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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Confident school leadership: a Canadian perspective

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Resource

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Introduction

'Effective leaders are not simply managers of single institutions, but confident leaders of a profession that is collectively focused on improving all children's outcomes through high-quality teaching and learning'

(PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007:4).

School leaders in England are facing both unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented challenges. More than ever before individual school leaders have the opportunity to shape the nature and work of their schools. However, to do this successfully requires the application of skills by more people than has ever occurred before, and consequently the mobilisation of new systems and supports to allow that to happen.

In this short thinkpiece I draw on my experience both as a leader of school systems in Canada and as a researcher studying large scale school improvement, and will suggest some critical factors in creating more 'confident leaders'. To begin, after a brief discussion of the nature of 'confident leadership', I will describe two central requirements for confident leaders – leading teaching and learning, and leading for public confidence and support. The paper then describes some of the ways school systems in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Alberta have tried to meet this leadership challenge and outlines some of the steps that could be taken to support the development of these dimensions in England's large and decentralised system. This will include recommendations to the National College and others.

This paper is intended to be provocative and to stimulate individual and collective thought as well as debate. The opinions are solely those of the author.

Confident leadership

Education policy in England supports a system in which schools, individually and collectively, have increasing authority over their own destiny. This model assumes that school leaders will have the ability to take advantage of this situation to drive progress across the entire system, so that all pupils are benefiting from high quality schooling. As noted by Hargreaves (2010), the policy approach calls for increasingly confident and well informed school leaders who can take responsibility for a 'self-improving' education system.

While confident leadership is a laudable and important goal, three reservations need to be noted at the outset. First, too much confidence can be as bad or worse than too little. To be sure, if we do not believe in where we are going or what we are doing we are unlikely to make much progress, and in particular will have difficulties convincing others to join. However, some of the biggest disasters in history have come from people who were too self-confident; convinced they were right even in the face of much evidence to the contrary. What wise leaders need is an appropriate balance of confidence and doubt, of certainty and humility. While we move our organisations in a direction we are confident is the right one, using means we believe to be appropriate, we must at the same time be open to the possibility that we are wrong and that changes, even big changes, may be needed in ends, means, or both. This is, to be sure, a neat trick.

Second, because leadership is a property of teams and systems more than it is of individuals, confident leadership depends on the characteristics of organisations and systems as well as those of individual leaders. People are social creatures; much of the meaning we give to our work and lives comes from our interaction with others. In complex organisations such as schools, confident leadership requires a sense that others with whom one works are also competent. It is much easier to be a confident leader when one has competent colleagues and superiors and a supportive organisation. Every leader knows that a strong supporting team makes the job both worthwhile and feasible.

Trust is also an important element in building strong organisations (Bryk & Schneider, 2004; Day et al, 2010). It is well known that children develop confidence when they have the opportunity to explore new challenges, but with the knowledge that parents or others are there to support and protect them if need be. Adults are not that different; in any setting we will do more and push further if we know we are supported by others. Equally, school leaders will not be effective if they live in a climate of fear and blame. This means that a discussion of leadership must also involve building the right system in which leaders can work effectively.

Third, the work of leaders in every organisation is shaped by their context; the work of organisations of all kinds is influenced more by what happens in society than by internal actions (Levin & Riffel, 1997; Kahneman, 2011). The success of any organisation depends on its ability to understand and respond to a changing environment, which means that leadership challenges in schools can only be understood by thinking about the environment in which schools exist. To talk about a self-improving system still implies important relationships between the education system and the rest of the society, with larger social forces shaping what schools can do in important ways. For example, how school leaders address improvements will depend on what parents and other influential actors outside the school believe to be desirable goals and features of the school system. Leaders' ability to do good work will depend in part on the kinds of resources society provides for schools but also for children and families. For example, increasing income inequality in England makes the work of schools more difficult.

As well, this relationship between inside and outside is vital because organisations that are left alone tend to become traditional and routinised, if not sclerotic. Goals of better service to clients can easily be displaced by the desire to satisfy internal groups and to keep things going without much change. Outside pressures, while they can be challenging, help to keep organisations thinking and alert. When this relationship works well, the 'outside' provides constant feedback to the system on its performance, keeping the organisation focused on achieving its goals in the face of changing conditions. While leaders may not always welcome these external pressures, they are needed. For schools, the implication is that some external pressure and monitoring is necessary, though one can certainly argue about how much and of what kind.

The leadership challenge

School systems everywhere expect a great deal from their leaders. A recent National College publication (Day et al, 2010) described ten key tasks of leadership, while various sets of leadership standards in England and elsewhere include a much larger number of skills and foci. Indeed, one of the challenges in leadership development is that we are asking leaders to have too many skills, making the task seem impossible for ordinary mortals.

I want to propose something simpler: that while many skills matter, to be truly confident about their work school leaders need to feel capable in two major areas; first, leading teaching and learning, and second, being able to manage the political environment in and outside the school in a way that sustains the organisation and builds community support for it. While the first of these has often been noted, the second is less frequently addressed yet is, in my view, equally important. Indeed, without effective political management and public support, a school cannot achieve excellence in teaching and learning, as I will show shortly. Of course other areas of leadership also matter, and will be discussed briefly below.

Let's start with leading teaching and learning. The first observation is that leading teaching and learning in a school is not the same as teaching students. The task of school leaders is to ensure that expertise is available as and when required, whether it comes from inside or outside the school. Their task is to ensure that learning happens, not to provide all the instruction themselves. It is the difference between managing a team and playing on the team, or conducting an orchestra and playing in one. The best managers and conductors are typically not the best players, and vice versa. So leaders do not need to be – indeed, cannot be – the best or most knowledgeable at teaching, but they do need to be very good at engaging a group of adults in doing their work better.

Leaders should also recognise that how children learn is a complicated matter, and varies across students and areas of study. There is not nearly enough research on questions of teaching and learning given their importance and complexity. Moreover, a great deal of work on education reform and change is largely silent on the specifics of teaching and learning. This work has much to say about how schools should be run, but little to say about what teachers should be doing every day to help children learn. In my view teaching is a very challenging task requiring a high level of technical skill, and we should be doing much more to understand those skills so that we can ensure that more people have them (Levin, 2010). Nonetheless, much is known about good teaching and learning practice – for example as described in the recent syntheses by Hattie (2009), or in various other syntheses in areas such as reading (Snow et al, 2005) or student motivation (National Research Council, 2003). Leaders should be taking steps so that members of staff – not necessarily leaders themselves – become familiar with this evidence.

Fortunately, a considerable amount has been learned about the leadership of good teaching and learning over the last decade or two, both from research and from the work of skilled practitioners such as England's national leaders of education. The National College for School Leadership has been at the forefront, in England and internationally, of learning and sharing these findings and of helping school leaders strengthen their skills. A full review of this area is outside the scope of this short paper, but readers can draw on a variety of excellent sources, including other papers in this series as well as work by Barber, Wheeler & Clark, 2010; Day et al, 2010; Hopkins, 2007; Matthews, 2009; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2007; Southworth, 2009; and Timperley, 2011.

In brief, our growing knowledge about leading teaching and learning tells school leaders that to do this work well, they have to:

- Identify the work of leading learning as a key responsibility, to which they devote a considerable amount of time and attention and which takes priority over other competing pressures.

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- Build a school climate that makes it clear that everyone in the school is expected to engage in ongoing learning about effective practice (for example through the organisation of effective CPD and the effective use of pupil data to guide improvement), and translate that climate into specific systems and processes that make it an important part of the work of everyone in the school (for example by building discussion of learning into every staff meeting, every school event, every plan, and every major communication). Working to improve teaching and learning must be a central part of everyone's work, every day.
 - Build a strong and mutually supportive team of formal and informal leaders in school who encourage and support ongoing learning by staff.
 - Ensure that other processes, such as teacher evaluation and student assessment, support rather than detract from learning in the organisation at all levels (for example by not penalising people for trying new things that turn out not to work well).
 - Ensure that all of the above is guided by the best available evidence on effective practice in education, including a strong culture of research and evaluation within schools.

All of these requirements embody a certain tension between colleagues who support each other and colleagues who are able to challenge each other. Of course both are necessary, and many organisations, including schools, probably do not have enough of either. But it is important to be explicit that high performing teams, organisations, or systems have both these aspects in a satisfactory dynamic tension. People count on being challenged as well as supported by one another, since it is important to have both of these to be the best they can be. When this balance is right, people feel stretched, energised and supported. The trick is to avoid too much criticism, which is demotivating, yet to be willing to critique and be critiqued in the interests of improvement. The notion of a 'critical friend' captures this dualism well; critical friends are needed at every level of the education system. The ability to give and receive critique, as well as support, is a sign of confidence from both parties; it takes confidence to push people to be better (without discouraging them) and it takes confidence to receive criticism as a contribution to improvement.

School leaders in England increasingly understand and agree with this emphasis on their role in leading teaching and learning, not least because of the work of the National College. While people undoubtedly vary in their perception of their own skill in leading teaching and learning, a belief that this is a key part of the leader's role is now practically universal. The task, then, is to continue to develop these skills across 20,000 school leaders and their leadership teams, while also tackling the common research finding in many countries; that school leaders feel many factors prevent them from giving this task the priority it warrants. This mission is daunting, but not impossible; much progress has been made in recent years.

Managing the political environment and building support for good education

Educators are optimists. We like to believe that right and reason will prevail and good ideas will be adopted no matter what. Sadly, the world is not always like that. The reality is that, as one of the education ministers with whom I worked used to say, “we only get to do in schools what the public is willing to let us do”. Many of us can recall incidents, perhaps many of them, where good ideas were stifled by opposition, either within or outside the school. As another example, practices clearly shown to be ineffective by substantial research (for example, retaining students in grade or using extensive setting by ability or giving marks on a scale of 100) continue to be widespread, largely because many people believe in them despite the evidence.

Anyone leading a school is necessarily engaged in a political enterprise that involves building support, negotiating, communicating, persuading and often, compromising. Politics are ubiquitous in schools. In England, school leaders must first of all retain the support of governors, which can itself be tricky but is by no means enough. Improvement in schools also requires the support of staff, of parents, of pupils and sometimes of others even further afield (such as the national government). Politics can intrude in so many ways, from staff who automatically oppose any initiative that comes from a headteacher, to colleagues who actively dislike each other, to parents who are ready to sacrifice other pupils for the sake of their own children, to governors wanting to have more influence whatever form that takes, to other schools that are unwilling to collaborate. This is not to imply that political issues are always venal or self-interested. Political conflicts often arise from real differences of opinion on important issues, such as which goals of education matter most or how best to achieve particular aims. But whether motivated by grand ideas or self-interest, the result is conflict that must be managed.

Another important element of this political role is engaging with the public to build support for public education. Many of the external forces that make school leadership more difficult come from public policy, which is in turn shaped by public attitudes and opinions. For example, policies around regular testing of students or competition among schools or sanctions for poor performance are often put in place as an effort to respond to public concerns about education. If school leaders want to help shape public attitudes, then they must engage in that public debate in various ways. The most important of which is by leading and communicating success for students.

School leaders are vital for effective communication – not only with their own local community but with the broader national public about the importance of public support for schools. However, this must involve support for all schools, so communication cannot be built by showing how one school is much better than others; it cannot damage public trust in the system as a whole. There are many important issues around this work, such as how to communicate challenges as well as successes, and understanding that public communication is less a matter of glossy brochures than it is of daily interactions between members of the school and others in the community (Levin, 2008).

School leaders may feel unprepared to lead teaching and learning, but most (correctly) feel even less prepared to manage the political tasks facing them. They may find these tasks distasteful, and equally may have little idea how to go about them. Yet these are also skills that can be learned and improved. For example, key skills in this area include productive conflict resolution, being able to hold conversations on difficult topics, listening effectively to others who disagree with us, or understanding how to persuade (which is not simply a matter of saying it over again and louder). There is a good base of knowledge on all of these issues, but it is often not part of the leadership curriculum. For example, considerable work exists on conflict resolution (for example, Fisher and Ury, 1991), or on holding difficult conversations (Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999). Leaders should have the opportunity to learn these important skills.

Just as importantly, leaders have to understand that political work is an essential part of the job. Spending time listening to people, understanding their views, making efforts to persuade them to consider other courses of action, and building coalitions to support change are not distractions from the job of leading a school. This work is a vital part of being a leader, necessary in building a sense of common purpose towards better schooling and better outcomes.

A word on operations

In identifying these two priorities I am not suggesting that other aspects of leadership are unimportant. As noted earlier, we expect a very extensive set of skills from leaders, in a wide variety of areas, and though many publications urge school leaders to focus on such tasks as vision and teaching, operations, which tend to get short shrift in these lists, are also important. The best leader of teaching and learning will not keep her or his job if the budget is badly mismanaged, or if children are not safe in the playground, or if the staff are not paid on time. Leaders understand this, which is why many end up spending so much time in these areas. Getting operations right is fundamental and undervalued. At the same time, excellent operations are not enough to make a good school; that only happens when the other elements above are addressed. In fact, operational tasks are often the easiest to delegate, allowing leaders to spend their time on issues of teaching and learning.

The importance of context

School leadership everywhere is a challenging task. Regardless of the type of education system, school leaders face many complex challenges, often including what Rittel and Webber (1973) called ‘wicked problems’ – that is, those issues that cannot be avoided yet offer no clear solution. As public education has been able to provide more and more young people with higher and higher levels of skill and knowledge, public expectations for schooling have grown at least as quickly. Fifty years ago, the idea that most students could finish secondary education successfully would have been seen by most as unnecessary, or even as a wild fantasy. Today, the expectation is that virtually every young person in developed countries will obtain at least that much formal education, and an increase in demand has occurred for the breadth and depth of what schools are expected to provide. Educators may be forgiven for feeling, as Wildavsky put it many years ago, that they are “doing better and feeling worse” (1979).

As well, developments in the wider society have also rendered the work of school leadership more difficult. As is the case in other professions and public services, public expectations have been increasing while respect for professionals has been declining (perhaps due to a better educated population). Growing diversity in society means more demands on schools and other institutions and harder choices between competing positions that are not easily reconciled. Many employees are less willing to accept orders, as are many pupils and parents. Yet, equally, concerns over risk of various kinds has made organisations more cautious and resulted in more rules in many areas, from finance to safety.

At the same time, a growing belief that schools can alleviate, if not entirely overcome, the results of other social inequalities has put pressure on school leaders to pay more attention than ever to issues both of instruction and of caring for pupils. The result of this is that school leaders have more on their plates than ever before, alongside higher expectations than ever before as to how they should deal with it all. These stresses are clearly visible in the results of the reviews of leadership in England conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2007 and by the recent National College study (Earley et al, 2012) and they show no signs of diminishing. Indeed, as noted earlier, these external pressures show even more clearly the importance of the political role of school leaders.

Approaches to confident leadership in Ontario

Education systems around the world have recognised the importance of improving school leadership as an important part of improving educational outcomes and reducing achievement gaps. A key finding is that in systems with high levels of achievement, leadership development is increasingly seen as integrally linked to the ongoing work of school improvement rather than as a separate enterprise. In these systems leadership development is more focused on influencing the daily work of leaders than it is on courses or training, important as the latter can be. Moreover, as suggested earlier, effective leadership in these systems is viewed as a property of the systems as a whole, rather than being seen primarily as a characteristic of individuals. In other words, ongoing development is more important than initial selection, but this individual development takes place in light of larger system improvement efforts.

Consider leadership development efforts over the past few years in Ontario. Ontario is a Canadian province of 13 million people spread out over an area the size of Western Europe, though the vast majority live in cities. Its public education system, as a result of the complexities of Canadian history, involves four separate, self-governing systems (English Catholic, English public, French Catholic and French public). All of these are governed by elected local school boards and all are 100 per cent funded by the provincial government. In Canada education is the constitutional responsibility of the 13 provinces and territories. The national government has virtually no role in schooling; for example there is no Canadian minister of education. These four systems together operate 72 local school districts, ranging in size from a few hundred students to 250,000. The school boards own the buildings and hire and employ all staff. Together they operate nearly 5000 schools, with 120,000 teachers, about 70,000 other staff, and 2 million students. Virtually all staff are unionised with collective agreements at the district level. Ontario schools spend in total about \$22 billion each year. The Ontario Ministry of Education provides the central direction to this system, including setting curriculum, teacher certification, accountability mechanisms, and most other major policies.

When the current Ontario education improvement strategy began seriously in 2004 (see Levin, 2008, for a fuller account), leadership development was seen as a supplement to the province's strategies to improve literacy, numeracy and high school completion. A separate leadership development effort only began a couple of years later, when these strategies were well developed, and even then it has been clear all along that leadership development is in the service of these student outcome goals, not a purpose in its own right. The Ministry's leadership development branch works closely with its student achievement division.

This approach means that in Ontario there is not a great focus on formal training and courses. For example, there has been no real change in the province's very modest qualification programme for principals – but there has been on building specific leadership skills in practice by working with school districts (who employ teachers and principals) and provincial leadership organisations. Ontario also gives a great deal of attention to building networks of leaders within and across the 72 school districts, which vary greatly in enrolment and geography, to work on these improvement goals (see Levin et al, 2011, for a fuller description of Ontario's leadership development strategy). For example, many activities bring together leaders from across district boundaries to focus on the common requirements of their work.

Ontario's strategy is a combination of top down and bottom up. The main goals of improvement are set by the Ministry of Education, which also funds much of the work. However the determination of specific activities and priorities is a shared process with school and district leaders. Each district has its own approach to leadership development and succession planning within the larger framework provided by the Ministry. For example, the Ministry supports mentoring for all new principals but districts determine how this programme works in practice. Many networks of leaders span district boundaries in various ways, though all focus on the provincial goals for improvement.

In addition, all the leader organisations in the province – three associations of principals and three associations of supervisory officers (district officials who supervise schools and principals) – have been brought together to form a virtual Institute of Educational Leadership which shapes priorities and coordinates training and development. (Ontario’s principal associations are major providers of professional development for their members). There is also strong input to the leadership development effort from researchers so that strategies can be grounded in evidence.

Ontario recognised that a vital feature of principals’ work was good support and supervision from senior district staff, so has worked to strengthen these relationships as well. School districts are actively involved in leadership development, including succession planning and selection processes (keeping in mind that school leaders are hired, placed and supervised by districts, not by individual schools). Although there are inevitably frictions between the Ministry and school and district leaders, visitors to Ontario typically report very positive energy and a high degree of alignment in the views of all parties as to the overall approach in the province to improving schools.

Ontario undertakes careful monitoring of student progress and of school achievements. For example, the number of low performing elementary schools in Ontario has declined by more than 80 per cent since 2004, even as the bar for “lower performing” has been raised (personal communication, senior Ministry official, October 2012). School achievement levels on provincial assessments and measures are public. However there is no system of ‘failing schools’ and no equivalent to Ofsted and its reports. In general Ontario has tried to see the main measures of student progress as indicative rather than definitive. Individual schools are typically not competing for enrolments based on those outcomes. In general the accountability system is not punitive for individual leaders, although there are certainly cases where districts will move leaders to new assignments in an effort to inject new energy into a struggling school.

The Ontario approach of a shared effort between schools, middle tier agencies and the state level is also typical of other high achieving systems such as Singapore or Korea or Shanghai in China. The net result of an approach which has this kind of balance, when done well, is a strong programme of leadership development, good selection practices, the ability to move people to where they can be most productive, and individual leaders who feel that they are in a system that offers them opportunities but also a great deal of support when required.

The education system in the province of Alberta is very similar to Ontario’s except that it has fewer students, schools and districts, and has a much smaller Catholic sector. However the other elements – local districts, provincial policy and funding – are the same. (For an account of some aspects of Alberta’s system, see Hargreaves et al, 2009). In Alberta, which is also a very high achieving province, the provincial Department of Education has been less directive than Ontario about strategies; relying more on gathering and making public information on a range of outcomes. For example, Alberta’s ‘accountability pillars’ include parent and student satisfaction as an important measure along with test results and high school graduation rates.

Alberta’s school districts are the key actors in leadership development, both through their individual decisions on hiring, placement and development, but also, in the last few years, through the collective work of the College of Alberta School Superintendents, which has been the main organiser, with financial support from the Department of Education, of professional learning for leadership. These efforts are very much focused on building strong leadership teams in school districts, and in helping those teams focus their work on improving student outcomes. Over the last few years Alberta’s school and district leaders have sharpened their focus and increased their knowledge around what they need to do to improve teaching, learning and student outcomes.

Both Alberta and Ontario have developed their own leadership standards, in both cases through participative processes with school leaders and their organisations. In both settings these standards serve as the basis for leadership development work, but in a way that allows considerable local adaptation as to specific approaches. In short, these effective systems address leadership development as involving both the development of individuals and the building of a strong system which supports and encourages effective leadership at all levels. Confident leadership is seen to be less a property of determined individuals than of teams of people working in a mutually supportive organisation where everyone is constantly encouraged to improve their skills in a collaborative way. In these organisations, leaders embody what Fullan (2010) calls 'positive competition', in which each person's development encourages their colleagues to sharpen their own skills in the service of the overall organisation. It is less about looking better than others, and more about the organisation as a whole improving its performance. As noted earlier, this requires mutual critique as well as support.

A further result of this approach is that neither province has had a crisis in terms of people applying for leadership positions. This means that neither province has had to consider alternative provision or certification for leaders as a way of finding enough qualified applications (just as neither has had a need to do so for classroom teachers). Of course, neither system is perfect, or anything close to it. Many issues remain. Personal agendas can get in the way of system improvement. Some people still go into leadership roles for the wrong reasons or get stuck in positions that do not suit them. Not all professional development for leaders is of high enough quality. Relationships with teacher and support staff unions are never simple, especially in districts with a more difficult history of labour relations.

However in Alberta, where school principals are part of the Alberta Teachers' Association, there is a more positive working relationship between teachers and the system than in Ontario, where principals were forcibly removed from the teacher organisations fifteen years ago. For example, the Alberta Teachers' Association is supporting a national study of the future role of the principalship in Canada. Nonetheless, in both provinces school leaders generally feel positive and optimistic about their work – hallmarks of self-confident leaders.

Applications to the English system

England has been a world leader in recognising the importance of school leadership and in providing support for effective leadership. The National College itself is one of the most important supports, but others include the development of a high quality credentialing system for school leaders (the National Professional Qualification for Headship [NPQH] and proposed additional qualifications), a strong focus on middle leadership in schools, a commitment to the use of evidence to guide leadership practice, and, more recently, the deployment of national and local leaders of education to support schools. Teaching schools will likely provide another important vehicle to help develop leadership. The strong support for a research component within the work of teaching schools is a particularly welcome development. Some school leaders also continue to benefit from support from their local authority or, increasingly, the chain or federation of which they are a part.

Recent school policy in England has given great prominence to the role of leadership within a decentralised system, providing enormous opportunities for leaders to make a difference working individually or collectively. However, before highlighting these potentials, it must be noted that some aspects of the English system would make it more difficult to adopt the approaches being used in Canada. For example:

1. English schools have a high degree of autonomy in some areas, while being quite constrained in other areas. Schools have considerable control over budgets and staffing, for example, which creates operational demands on leaders, but are also subject to a powerful inspection system which is aimed (rightly) at reducing variability of practice in many areas, and creates some real pressures on leaders (Gilbert, 2012).
2. School leaders in England, unlike most other systems, are hired by and responsible to local governing bodies whose expertise, commitment and views on issues can vary widely. School leaders thus have to manage relationships with governors in a way that is not the case in most other school systems, where this work happens at the district or regional level rather than in each school. The result of greater autonomy and a political role is that heads in England report feeling a major disconnect between what they would like to be doing and the tasks that actually seem to require their attention (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007; Earley et al, 2012). Though to be fair this conflict is reported by school leaders in all systems, whatever their mode of governance.
3. England has many small schools, especially in the primary sector, which means that recruiting skilled leaders is harder and the resources to support good leadership, such as strong teams, are less likely to be present. The diversity of England's system, involving faith-based and other unique forms of schooling, makes this challenge even more difficult. Leaders of small schools can be compared to people running very small businesses, where many enterprises struggle or fail.
4. The English system requires schools to compete for enrolments yet many commentators have identified an increasing need for collaboration among schools. The twin forces of competition and collaboration pull leaders in contrary directions. In particular, competition can reduce trust, collaboration and mutual learning among schools.
5. The decline in the role of local authorities (LAs), while it has reduced some constraints on school leaders, has also meant that some kinds of support are less readily available. The National College study (Earley et al, 2012) reports this as a major concern for many school leaders in England. Compared to countries with a stronger system structure – what is sometimes called the 'middle tier' – in England it is harder to match leaders to the most suitable assignments, and the plethora of potential providers of leadership development may render the work of school leaders more difficult. The declining influence of local authorities has also removed a more senior level of leadership that exists in other systems, who can support individual school leaders and also speak more effectively to regional and national issues.

These are realities that are unlikely to change in the near future, so efforts to build a skilled and confident leadership corps must take them into account.

What to do to build greater leadership skill and confidence

As noted earlier, the aim must be leadership confidence based on skill; confidence without skill is not a desirable goal. To achieve this, three basic approaches need to be pursued simultaneously, with the College and others helping to guide the overall effort.

The first requisite seems the most obvious: providing high quality training and other opportunities for skill development. Much is already being done in England in this area through the National College and others. There is also continued development of these efforts, with the College playing a leadership role by studying what is currently in place and advocating for new and improved approaches to development in light of changing conditions. Clearly there is much excitement about the potential of some of these new strategies to help create the kinds of skills and conditions outlined in this paper, and many people are working hard in that direction. It will take some time though, before these approaches mature and judgments can be made about their impact. Constant feedback from current and aspiring leaders is needed to know whether the training and development provided is appropriate and sufficient. As in every other area of learning, the task is never done, and improvement is always possible.

Recommendation: The National College should monitor and report publicly on the real impact of various training modalities on leadership skills and practices. This will be even more important in the multi-provider world now emerging in England.

The redesign of NPQH and the development of new related credentials as part of a highly flexible programme with diverse provision also has great potential, and continues to be a world-leading example of leadership development in a large system. As this effort develops, it will be important to coordinate among various providers to ensure both quality and a reasonable degree of consistency in content – but without stifling the innovation that could result from diverse providers. As teaching schools and other bodies develop in a highly varied schools sector, steps will be needed so that everyone can learn from each other and so that the best practices are widely shared. As noted, this work is more difficult in a system with so many small, self-governing schools, so lateral learning mechanisms will need much attention.

Recommendation: All parties should work to avoid too many changes in policies that affect leadership. (For example the advent and disappearance of school improvement partners as a main focus of leadership development).

Recommendation: The National College should work to ensure opportunities for lateral learning among providers of leadership development.

This may be difficult given competitive pressures among these providers, but it will be essential to improve overall quality.

Another challenge will be ensuring access to high quality learning and development for enough leaders to ensure that the system as a whole is adequately supplied. It is already clear that in England this is difficult for some groups of schools, depending on type and location, so it will be necessary for the College, the government and school leadership groups such as teaching schools to consider how the appropriate outreach can be made.

Yet another challenge in leadership development will be active recruitment of non-traditional candidates, in particular from minority groups who are currently underrepresented in the leadership corps compared to the student population. International experience shows that changing this balance requires active recruitment and ongoing support, but can have very positive consequences.

Recommendation: Data should be reported regularly on participation in leadership development and its connection to hiring, with particular attention to equity concerns.

The second strategy involves building ongoing support and networks for school leaders. The literature on training (Leithwood and Levin, 2008; Pellegrino and Hilton, 2012) shows that training can produce changes in practice if it is carefully developed and closely related to leaders' real work. Change, as school leaders know, requires consistent support and feedback.

Leading a school can be lonely work, especially in regard to the political dimension. So building support systems and networks for leaders is another essential task. It is a delicate matter to have the right blend of support without stifling new approaches.

In the current environment in England, while there are many potentially good supports for such networking, they are far from universal. The College and others should take steps to ensure that high quality networking opportunities are available to all school leaders. The College could also provide resources for such networks.

Recommendation: The National College should assess and report on the extent to which all school leaders a) have access to and b) participate in leadership networks.

As with professional learning communities for teachers, having a mentor or network is not enough. It is all too easy to turn groups into mutual reinforcement or shared complaint sessions. These may make people feel better but they do nothing to improve anyone's skills. The work of effective groups is carefully structured so that it supports meaningful learning – by focusing on the real work of the participants, using real examples, and including norms that legitimate challenge and debate. The College already has a lot of experience with networks; that earlier work could be useful now in putting together guides for effective networking that could be used around the country.

Recommendation: The National College should work with other partners to provide standards and resources for effective networking by school leaders.

Such resources could include various kinds of tools for those running networks or equivalent services, such as good practice guides, evaluation mechanisms, and shared examples of successful approaches.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, leadership development in these areas has to be built through systems, processes and tools that increase the likelihood that new skills will be developed and used. If things are important, organisations develop systems to make sure they get done. That is how we handle aspects of schooling such as payroll or transportation or pupil safety, by creating routines and procedures so these things get attended to. The same should be true of leadership development. People can be more confident when they know that there is an organised approach to the work.

In this context, systems include things such as regularly scheduled leadership development events with agendas that prioritise the key challenges facing people, or assigning time and resources to leadership development work so that it is not left until there is free time. Robinson (2011) talks about smart tools, which are both valid and well designed, and notes that they have high coherence but low complexity, take account of the realities of practice, and use multiple cognitive modes. These are the kinds of things we need to develop for school leaders rather than simply giving people more lists of things to do.

Recommendation: The National College and other partners should work together to develop high quality tools that would support the daily work of leaders in priority areas.

One important vehicle to support strong leadership is a better connection to research. In most professions, practice is guided by a strong body of knowledge, from both research and experience. Professionals have greater confidence in their work when they know there is good empirical support for it. Evidence helps narrow choices about programmes which is particularly important in a world in which there are many, many programmes being marketed to schools. As the Education Endowment Foundation has noted (<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/>), school choices about how to address improvement are not always grounded in a good understanding of current evidence. Equally, though, researchers should be investigating those practices seen as effective by skilled professionals, since in many cases good practice will run ahead of the research evidence. In education, the links between professional practice and research evidence are quite weak (Levin, 2010), making schools susceptible to ideas for improvement that do not have a solid base of evidence behind them.

Recommendation: The English education system should continue to strengthen links between research and practice in education, by building on and coordinating the many initiatives already in place. Specific examples could include ensuring research remains an important part of the work of the College and other official bodies, building research analysis skills into leadership development, and emphasising the importance of valid evidence in all leadership communications.

The good news is, as mentioned earlier, that there are many relevant pieces in place in England that support this agenda, so there is a good base for building for the future. The National College is first among these, including the redesign of NPQH, but the development of national and local leaders of education as well as the potential contribution of teaching schools are also important efforts to help build leadership capacity and confidence in England. National organisations of school leaders and universities can and should also be important partners in this work, providing different kinds of connections and skills. It will take the combined efforts of all parties to do this work well, and it will need strong leadership from government, the National College, and others to create and sustain that engagement.

Recommendation: The advocacy role of school leaders in urging better conditions for and around education in England should be recognised and accepted by all parties.

Karl Marx wrote that people make their own history, but they do not get to do so under conditions of their own choosing. For school leaders, that raises two important implications. First, whatever the conditions and limitations, the task of educators is to do what we can to improve positive outcomes of all kinds for young people. The ideas in this paper may help do so more effectively. Second, it is also educators' responsibility to try to improve the system within which we work. School leaders, particularly by working collectively through their various associations, can play an important role in advocating changes in education that will make the system more effective and therefore help more young people achieve success. Both roles, inside the school and in the larger system, are important in building confident school leadership in England.

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