

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

The Hailsham Partnership

Context for the Field Trial Site

Hailsham is a partnership of five schools, one secondary and four primaries. The secondary school, Hailsham Community College, was established some time ago as a full service extended school, and the Partnership has been working together to build on that experience to offer whole town provision of a range of services including education.

The five schools in the partnership are:

- Hailsham Community College
- Whitehouse Primary School
- Marshlands Primary School
- Hawks Farm Primary School
- Grovelands Primary School

Hailsham is a very stable and quite insular community with a population of around 25,000 in East Sussex.

Individually the schools have historically engaged with a variety of the support services in a way that they describe as ‘chaotic’, resulting in poor response rates and uneconomical working practices. In contrast, Hailsham Community College’s experience as a Full Service Extended School has led them to establish six operational groups to support the development and delivery of provision across the town including a multi-agency group, serviced by 36 agencies. By collaborating to build on this experience in designing a model for whole town, full service provision, the Partnership aimed to benefit from economies of scale through joint commissioning on the one hand and increased capacity for more rapid, targeted and personalised responses on the other.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

The Hailsham Partnership is led by an Executive Board, which comprises the headteachers from the five schools and representatives from a range of agencies involved in service provision for children and their families.

The Board is chaired by an Executive Headteacher. The Board has also seconded a deputy headteacher from one of the schools to the role of ECM Development Manager. Her job is to connect the different parts of the system to ensure that the Partnership’s vision for full service provision can be delivered.

A discrete governing body for each of the five schools remains in place. In future, the Partnership proposes to apply for Power to Innovate, which will allow them to move to a soft federation of schools with a shared governance model and a formally constituted Strategic Committee that will reflect broadly the membership of the existing Executive Board.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

Over the last eighteen months, the group of five headteachers has built a strong and effective partnership. Initially cautious and concerned that this might be a secondary led, top-down initiative, the primary headteachers are now full and active partners, secure in their shared commitment to a whole town ECM agenda.

This degree of collaboration and trust has been built over time through planning, learning and working together on a range of issues. Frequent formal and informal communication has been important here too.

The role of the ECM Development Manager has been designed to work with the headteachers and representatives from other agencies, to develop operational plans, secure stakeholder support, and monitor progress.

Large stakeholder events have been held with representatives from all services and including young people and parents. These events have led to widespread support for the aims of the Partnership and have helped identify priorities, which are then carried forward by separate, focused partnership groups. Current foci include multi agency approaches to inclusion and developing student voice.

Designing an appropriate model for governance, which will agree strategic objectives, oversee implementation and be the ultimate accountable body for the town's services to children, has been the main focus of the Next Practice in System Leadership project. Working with the existing school governing bodies, to secure ownership and buy in, presents an ongoing challenge to the Executive Board. Governors are understandably wary of relinquishing control over their schools while they remain accountable for its success. Governors are kept involved and up to date and are becoming increasingly involved in Partnership meetings and events.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

Establishing an Executive Board, which involves every head teacher in the town and other major providers of children's services is beginning to have a real impact on improving connections between different parts of the system and, therefore, to access to a range of services. This has enabled the Partnership to make an improved offer to children and their families, especially the most vulnerable, measured by referral rates and waiting times.

From no initial involvement, governing bodies are now represented on all Partnership groups.

Collaboration in the Partnership is becoming increasingly sophisticated and interdependent as relationships between the different partners grow and deepen. Joint work has resulted, for instance, in the development of a common framework for assessment of special educational needs, which the SENCOs in all five schools use and created a town wide database of children's needs and the relevant resources allocated. The database works in parallel with the Children's Index and all five schools subscribe to it.

Two other significant projects focus on student voice, and on developing the role of parents and the community in schools, including offering parenting support workshops and courses.

Over time, The Hailsham Partnership aims use this collaborative capacity and to target their provision to:

- raise achievement and attainment of vulnerable learners;
- improve levels of development at the end of the foundation stage;
- improve student attainment by a range of measures;
- increase participation and retention post-16;
- increase the numbers of parents and families accessing children's services;
- improve attendance and reduce exclusion; and
- lower youth crime and numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Emerging issues

Beginning as it did from effective practice in the secondary school, the Hailsham Partnership might easily have remained in a traditional pyramid or family arrangement. However, the swift and significant progress that the Partnership has achieved has been made possible by a high level of buy in and participation, secured by extensive and early distribution of leadership. In operating in this way, the Executive Board also models an approach that has secured them wide and active support in the community.

Members of the Executive Board have worked hard to support each other and stakeholders in developing their understanding of the Partnership's vision and goals. Through an explicit process of talking, identifying individual priorities and building on these by offering practical responses – quick wins - gradually the full potential of the project, shaped by multiple perspectives and therefore widely shared has emerged

Early on there was some tension between the Partnership and the local authority as, while the Partnership had conceived and was developing a locally driven innovation to address the needs of the children and families known well to them, the local authority was itself creating a structure of formal strategic Partnerships for Children, built on a centrally designed model which it rolled out to localities. In some areas, these partnerships have not taken hold because local service providers seem not to own them. In Hailsham, however developing their own Partnership has created a live and dynamic set of relationships, which is really driving the ECM agenda forward. Most of these early issues have successfully been resolved through a gradually emerging understanding and strengthening relationship and the LA now fully supports the Hailsham Partnership.

The Hailsham Partnership has considered in detail various forms of governance that they could adopt to formalise their partnership. Their aim is to develop a greater rigour and accountability and to ensure that the Partnership will be sustainable, for instance in the case of changes to personnel. A hard federation does not provide the inclusive governance they want, whilst a soft federation will not allow them to include as partners services outside the schools. Trust status would allow wider partnership but the schools would first have to become foundation schools with the associated changes of owning land and employing staff, which would currently be a distraction from their agenda.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that leaders of partnerships could usefully consider the following questions:

What are the benefits and risks associated with broad and early distribution of leadership in a partnership of schools? What actions would leaders in a school that was initially perceived as the 'lead' organisation need to take to encourage leadership contributions from all the partners?

What activities can be put in place to secure frequent and meaningful communications between partner organisations?

How quickly can and should serious joint work begin? Is trust an outcome of, or a precondition for, effective collaboration?

How important is it to a partnership of schools to secure strategic and operational support from the local authority? How can school partnerships and local authorities work together to add value for local children and their families?