National College
for School Leadership

The new landscape for schools and school leadership

Seminar report, January 2012

Resource

Contents

Executive summary

In November 2011, the National College (the College) hosted a 24-hour seminar on the educational landscape and the challenges and opportunities for leaders, particularly in terms of how they achieve system-wide success. Attendees at the event, which was held under Chatham House rules, included leaders of maintained schools, academies, independent and free schools, directors of children's services, senior policymakers and academics and representatives from national organisations and think tanks. The following is a summary of the discussion, and the recommendations that emerged from the event.

While pupil background remains the strongest determinant of educational success, it is the quality and capacity of teachers and leaders that will make the greatest difference to pupil outcomes. It follows that school leaders need to focus their time and energy on recruiting and developing great teachers.

The evidence indicates that there is a link between positive outcomes and school autonomy, but only if combined with sufficient accountability. Yet even highly autonomous schools still need to collaborate if they are to develop consistently great teachers. If schools compete, and knowledge and good practice remain locked in single schools, the wider system cannot improve.

The English system is characterised both by schools working in relative isolation and by significant variations in pupil performance within and between schools. These variations are significantly worse than in many comparable countries. Whilst many children are receiving the highest standard of education, too many are receiving an education that falls far below that standard.

There is a growing commitment among some of our best leaders to pursuing system-wide, as opposed to simply institutional, success. They are using their autonomy to challenge each other and to work together, drawing on each other's strengths to build the capacity for high-quality teaching and leadership. However, this collective drive for self-improvement is still not reaching the majority of schools and so there are risks that greater autonomy in England will not achieve its intended aim. Many leaders lack the confidence to take advantage of greater autonomy: rather than using it to look and learn from others to achieve the best possible outcomes for all children, they may look inwards and use autonomy as a cloak for recycling existing low-level practice.

The challenge for policymakers and school leaders is to be clear about the case for collaboration, including how it is to be achieved and how barriers can be overcome. This can and should be done at the same time as moving to increase autonomy and diversity and reduce central control and bureaucracy. A key issue to be addressed is increasing the capacity for self-improvement in England's primary schools, in particular small primaries.

The ultimate goal should be a system in which the elements of a devolved system are held in creative tension, with checks and balances to make sure that autonomy does not lead to isolation, that diversity does not become a barrier to collaboration and that accountability does not slip into regulation.

This raises three key questions:

1. How do we judge excellence? Are the learning outcomes by which we judge the system sufficiently ambitious? Are we placing too much emphasis on outcomes at the end of a child's school-based education, rather than the learner's progress throughout it?

2. How can we build capacity for system leadership and hard-edged, school-to-school collaboration, in particular in the primary sector?

3. What is the role of the state? What kind of social contract do we want or need? How can we engage the growing number of players in the learning game, including many who are not part of the educational establishment?

One answer to these questions can be found in the growth of the academy and free-school movement. Chains and federations, in particular, are demonstrating significantly improved outcomes that are achieved by a level of collaboration between schools that goes well beyond sharing best practice and is best described as joint practice development.

But while new structures may be necessary for improved outcomes, they are not sufficient. Cultural change is what makes the difference, and this takes time, trust and collaborative leadership that is distributed across every level of the organisations involved. This is exemplified in successful partnerships such as those seen in City Challenge, and it is embedded in the concept of teaching school alliances. System-wide success requires a wider shift in how the profession, governors, parents and wider society perceive the role of school leader. 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.

Whilst there was considerable debate and a strongly held minority view that an organised middle tier is not essential, the research evidence is clear that successful systems need an effective middle tier to support a culture of collective improvement. Chains both model what that might look like and challenge the way in which some local authorities currently fulfil the role. We do need families of schools, but not collaborations of which schools are a part simply by virtue of being neighbours in the same local authority. The nature or form of an effective middle tier should not be prescribed or centrally enforced, but emerge in response to the needs and expectations of schools and school leaders. There should, however, be a widely recognised definition of what the middle tier needs to achieve and standards for how any such activity might be evaluated. There is currently no settled view on what this might look like. The spectrum of opinion ranges from those who want to redefine the middle layer to those that want to see more or less radical reform of local authorities.

Whatever the structural solutions to the challenge of creating an effective middle tier or mediating arena, some proposals are beginning to attract significant support:

— schools that are underperforming should be required to join a successful chain, federation or established partnership

— the performance of local authorities is inconsistent, and government should consider whether it might require a licence to operate for any body offering services in the middle tier

— changes should be made to the way in which headteachers are recruited, appointed and supported to ensure that they all have the capacity for system leadership, and that it is not the exclusive preserve of a small, elite group

— similarly, the best middle and senior leaders need opportunities to collaborate so that system leadership is widely distributed

— incentives are needed to ensure that chains and federations collaborate with each other and with schools beyond their partnership to avoid insularity

— the regulatory framework (governance and accountability) for chains needs to be reviewed to emphasise collective accountability and improvement

— quality assurance across the system needs reviewing in order to address issues of duplication and inconsistency

— the current arrangements for school governance are one of the biggest barriers to distributed system leadership and need urgently to be reformed

Recommendations

The National College and school leaders should develop a coherent theory of the case for how system leadership can secure successful partnerships and collaboration across schools. This should be used to inform the College's work on developing system leaders. Aligned with this, the College should work with school leaders and other stakeholders to build and communicate a compelling narrative for how and why all school leaders should engage in the development of a self-improving system that is characterised by diversity, autonomy, accountability and collaboration.

The National College should work with primary-school leaders and others to understand the key issues facing the sector and define ways to build on the sector's many strengths as it becomes more autonomous and self-improving. The work should focus on the governance and leadership of primary schools, with a brief to investigate ways to promote excellence, secure school improvement and achieve value for money.

The Department for Education (DfE) and the College should work with governors and others on reforming school governance by licensing experimentation to support a more professional approach to the appointment of headteachers, greater local accountability and collaboration with other schools.

The DfE, Ofsted and the College should work with emerging chains and others to review the expansion of chains, the ways in which chains are held to account and the ways in which chains collaborate and learn from each other and other schools and partnerships to ensure success.

The DfE, local authorities and other stakeholders should continue to explore how the mediating layer might operate in future to secure school improvement, the effective management of pupil place planning and admissions, and wider children's services for children and families who face the greatest challenges.

Introduction

In November 2011, the National College hosted a seminar on the educational landscape and the challenges and opportunities for leaders, particularly in terms of how they achieve system-wide success. The seminar focused on four key questions:

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

2. What are the policy issues to consider and what might the system look like in 2014?

3. What are the challenges and issues for leaders and leadership as we move forward?

4. What are the implications for the College and wider system?

Attendees at the event, which was held under Chatham House rules, included leaders of schools, academies, independent and free schools, directors of children's services, senior policymakers, academics and representatives from national organisations and think tanks. The following is a summary of the discussion, and the recommendations that emerged from the event.

The conditions required for success in a highly devolved educational system

In the UK currently, we have an education system in which schools are more autonomous than anywhere else in the world. However, the English system is also characterised by variations in pupil performance that are significantly worse than in many comparable countries. This variation is a feature of the differences between schools and, even more significantly, within schools. Whilst some children receive the highest standards of education and teaching and learning, others experience an education far below that standard.

Those features of a highly devolved system that make the biggest contribution to school improvement are:

— **autonomy**: the most rapid rate of improvement at GCSE in the last 12 months, 5.3 per cent, has been in sponsored academies

— **diversity**: evidence from the USA suggests that charter schools have generated some competitive pressure, which has had a positive impact on the rest of the system

— **accountability**: PISA data establishes a link between positive outcomes and autonomy as long as schools are held to account

— **strong and confident leadership**: at school level this focuses on the leadership of teaching and learning, and across the system emphasises collaborative working between schools in order to build the capacity of teachers and leaders to achieve improvement

There are, however, several features of the emerging system in the UK that may be acting as barriers to improvement:

— McKinsey evidence indicates that schools need a minimum of 250 pupils to operate efficiently, which suggests that large numbers of (primary) schools are too small to support their own improvement.

— 3 in 10 schools are not working in partnership with other schools to deliver continuing professional development.

— Smaller sponsored chains and less formal converter chains are unlikely to be able to provide leadership development opportunities across their schools.

— Chains account for only 2 per cent of the whole system, though they are expanding fast.

It follows that whilst new structures may be necessary for improved outcomes they are not sufficient. What is needed is a system in which the elements of a devolved system are held in creative tension, with checks and balances to make sure that autonomy does not lead to isolation, that diversity does not become a barrier to collaboration and that accountability does not slip into regulation.

In the subsequent discussion, four questions were raised which participants returned to repeatedly during the rest of the seminar:

— **How do we judge excellence?** It was suggested that the indicator of five A*–C grades at GCSE (including English and maths) was too narrow a measure, and that other criteria (such as an Ofsted judgement of excellence or outcomes linked to personal development) might lead to different conclusions. It was also noted that the current indicator only measures outcomes at the end of a child's school-based education and the point was made that we need something that provides an overall picture of progress and standards. It was also argued that there are outstanding leaders in schools that are below floor targets or are not judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted. This talent, by implication, should not be overlooked.

— **How can we build the capacity for system leadership in the primary sector?** Politicians have largely concentrated on secondary-school reform. Reform of the primary sector presents far greater structural, professional and cultural challenges. There is a key role for the College in working with primary schools to address barriers to change, whether they stem from culture, structure, governance or capability.

— **How do we ensure effective collaboration between schools?** There are three concerns that need to be addressed. The first is whether enough leaders are likely to emerge with sufficient capacity to drive improvement across the system, recognising that much collaboration between schools currently lacks the hard edge required to genuinely drive improvement. The second is whether the need exists for a middle tier or mediating layer to act as a catalyst for collaboration between schools. The third is whether governing bodies (and parents) are sufficiently aware of the benefits of collaboration and willing to take a wider view of the system as a whole.

— **What is the role of the state?** At the heart of the debate about the role of the state were differences about what might constitute an appropriate balance between freedom and accountability, and about the relationship between the government (both national and local) and the mediating arena.

Staying ahead of the game: top down and bottom up

The changes in the UK are exciting interest around the world, and we are perceived to be at the leading edge of radical reform in our efforts to transform a system that is already high performing. That means there are no easy answers to be found elsewhere, though other countries, including the Asian countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, do offer some benchmarks by which to judge what is happening here:

— In Finland, the curriculum is increasingly focused on 21st-century skills, competency for all young people and links between formal and informal learning.

— In South Korea, the emphasis is on the three Cs (creativity, character and curriculum) in an effort to build a system which values, among other things, personal resilience.

An international perspective reframes the key questions that emerged from the opening session:

— In seeking to identify **excellence**, is the agenda ambitious enough in terms of learning outcomes?

— As we attempt to understand the **role of the state**, we need to decide what kind of social contract we want.

— When we think about **system leadership**, we need to understand that the number of players in the learning game is increasing, that it includes people who are not part of the educational establishment, and that if we don't transfer power to young people (the learners themselves), they will appropriate it themselves using their technological muscle.

Four new perspectives: a system in transition

1. Free schools punching above their weight

Although free schools are important in their own right, their greater significance lies in their capacity to impact more widely on the system as a whole. By 2014, there could be 200–300 free schools approved. The impact of this will be to:

— drive through deregulation, encourage enterprise and create a way of opening up the system to bright, young people with the ambition to do things differently

— mobilise energy within communities, and engage parents by convincing them that the system is on their side and that it is possible for them to make a difference

— provoke local authorities into taking the action that is needed to improve neighbourhood schools so that they become more competitive

As always, however, structural change will not provide a solution by itself. In order to achieve this impact, government needs to:

— be clear about how free schools will be accountable; experience in the US and elsewhere suggests that this matters

— demonstrate how it will intervene in the case of failure, because this will be the acid test of its commitment to quality

— be explicit about the role of free schools within chains, and whether they might be compromised by becoming part of another system

The free-school debate raises any number of questions about the **role of the state** and the challenge that is being offered to the existing social contract:

— Are free schools a Trojan horse for testing teachers' pay and conditions which have so far remained largely intact despite the freedom for academies to introduce variations?

— Are free schools simply an opportunity for the middle classes to reassert their ability to take ownership of the system?

— Will free schools, many of which are also faith schools, play havoc with the admissions system and create problems of social cohesion?

— Does the bureaucracy associated with establishing a free school promote or stifle entrepreneurship?

2. 'Hope for audacity': radical realignments across the system as a whole

Chains of sponsored academies are securing impressive results in some of England's most deprived areas. The way ahead for chains and federations is to promote more and deeper collaboration between schools. New forms of governance are already being pioneered within chains, with smaller, high-impact governing bodies (without sub-committees) sometimes overseeing more than one school. Where chains include teaching schools, they are beginning to work proactively and effectively with schools beyond the chain.

The key challenges that remain are to:

— find ways of ensuring that chains grow at a sustainable rate

— identify an appropriate model for collaboration between primary schools in chains which respects issues of culture and operating scale

— establish an effective mediating layer, possibly exploring the idea of licensing a local authority or other body to be responsible for school improvement in an area over a defined period of time

3. Capitalising on the opportunities offered by successful academy chains

The lessons from the charter school movement in the US are clear:

— there are only two key kinds of intervention that consistently drive up results, and these are investing in teacher development and implementing effective behaviour policies

— accompanying the increase in autonomy, there is an almost irresistible tendency towards concentration (60 per cent of sponsored academies and 30 per cent of all academies are in chains)

— although charter schools don't have much in common apart from autonomy, it is clear that larger chains do have a positive impact

— the improvement in performance is more marked in the early stages (as failing schools make up lost ground) but it can be sustained

If some academies and chains are more effective than others, there are implications for the **role of the state**, and, in particular, the status of the middle tier. The best local authorities are engaged in the debate, but others are fearful and at risk of becoming dysfunctional in their opposition. In the absence of a national consensus about governance and accountability, we will be unable to apply the lessons from the academy chains more widely.

We need:

— a more fluid and intelligent system in which school autonomy is earned as a reward for success

— a requirement for schools that are underperforming to join a chain or federation, where they will have the opportunity to learn from others

— mechanisms for sharing learning, both between chains and across the wider system

— a fresh approach to the challenge of primary chains, where it is proving difficult to gain momentum for change

4. Promoting collaboration between schools in competition with each other

Diversity, competition and collaboration can and do co-exist productively, and although there is almost universal agreement that the only way of achieving a step-change in performance is by encouraging or requiring schools to collaborate, there is less consensus about how this might be achieved. Some believe that there needs to be a significant change in the way in which the profession, governors, parents and wider society perceive the role of school leader. 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.

The key challenge is to establish an approach which engages **primary schools** ('the 16,000 schools that we have not talked about today') in the kind of collaboration that makes a difference ('not the kind of weak collaboration in which nobody takes responsibility for anything that goes wrong').

A new middle tier or not?

Although the view was expressed that we should close the gap between school and state by dispensing with a middle tier altogether ('local authorities and Ofsted are part of the problem'), most participants saw a role for some kind of middle tier because 'a system of independent state schools will not achieve what we have to achieve'. It was noted that independent schools are generally more entrenched and less innovative than state schools, with real barriers to establishing new schools, and that by advocating school-to-school support and new structural solutions as the basis for improvement, the secretary of state has implicitly rejected the notion of a free-for-all. Most agreed that the nature and form of an effective middle tier should not be prescribed or centrally enforced, but instead emerge in response to the needs and expectations of schools and school leaders.

The first step is arguably to define what we mean by the middle tier. The term covers at least three distinct roles: ensuring wider services for the neediest; being responsible for issues such as pupil place planning and admissions; and school improvement. Local authorities probably do have a key role in the first two, but the third can and should be reshaped with the best schools playing a greater role.

Those seeking to redefine the middle layer want to see some or all of the following:

— Some mechanism is needed to establish 'rules for school-to-school support' in order to achieve 'partnership with a hard edge'.

— 'Intelligent accountability' would acknowledges the big society and might involve more formal, peer-to-peer evaluation between strong schools, the reform of governing bodies and more direct accountability to parents and localities.

— 'More diversity and spark' is needed, in the sense that school leaders need to think about what they want from freedom – freedom *from* regulation or freedom *to* innovate in the interests of children.

— Widely recognised standards for middle-tier provision would ensure that schools and others could have confidence in the quality of what's on offer.

Equally important is the need to engage with the question of how **excellence** should be defined. 'Korea and Singapore are beginning to realise that the league table they are at the top of is not the right league table'. Whilst it is legitimate for any system to define minimum benchmarks, such as five A^*–C grades, the danger is that these become the only benchmark that schools strive towards. Genuinely outstanding schools get great results, but this is almost incidental, as what they really focus on is developing character and wider forms of learning.

The issue is that many academies do not appear to be using their freedom from pedagogic and national curriculum restraints to actually innovate. Do school leaders need to occupy the space to define excellence and benchmarks, alongside those set by government, in order to gain a greater sense of collective ownership of standards and encourage professionals to converge in an effort to achieve them? The evaluative work of Ofsted offers many strong examples of high-quality practice, but more could be done to ensure these are shared, understood and used to drive wider improvement.

Three futures: a system adjusting to the 'new orthodoxies'

1. Raising standards through structural change

— A tipping point in the number of academies has already been reached in the secondary sector and the challenge, by 2014, will be to make sure that schools collaborate in pursuit of higher standards by helping chains grow and by making best use of national leaders of education (NLEs) and teaching schools or other partnerships.

— Free schools will inject a level of competition into the system, and help to improve alternative provision for pupils who would otherwise be out of school.

— By 2014, attention will have turned to the primary sector and there will be a need to find a new model for primary chains, and new incentives to join them.

— There will be a renewed focus on accountability, with government shining a spotlight on unsatisfactory standards in academies, and a fresh look at the link between pupil performance and funding agreements.

— The current school funding system (which is 'broken beyond repair') will be on the way out because of inequalities in the system and the lack of transparency.

— The middle tier will be a collection of different functions, led by different organisations and not a single, all-purpose operation.

2. Building confident leaders

— Even though, by 2014, there will have been significant structural change, the future is 'seriously unknown' because empowering leaders to take control of their destiny is at the heart of government policy, rather than direction from the centre.

— Currently, the system is short on confidence, and leaders are still inclined to be compliant.

— If the policy works, school leaders will be able to exploit new curriculum freedoms, and view the publication of 'huge amounts of new data' as an opportunity, not a threat, allowing the public to design their own league tables, based on what is important to them, and freeing schools to target their offer in a much more sophisticated way.

— In this world, competitor collaboration will become the norm. The focus will turn back to the curriculum and qualifications, and schools will start to focus much more rigorously on initial teacher training.

— The actual direction of travel will depend on whether the bold or the fearful prevail; the choice will be ours because the future is in our hands.

3. Government policy in the steady state

— By 2020, we will have reached a steady state in which every secondary school and a majority of primary schools are academies.

— Chains will be the norm, with 20–30 having up to 100 schools and dozens in the 10–50 range. Some will be local, some geographically spread and some in clusters.

— The normal route for establishing a new school will be the free-school route, and many of the new free schools will be run by academy chains.

— The whole system will be highly accountable, with more data published and Ofsted focusing on teaching and learning.

— The role of central government will be minimal, concerned exclusively with accountability and quality assurance.

— Support for the system will be provided by over 1,000 teaching schools, some in chains, and others providing the link between chains.

— The National College and the Teaching Agency will provide quality assurance and support, and, where this is not sufficient, there will be interventions.

Three big questions

1. How will the chains be regulated? What is the optimum size for a chain? What happens if they become the monopoly provider in a geographical area? How will they be governed? What does accountability look like for a chain?

2. What will quality assurance look like, since this is essentially at the core of the debate about the middle tier? Who should be responsible for quality and improvement? What will the role of local government be? What other local solutions might be available, such as a local schools commissioner?

3. Are we loading too much on teaching schools? What can we do to ensure that they are successful?

Discussion concentrated on the **role of the state**, and the extent to which central government should have a vision for the system. There was considerable scepticism about the proposition that it either should or could step back and allow the system to generate its own solutions:

— Government has a responsibility to lead debate about what sort of society we want and how we will prepare young people for employment.

— Without transparency from government, the system will be shaped covertly by the requirements of Ofsted and the design of qualifications.

— Somebody needs to be an advocate for the disadvantaged and the dispossessed.

— Social and technological change and its impact on provision in the public sector cannot and should not be ignored by government.

— There will always be a need to make sure that chains collaborate as well as compete.

— There are functions, such as admissions, that cannot be left to chance.

Government has to be engaged in building a narrative about education, but it should not so dominate the landscape that others leave the debate. School leaders need to have the confidence to shape their own destiny, but ministers need to become more adept at articulating their vision in a way that is not oppressive.

The need for a narrative to cope with complexity

We are moving from an old hierarchical structure in which the key building block was the standalone school to an emerging chaotic structure in which the key building block is a cluster of schools.

Without collaboration, there will be no improvement but many schools imagine they have deeper partnerships than, in reality, they do. The size of a chain is not important; it is the quality of the relationships between schools within and across chains that matters.

We need to change our language and start talking about the mediating arena, and an education or school service, in order to acknowledge what is new about these relationships. We need to emphasise the importance of learning rather than compliance. Other conditions that need to be fulfilled to build deep collaboration are specified in the maturity model described in *Leading a self-improving school system* (Hargreaves, 2011).

The maturity model is about achieving the cultural change without which systemic change will be a meaningless exercise. If we don't create coherence through a shared narrative of change, we will find ourselves wandering aimlessly in a 'fragmented, confining landscape'.

The glue that prevents fragmentation has four key elements:

— high social capital (high levels of trust, which are essential for sharing knowledge)

— mutual evaluation and challenge (relationships based on honesty)

— joint practice development (planning and delivering together, not just sharing good practice)

— distributed system leadership (which extends moral purpose to all stakeholders so that everybody has an investment in the success of everybody else)

The relationship between the elements can be shown in diagrammatic form (Figure 1) which emphasises the primacy of distributed system leadership without which partnership working never goes beyond a set of good intentions:

Figure 1: Relationships in the maturity model
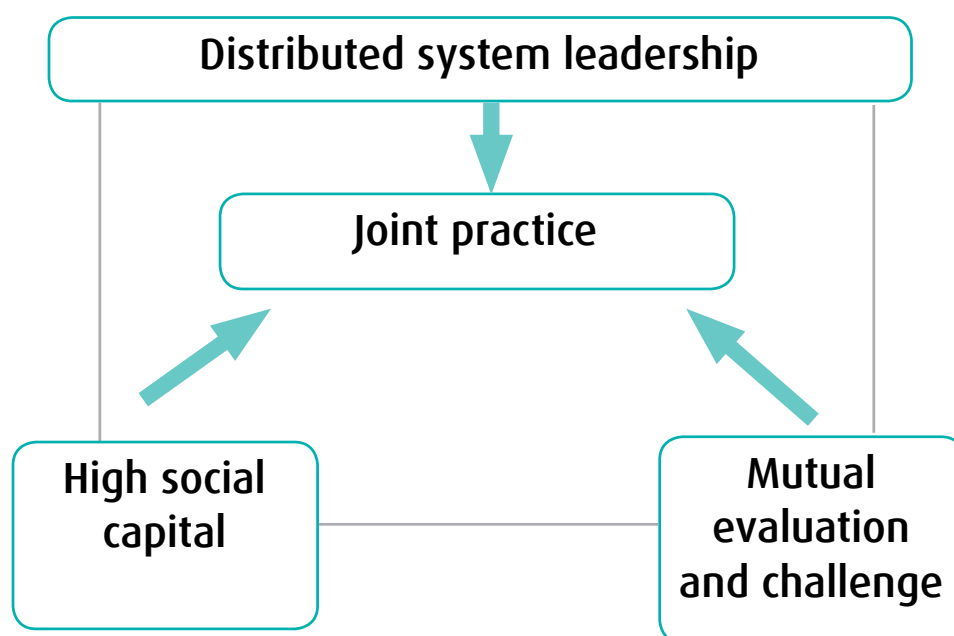
The implications of this are that we need:

— a coherent narrative theory of the case as a way of demonstrating to ministers that a devolved system needs to develop partnership competence

— an expectation that the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) will require aspiring headteachers to have experience of working in clusters

— inspection experience for all headteachers

— a commitment to distributed system leadership by ministers, officials and local authorities

— a commitment to distributed system leadership from 'nodal leaders' (ie, system leaders such as heads of teaching schools)

— a requirement for local authorities to broker primary-school clusters

— reform of school governance which, in its current form, is one of the biggest barriers to distributed system leadership

It was later suggested that the need to reform school governance is urgent and that there should be a requirement that all headteachers be appointed as co-leaders of more than one school.

Building a system which balances autonomy and accountability: options for the future

The local authority as the building block

— The local authority provides the best way of engaging all those schools (and they are a majority of schools) that are currently in denial about the need for change, but it is long and complicated work that requires a painstaking approach to building relationships.

— This option depends upon the ability and willingness of the local authority to co-construct a system of school consortia which are led by headteachers (by, say, NLEs), with full responsibility for all the school improvement work of the local authority including quality assurance.

— The local authority needs to remain in a support role, providing data and financial resources that are allocated by reference to need.

Accountability and sustainability

— Accountability plays a key role in achieving system-wide success. There were varying views of the degree of accountability required in order to achieve this, and how responsibility for accountability is best distributed between the centre, the 'middle tier' and schools. It was generally agreed that central accountability must remain responsive to developments in the system, particularly the growing role of chains and federations in driving school improvement, and ensuring quality assurance in that context.

— The primary sector is facing a crisis, particularly in terms of the long term sustainability of many small primaries. The solution may be to invest in helping such schools to form hard edged partnerships which allow them to share leadership and resources and thereby create more capacity for improvement.

A partnership model

— Partnership working is at the heart of improvement, but many headteachers want to work with colleagues who share the same value system, not the same locality. This is best achieved by creating larger networks which can provide expertise in data analysis and curriculum development and ensure that the network has intellectual leadership.

— Challenge and accountability can be provided through member schools training their middle and senior leaders to inspect each other on a regular cycle, and to then share expertise and resources to address the issues raised.

— These partnerships don't need shared governance and leadership in the same way as academy chains, yet – like teaching schools – they are still committed to building social capital through self-evaluation and collaboration in order to improve outcomes.

Schools can exist within a number of different partnerships, all of which serve different purposes. These could include, for example, behaviour and attendance partnerships established with neighbouring schools, policy development arenas, clusters for leadership development and functional groups that are required by an active mediating layer.

Recommendations

The National College and school leaders should develop a coherent theory of the case for how system leadership can secure successful partnerships and collaboration across schools. This should be used to inform the College's work on developing system leaders. Aligned with this, the College should work with school leaders and other stakeholders to build and communicate a compelling narrative for how and why all school leaders should engage in the development of a self-improving system characterised by diversity, autonomy, accountability and collaboration.

The National College should work with primary leaders and others to understand the key issues facing the sector and define ways to build on its many strengths as it becomes more autonomous and self-improving. The work should focus on the governance and leadership of primary schools, with a brief to investigate ways to promote excellence, secure school improvement and achieve value for money.

The DfE and the College should work with governors and others on reforming school governance by licensing experimentation to support a more professional approach to the appointment of headteachers, greater local accountability and collaboration with other schools.

The DfE, Ofsted and the College should work with emerging chains and others to review the expansion of chains, the ways in which chains are held to account and the ways in which chains collaborate and learn from each other to ensure success.

The DfE, local authorities and other stakeholders should continue to explore how the mediating layer might operate in future to secure school improvement, the effective management of pupil place planning and admissions, and wider children's services for children and families who face the greatest challenges.

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The National College is uniquely dedicated to developing and supporting aspiring and serving leaders in schools, academies and early years settings.

The College gives its members the professional development and recognition they need to build their careers and support those they work with. Members are part of a community of thousands of other leaders - exchanging ideas, sharing good practice and working together to make a bigger difference for children and young people.

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