become more interdependent with others.

The challenges leaders face in building and maintaining deep partnerships include the costs of deep, inter-school partnerships in terms of the time, money and energy required to make them work, which makes heads cautious; or the fact that staff will not know the students in partner schools so their sense of moral purpose is weaker, initially. JPD can serve to address these challenges by not only bringing staff from different institutions together around a common goal to learn but supporting and encouraging the movement of staff between schools through secondments or other arrangements so all staff become familiar with students across the partnership schools.

The role of government is vital - ministers need to make clear and keep repeating what their vision of the self-improving system is, including the goals they expect it to achieve, so that leaders understand its importance and have the confidence to pursue the deep partnerships and build collaborative capital that support it.

In the discussions that followed, the following themes emerged:

Partnerships for a self-improving system

For those heads operating at executive level who are successfully leading partnerships, whether chains, federations or other collaborations, the challenge is how to scale up their successful work so that more schools can access it.

Some believe the structural solutions approach is a successful means of ensuring those schools most in need of support are able to benefit from school-to-school improvement, because intervention can be swifter. However, even for those schools that are not below floor target and entering partnership voluntarily, it was considered that partnership would only be successful if entered into on a formal basis. Models such as hard federations and academy chains can help to provide the necessary structure for effective self-evaluation, and the deployment of staff to share expertise for improvement and professional development.

However, groups such as the Bradford Partnership, which includes all primary and secondary schools in the city, are demonstrating that it is a commitment to deep partnership, rather than formal structures *per se*, that lead to successful school-led alliances.

Among this range of approaches, a strong common theme emerges, which is the commitment to moral purpose and to holding all parties to account for collective success. The leaders present are clearly driven

by a desire to share effective practice to the benefit of more children and this underpins their vision and practice. All are willing to be held to account for their efforts.

Barriers to a self-improving system

However, it was also clearly reflected that there are some barriers to the further development and reach of school-led partnerships. The stumbling blocks for some are local authorities which will not support them to expand, for example, their executive headship role to other schools. For others the issue is scale and sustainability: some academy chains feel they are now “big enough”. One other problem emerging is that there is a “degree of retrenchment” happening in some collaborations, with some academies, for example, opting to work with other successful schools in teaching school alliances rather than linking up with schools that are struggling.

The importance of ‘status’ for heads moving from a single institution to working collaboratively was also listed as an issue by one colleague: “Let’s be honest, heads’ egos is one of the big barriers in the system.” In the same vein, as a leader in a partnership, the focus should be on forging links laterally between the partners, rather than creating a hierarchy: “I regard myself as a network engineer, not an empire builder,” said one leader.

One of the key structural challenges is financial stability: one leader representing a teaching school alliance told of how they are already running a deficit owing to staff costs outstripping the available funding. Another is the amount of ‘energy’ in the system: it’s better for leaders to focus on two or three key needs and do them well, rather than try to do everything. Unsurprisingly, bigger schools find their role easier to manage than smaller ones. The issue of “uncontrolled competition” (from other schools opening or changing status) has been a real worry for some.

The role of the executive head is too often seen as an emergency step to fill a sudden vacancy, to raise standards from low or when governors have felt unable to appoint from the field of candidates on offer, whereas it should be presented as a more positive choice.

Others in the profession – the least engaged – have different concerns. One view widely expressed among colleagues was the perception that collaboration is being forced on some schools against their will and without the potential benefits being clarified. And both heads and governors worry about the impact on jobs of federations and other hard collaborations.

It is only by mitigating these barriers that leaders can develop the climate for further and wider collaboration to engage with others. There is a sense of ‘chicken and egg’ here: for many, being part of a partnership in itself breeds the confidence to pursue what they are doing as leaders.

Government: what does it want?

Many colleagues felt that the government needed to communicate its strategy for creating a self-improving system more effectively to school leaders.

One key issue is that the self-improving system concept has become synonymous in some quarters with ‘academisation’ and other structural solutions. But what must be clearer is that a self-improving system is not limited to structural solutions. The development of the academies programme has accelerated not simply as a result of intervention through structural solutions, but also as more leaders seek the freedom and autonomy to innovate and pursue their vision.

Some leaders were of the view that simply extolling the benefits of autonomy in itself is “not useful” in terms of promoting a self-improving system where schools are required to work interdependently. The message around autonomy and freedom should be one which is promoted alongside the importance of collaboration and a sense of responsibility to other schools and the wider system.

It was questioned whether there is a risk of a view emerging that autonomy in itself improves teaching and learning and raises standards. How can this be possible, some wondered, without strong professional networks and agreed standards? In fact, Ofsted’s most recent annual report further demonstrates the importance of school-to-school support in the new landscape.

Some felt there were mixed messages at national and local level. There was a sense that other government initiatives and policies are not always conducive to, or in alignment with, the need to enable a school-led approach to reform and improvement. The significant emphasis on individual school accountability was cited as an example here, specifically the fact that Ofsted continues to inspect schools as separate entities, however deep their partnerships. Similar concerns were voiced about the perception of a 'top-down' approach to national curriculum reform.

This is confusing for those who are on board already and fails to instil confidence in those leaders who are not yet convinced of the benefits of using their new-found autonomy to engage in school-to-school partnerships.

The sheer number of initiatives at national and school level exacerbates the problem, it was also felt. Better to concentrate on a few things and ensure that all parties – schools, National College, government – are in alignment on them. This then gives school leaders the confidence to pursue these areas of focus, and others they feel important, without fear of new accountabilities and demands further down the line.

That said, 'system alignment' doesn't have to mean simply aligning with Ofsted and others. It can also be done at the school level, through processes such as self-evaluation, which have been discussed earlier in this report.

Fundamentally, the critical task for government is to set the strategy for a self-improving system, communicate it to the profession, then foster the conditions to enable the profession to take greater ownership of school improvement. Government needs to do this while also ensuring there is sufficient accountability and intervening where schools are facing significant challenges and an urgent response is needed.

But thinking even more radically, there may be an argument for government reconceptualising its role more profoundly in education and switching from the role of provider to enabler and broker.

Vision: top-down or bottom-up?

The point was raised several times that whatever the government's vision is – what it understands by a self-improving system – it is unclear to the profession how they are expected to fulfil it. School leaders have been empowered to a degree but this is alarming to some who are still expecting direction from the Department for Education:

"The vision needs to be articulated from the very top, otherwise small primary schools won't be drawn in. It has to be clarified that there are a variety of ways for partnerships to exist, not just academies. Secondary leaders need that strong understanding as well. That would provide alignment and confidence and it may just head off the tale of two tiers which we may be heading towards."

The counter-argument was that policymakers should be setting the vision but not how it should work. Rather, people running schools and partnerships should determine how the vision is fulfilled in their context and not be "waiting for someone to help them use their autonomy".

For this to work, it is therefore critical that those leaders who are already successfully improving and reforming the system in their locality, often with a strong entrepreneurial spirit, have a means of sharing what they do with others across the system.

For some, however, the whole notion of government 'stepping back' and 'empowering' leaders to make their own decisions was a red herring:

"You can't leave government out of the mix. It determines who goes to school and how much money is provided for schools, the accountability system, it sets the social scene, what research is done and supported. To say that government can say 'over to you' is sophistry. The government makes choices that have a much greater impact than anyone in this room can make."

The challenge for primary schools

The lack of capacity in primaries to work in partnerships is a major concern and raises the spectre of the two-tier system, with some schools collaborating and improving while others – for reasons of will, capacity or simple geography – fall by the wayside.

The perception of ‘academisation’ in itself can be a deterrent to primary schools which might welcome partnerships but fear being forced to take the academy route. If there isn’t already a clear narrative for primary governors about partnerships and school improvement, then someone – school leaders, the College – must develop one.

How to do this? How to foster partnership working when there is no appetite for it? One colleague suggested that “fear of isolation can be a driver to get people to collaborate”, justified on the basis of the greater good – that is, those who are isolated now will be more so unless action is taken. There is, though, the risk that it could lead to resentment.

A different approach would be to sell the concept of partnerships more positively by emphasising that collaboration actually makes a leader’s life easier – carrot, rather than stick, in other words. There are changes ahead which would make useful starting points for this conversation. Implementation of the new national curriculum, for example, will bring opportunities and indeed, an impetus, for collaboration. For isolated schools, this would offer a powerful demonstration of the benefits of working with others.

Is a self-improving system achievable?

A system can only be self-improving within its current parameters and every system is part of a wider system. The concept of autonomy therefore needs to be considered within these parameters:

“Rather than autonomy, we should be talking about ‘inter-dependence’ of schools. Schools actually have little autonomy – not only because of Ofsted but they have no control over the children who go there.”

Some colleagues argued that it may actually be impossible to create a self-improving system because of the other system parameters, although the success of the London Challenge, for example, goes some way towards rebutting this argument.

“We worked on the basis that London had all the answers within it and we would find them. Sometimes they were trapped within a single school, LA or department. The question was how to unlock them.”

It was joined up, clearly steered and more than fulfilled its aim of raising standards across London schools, though there is a question mark over how far the learning has been shared subsequently. But it does suggest a self-improving system is possible within the parameters of the wider system and the constraints/demands on schools. It is important to consider how the various institutions, roles, policies, and funding can serve to enable rather than constrain the opportunities for leaders to lead confidently and interdependently, to pursue collective excellence.

Perhaps most importantly, how will the knowledge about school improvement be shared? Such evidence of what works, what doesn’t and why, is key, but so is mobilising that knowledge and the will of leaders to act on it:

“If we want a high quality self-improving system we need:

- evidence – how do you know that what you know is right?
- the platforms for moving that knowledge around so that practice doesn’t get trapped in single institutions
- the moral courage of leaders to lead that process, to be accountable for it, and to share things which it is not obviously in their interest to share”

In fact, the mini examples of a self-improving system – the already successful school-led alliances and groups presented by various leaders at the seminar - offer strong evidence that it is possible to create a self-improving system with confident leadership being a prerequisite in each case.

The challenges that then need to be faced are: what are the enablers for a self-improving system and how can they be achieved realistically within the constraints that currently apply?

A confident profession: developing and empowering leaders

In this section, leaders examined some of the emerging leadership opportunities and challenges.

What kind of leaders and leadership behaviours does a self-improving system require?

1. Routes to system leadership

Some overseas school systems have separated teaching and leadership through the way they have approached their leadership development programmes. Whilst most leaders agree that the leadership of learning and teaching is integral to developing confident leadership, it is also important to recognise that those who lead as subject specialists and those who lead schools will have different development needs at some stage.

In England, a route that provides overlap between the two may already be emerging in the shape of specialist leaders of education (SLEs) who retain their specialism but lead improvement beyond their school and develop broader leadership skills. Created in the 2010 White Paper, SLEs are outstanding senior and middle leaders who support individuals or teams in similar positions in other schools (HM Government, 2010). They understand what outstanding leadership practice in their area of expertise looks like and have the skills to help other leaders to achieve it in their own context.

2. Key skills

In Canada, where leaders have been enabled to play a key part in delivering system reforms, “managing the politics” is something leaders have to get to grips with if they hope to drive improvement; being a good leader of teaching and learning alone is not enough. The ability to bring key stakeholders along with them and manage conflict are two key aspects of this.

If partnership working and the knowhow of school-to-school support was incorporated into future leadership development, that might also address the problem of resistance by some schools as it would be seen as a natural element of leadership. This is already starting to happen through developments such as the SLE role and the new leadership curriculum from the College. The fact that the emerging generation of leaders of ‘generation Y’ are often natural networkers – as a result of having grown up in a world where communication with different interest groups via technology is a given – also plays into this argument. However, it should be noted that this generation is also producing leaders – of free schools and other settings – who are equally willing to “go it alone” if they see the need, much as entrepreneurs do.

A self-improving system will also depend on building a culture of collaboration and collective support and challenge at all levels of the system, not simply at a governance and leadership level, if it is to become embedded. To build a collaborative culture you need networks within schools before you can build networks between schools. So the onus is on schools and leaders to see that effective collaboration in the curriculum and in improving teaching and learning practices, between departments and across the hierarchy, is embedded and that all staff, including support staff, have the opportunity to lead improvement.

Professional development

Two key points emerged here. One is that, although teaching schools are beginning to move the debate on, professional development is still much more about a transfer of practice – from one professional to another – as opposed to teachers working together and learning from each other in joint practice development (JPD). JPD goes to the heart of whether collaboration is mutually beneficial and therefore more likely to endure as its value is recognised by all sides.

The other point is that we are still not equipping our new teachers or leaders to be able to assess the impact of learning by equipping them with, for example, skills in different forms of assessment as part of

their training. In order to measure the impact of collaboration we have to be able to measure its impact on learning.

Evidence

Evidence may have a key part to play here – hard data, gathered possibly through randomised controlled trials, which demonstrates scientifically the efficacy of an intervention, method or exercise in raising attainment. That would help to make teachers ‘equipped’ and would make it harder for staff to justify pursuing the latest random theory on how to improve teaching and learning.

Some colleagues had reservations about this argument, fearing there was a risk that it would mean too much effort expended on evidence gathering at the expense of learning:

“We could all name five or ten things that there is documentary evidence that they do improve things yet are not done in schools around the country. For example, classroom observation and feedback. If we focus on evidence-based or informed policies, we will be looking for more things to do rather than focusing on implementation of it.”

Evidence may be a starting point – “an essential piece of the jigsaw” – but it is no use unless it is widely shared. One of the other challenges for the profession is to disseminate what it knows more widely. The Sutton Trust was mentioned as an example of an organisation that has a good record of “finding out what works then skilling up”.

The point was also made that as a profession, education is “institutionally weak” with no equivalent of, for example, the Royal College of Surgeons. There the people who are developing evidence to improve processes and to set standards in the system are also the ones practising as surgeons. In education, the College or teacher networks could provide the institutional framework for such a function.

Building networks

As it stands, the comprehensive self-improving system does not exist; rather the picture is one of “some very effective and diverse sub-systems” in the form of teaching school alliances, chains, federations and other partnerships. The challenge is whether they are allowed to multiply by themselves or whether some sort of intervention is required which takes them from a minority of individual operations into a total, wholly inclusive, self-improving system?

“How do these successful heads/leaders envisage moving to a bigger system? Otherwise, you just carry on and hope it will grow. That’s not much of a strategy.”

It requires a new way of thinking to work out how these sub-systems interact with each other. How do you connect schools which are struggling to an organisation which can help them? How do you create something which will touch every pupil?

What are the implications for the College and wider system?

These points summarise the main recommendations from the seminar and in particular the final plenary, for the Department for Education, the College and the wider profession.

For the Department for Education:

Clarity: the model of school-to-school support is more than government intervention through structural solutions. This approach has its place but the perception is a deterrent to some leaders who might otherwise more confidently embrace partnerships and alliances with other schools as a route to improvement. If the government has a clear vision of what it expects a self-improving system to look like, it needs to articulate that to the profession. Promoting 'freedom' and 'opportunity', while important, is not enough by itself. The message about autonomy needs to be accompanied by ones about the importance of collaboration and leaders taking responsibility for both their own and others' improvement.

Empowerment: if the government intention is to empower the profession to shape the system itself – as far as possible – and encourage and enable leaders to innovate and create solutions for improvement, then it needs to ensure the conditions are in place for them to do so and to do this on an ongoing basis. This includes ensuring new policies are aligned with the vision for school-led improvement.

Initiatives: it would be more useful for the Department for Education to focus on two or three aspects or strands of reform, working to avoid setting multiple objectives for leaders to respond to at a given point in time.

Shared theory of action: the Department for Education should endeavour where possible to ensure leaders are involved in the conversations it has with local authorities (LAs) and other agencies around school improvement, to help create a 'shared theory of action'.

For the National College:

Communication: schools which are not working with others for whatever reason risk being left behind. If school-to-school support is the keystone of government strategy for improving schools, then there is a role for the College in talking to leaders who are not currently on board or, more likely, brokering a link between those schools and other leaders who are already in partnerships and can act as advocates. It is important to bear in mind that what has worked with confident leaders so far will not necessarily work with those who are sceptical or worried. The new primary curriculum could act as a driver here, offering natural opportunities for collaboration and enabling isolated schools to see the benefits to them of working with others.

Leadership development: incorporating partnership skills into leadership development more explicitly could be a way to engage more leaders – at least with regard to the emerging generation of leaders – especially if it reinforces the theory that collaboration makes the leader's job more manageable. Similarly, school leaders need a clearer understanding of the political dimension of their role and skills, such as conflict resolution, building consensus and winning the support of other stakeholders.

Teaching school alliances: the College's relationship with teaching school alliances puts it in a good position to explore whether they are reaching out to struggling schools or only working with like-minded ones. One message from teaching schools is that they would like more help in explaining to their peers more directly what they are for and what they are aiming to achieve. The announcement that the College will merge with the Teaching Agency, with teaching schools at the heart of the new organisation's remit to support a self-improving system, should help with this.

Capturing the learning: the College should continue to capture what leaders are learning in their contexts; through case studies, research, providing forums for discussion and other means, in order to help mobilise the knowledge around the system. Examples of successful innovative practice, like the models presented

by leaders to the seminar, need to be packaged up and shared in a way that will sell their benefits to other school leaders. One of the College's functions should be to step in and codify practice, monitor and validate what is working and assert itself as lead agency that can make a difference.

For the profession:

Schools and leaders need to take ownership of the vision, rather than waiting for direction “from above” on how it should be fulfilled. They are the ones best placed to relate the vision to learning and outcomes for children, not policymakers. Key to this is ensuring all leaders understand their freedoms and their role in a changed and evolving system.

Focus on deep partnerships as they are of most help. The need to manage change can form the basis for deep partnerships in which all partners are focused on an objective or set of objectives and learn together, taking everyone with them as they do so. The preparation for, and implementation of, the new curriculum could be an ideal opportunity for partnership between schools but also universities and subject associations.

Collaborate internally as well as externally: if people do not have a collaborative culture in their institutions it is hard to work with them because they do not behave/believe in same things. SLEs are an example of where schools have developed expertise and promoted the sharing of it internally. As a result, leaders of that expertise have gone on to work across schools, confidently supporting improvement.

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