

## WHAT ARE WE LEARNING ABOUT LEADING LOCAL SYSTEMS?

### INTRODUCTION

In September 2007 the National College for School Leadership and the Innovation Unit jointly hosted an event on Next Practice in System Leadership.

Aims of the day:

- To hear about the learning on Every Child Matters, 14-19 and federations/all-through schools that is emerging from the Next Practice field trial sites
- Explore the tools and approaches developed by the project
- Share colleagues' own 'next practice' ideas and engage in debate

### BACKGROUND

The Next Practice in System Leadership project explores how leaders are working beyond a single institution – multi-agency working under ECM; working with other schools, FE colleges, employers and others on the 14-19 agenda; and as leaders of federations or all-through schools. There are currently 17 field trials in progress.

According to current thinking, Next Practice in System Leadership means identifying approaches to leadership and/or governance that, in terms of structures, range of partners involved and scale, are brand new. They are sustainable and enable schools and others to offer a more coherent set of services. They aim, through collaboration, to improve the outcomes for young people and their communities.

For more information see:

[www.ncsl.org.uk/research/nextpractice/research-nextpractice.cfm](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/research/nextpractice/research-nextpractice.cfm)

[www.innovation-unit.co.uk/projects/systemleadership](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/projects/systemleadership)

## **MORNING SESSION**

The morning began with three keynote speeches.

NCSL Chief Executive Steve Munby highlighted the need for leadership in education to change in line with wider social and economic change. It is unrealistic to expect one person to cover all of the responsibilities of leading a school today, he said. What remains to be discovered is what kind of leadership is required to lead the complex organisations that schools now are. The Next Practice in System Leadership project is at the heart of this debate and of the work to identify what the future will look like.

Valerie Hannon, the Innovation Unit's Director of Strategy, said system leadership was one of the pressing national issues and leadership beyond single institutions is central to the development of all-age learning, the 14-19 curriculum and area-wide provision of particular services.

The Next Practice field trials aim to test out ideas that are radically different from current practice, address pressing local and national needs and improve the outcomes for young people locally.

David Jackson, lead consultant for the Next Practice in System Leadership project, explained some of the tools used in the development of Next Practice, including customised support for leaders in their context. In particular, the Bridge change leadership model offers ways to analyse and break down the complexity of an organisation or set of organisations in order to analyse what leaders should make their priorities.

The rest of the day was split between a series of learning cafes in the morning when colleagues had the opportunity to hear presentations from up to three of the 17 field trial sites and suggest topics and questions for the afternoon session.

## **LEARNING CAFES**

The presentations included:

### **1. Yewlands Family of Schools, Sheffield**

In Sheffield, the Yewlands family of schools has embarked on a radical reorganisation which brings together a secondary, a special and five primary schools in north Sheffield. The schools have been working together for five years and already share staffing, make joint leadership appointments and develop curriculum projects which run across phases.

They aim now to move beyond collaboration towards all-through provision under one leadership and one governing body and bringing a unified approach to succession planning and the collective culture of learning. The aim of their field trial is to produce a model which other schools will be able to adapt.

## **The vision**

The vision was created with staff, parents governors and students. There is a joint teaching and learning policy across the family of schools and skills for learning embedded through the schools. There are strategic leadership posts in schools – 0-19 directors in sport and music for example.

## **What it means for the children so far**

For the children, the changes have had a direct impact on their learning and their emotional wellbeing.

Five years ago Andrew Cross was a year 6 primary school pupil who encountered several problems on his move to secondary. He did not know the staff, found himself coping with unfamiliar subjects – and missing subjects such as Spanish which his primary school had offered. He found classwork and homework too easy. He was also worried about bullying.

When the problems were raised with the school by Andrew's mother – via Andrew's old primary school headteacher – the teachers explained that they needed to cover the basics with all children as some may not have covered everything before.

Five years later and the situation has been transformed... Andrew's parents have been consulted on a vision across the family of schools. The secondary curriculum and extended schools services are known to all parents before their children join the school. His mother has joined the governing body for the Yewlands family of schools.

Andrew's younger brother, John has joined Yewlands and has taken part in the joint family of schools gifted and talented summer school. He has worked with the directors of sport, music and MFL on a 0-19 curriculum pathways project and is taught by his primary Spanish teacher in year 7.

He has been told that year 7 is a foundation year to ensure he has grasped the necessary skills and from year 8 he will be able to choose his own learning pathway. He knows the head as he has seen her at his primary and often sees his primary head at Yewlands. John and Andrew's parents, meanwhile, are fully informed about their children's option and progress through school.

## **Leadership challenges**

A key challenge is to overcome local perceptions. One of the schools is seen as a 'local village school' and parents have aspirations for their children to go elsewhere. They need to be convinced to see the school as one part of a bigger menu.

Others include:

- Support of staff and governors has not been universal across the schools
- The need to create new structures which are fit for the way the family of schools operates
- Active engagement of the LA

## **2. Knowsley**

Knowsley is creating seven state-of-the-art learning centres under Building Schools for the Future to replace ten schools. The focus is on skills linked to economic and social regeneration. It is part of a planned transformation of the whole borough. It is a system-wide approach to an individual's or a family's experience of learning.

### **The vision**

- To create 'hubs' where provision for all children's agencies will be based.
- Schools will operate as area-based federations – which may lead to area-based trusts.
- To create a sense of collective ownership around learning for pupils, parents, carers
- Pupil forums, parent/carers forums and community forums will all feed into governing bodies. The governing body will be the place people go to get decisions taken – not where they are made in isolation.

### **What it would mean for children**

Through the learning centre, parents will have direct access to the agencies involved in their children's lives. Currently, David is a year 10 pupil at a community secondary school in north Knowsley but travels across the borough for some of his education. He would like to have more say in his school but his student council is not very effective.

His parents, Steven and Jane, are temporary foster carers and look after 13-year-old Michael. Michael is at school in the centre of the borough and has a dedicated TA to support him as he is visually impaired. He loves music and is on the school council. He has to miss school to attend medical appointments.

Steven and Jane find the lack of coordination between the services affecting both boys frustrating.

The reorganisation should help everyone. David and Michael could join the pupil forum at the learning centre nearest to them but attend other centres for other parts of their education. Steven and Jane can join the parent/carers and community forums nearest to them. Through their local learning centre, they would have access to a lead professional who coordinates support for Michael.

### **Challenges**

- The BSF goalposts are constantly moving
- Restructuring at Knowsley LA – where children's services sit is still unclear
- Difficulty of moving between sites
- Some resistance at local level
- Keeping the community engaged

### **3. The Chichester Community Alliance**

The Chichester field trial aims to create a fresh model of leadership and governance to deliver multi-agency services for families and high standards of education.

It brings together a nursery school and children's centre with two primaries, one of which is to be a phase II children's centre.

The schools have settled on a joint strategy to improve outcomes for children and families. A governing sub-committee is made up of governors from each school plus representatives from health, the family centre, local council and LA. Other agencies – police, volunteer bodies, JobCentre Plus – are also being invited to join.

The alliance is also hoping to influence the LA's wider strategy for ECM, especially the allocation of services.

#### **What will it mean for the children?**

Bespoke services tailored to their needs which families can access through a single point of contact.

For example, four-year-old James and his siblings Lilly, eight, and April, one, live with their mum. In the past, Mum has been hit by her partner and has suffered from depression. James's language development is delayed and his attention span is short. Social services, the family centre, speech and language therapist, health visitors and schools are all involved in trying to give James and his family the support they need.

Under the Community Alliance, James would get a package of services designed for him and his family to be accessed in a place that is convenient for them. The family will be closely involved in deciding what those services are, while collaboration between the schools will mean that the support is consistent for James and his siblings.

James should therefore be ready to learn – and to achieve.

#### **Challenges**

- Promoting collaboration throughout the staff
- Restructuring of the NHS as the alliance was being created, hampering communication
- Funding – the myriad systems all the agencies involved have so far made it impossible to pool funds
- Ensuring that the governing sub-committee is taken seriously and has relevant knowledge of all the schools and centres involved.

## **AFTERNOON SESSION**

After lunch, colleagues split into groups to discuss what had emerged from the field trials and from their own experiences thus far and to identify some possible solutions to the issues raised. This is a summary of some of the discussions, organised according to key themes.

### **1. Creating a climate to innovate**

What kind of 'climate' is right depends on the local context as what works in one community won't necessarily apply elsewhere.

There are potential tensions: How much work should be 'top-down' and orchestrated by leaders? How much is it a question of working organically and seeing what emerges as work progresses? And how should these approaches be integrated?

It's important to identify key people those who have good networks of contacts and are reliable but not authoritarian. It can be useful to focus on middle leaders to avoid the impression that everything is being done 'top down'.

In working with other agencies, school leaders need to be able to understand their partners' perspectives and not view a situation purely from an education standpoint.

### **2. Measuring impact**

The current structures for measuring impact disregard federations and other forms of collaboration and continue to treat institutions as single entities.

One solution would be to create a broad range of indicators – 'soft' and 'hard' - which are not all linked to exam results across a federation or other alliance - children's happiness, children's satisfaction, changes in pupil attitudes and behaviour, for example. Information could be gathered from across the schools and services involved. A federation could have a single DCSF number and present their results as a group.

### **3. Leadership and governance**

'Innovation' can be too dependent on the drive of one or more individuals, rather than being a corporate belief. There is a risk, therefore, that the system atrophies once those individuals depart and improvement stalls. A rigid leadership/governance structure – as opposed to one built around collaboration and team approaches – can be difficult to break out of in order to push innovation.

A new, separate governance framework which sits outside the schools and other bodies involved would take the onus off individuals. It must be clear that leadership of this body is collaborative and not dependent on one person to direct. It could build on existing structures as a good starting point but it needs to be open and flexible so that individuals who are creative can function alongside those who need more order.

#### **4. Capacity**

Capacity building is a complex process which trust and mutual understanding for the head to allow others in a school to shoulder new responsibilities. The challenge is how to create that 'buzz', make others feel genuinely empowered to take on those responsibilities and sustain the momentum.

One way forward is to delegate tasks and responsibilities to others based on their existing skills while striving also to extend the possibilities of what individuals can do. Focus on creating opportunities for middle leaders in particular as they are often a key 'energy source' in a school and extend give external agencies/organisations opportunities to them to work in and with schools so capacity grows across the system.

#### **5. Collaborative accountability**

When schools and colleges have historically been urged to compete, it can be hard to build a culture of accountability in which all share responsibility for the success of a federation or 14-19 partnership. Moreover, in multi-agency settings, each partner has their own set of accountability measures.

So how can all partners work together so that their accountabilities dovetail and don't conflict? One solution could be for individual governing bodies to create a federation/multi-agency/14-19 champion whose task would be to nurture support for collaboration. A city or borough-wide shadowing scheme between professional groups would enable people to see accountability issues through the eyes of their fellow professionals.

#### **6. Stakeholder strategies**

To ensure that all partnerships and agencies work together to safeguard families, parents, students, partnerships and community need to be engaged properly and fully consulted. If they are involved in the beginning of the process they should feel engaged in the outcomes. Ways to reach out to families could include creating family learning pathways and identifying a lead, multi-agency professional to work with a whole family.

### **CONCLUSION**

We can hardly do justice here to the rich variety of learning from the field trials which was on display at the event, nor to the vast array of ideas which emerged from the subsequent debates.

However, some broad themes are emerging:

It is becoming clear that really radical innovation in system leadership is a difficult process – more so than was perhaps anticipated. It can be thrown off course by changes beyond the control of the leaders involved, such as LA or health service restructuring; pace of progress varies; and much depends on the active support of the LA.

Staff and governor support – as with every radical change – is crucial but cannot be assumed. Similarly, the support of parents. The justification for changes needs to be communicated clearly.

Existing impact measures don't 'fit' system leadership because they are designed to assess the performance of single institutions. Criteria such as children's happiness, satisfaction and behaviour could be more useful in gauging the impact of system leadership than exam results alone.

Measuring schools against each other – through league tables etc – runs counter to the collaborative spirit which system leadership depends on in order to thrive. It also discourages innovation because it makes people less willing to take risks.

Collaboration by a group of leaders – not just a couple of driven individuals - is essential to sustain system leadership. Existing heads and governors must be willing to hand over authority to others where it will help to improve provision for all young people in their area. And system leadership will only succeed in the long term if it is backed by system governance.