



OECD ACTIVITY ON IMPROVING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

International Conference

International perspectives on School Leadership for Systemic Improvement

6 July 2006

A Short Primer on System Leadership

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A SHORT PRIMER ON SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

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By background and temperament I am a school improvement activist. Over that past thirty years or so I have self consciously located myself at the intersection of practice, research and policy. It is here that I felt I could best contribute to the process of educational reform. Reflecting back over this time, one of the initiatives I am most proud of is the work I did with colleagues on the **Improving the Quality of Education for All** school improvement project where we collaborated with hundreds of schools in England and elsewhere in developing a model of school improvement that enhanced student outcomes through focusing on the teaching - learning process whilst strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. More recently however I found myself as a national policymaker concerned not just with regional networks of schools but with a part responsibility for transforming a whole system. These two sets of experiences have convinced me that not only should every school be a great school, but that this is now a reasonable, realisable and socially just goal for any mature educational system. My time in Government also helped me understand that realising this aspiration is not in the gift of Government but rather is achieved through a re-balancing of power in the system where by and large it is schools that lead the process of change. The inevitable conclusion from this line of thinking is that it is 'system leadership' that is the critical variable in transforming the landscape of education. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the argument supporting this contention. In doing this I will discuss the:

- Reasons why large scale reform fails and the need for a systemic perspective
- Crucial policy conundrum in achieving sustained improvement.
- Four key drivers that can build system capacity to deliver on standards.
- Approach to 'segmentation' necessary to ensure that every school succeeds.
- Form of system leadership necessary to sustain such an approach.

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Why Large Scale Reform Fails and the Need for a Systemic Perspective

It is salutary at times to reflect on how much has changed in the study and practice of educational change even within one's own limited time in the field. Just over fifteen years ago Milbrey McLaughlin² in her reanalysis of the extensive Rand Change Agent study originally conducted in the United States during the 1970s concluded that:

A general finding of the Change Agent study that has become almost a truism is that it is exceedingly difficult for policy to change practice, especially across levels of government. Contrary to the one-to-one relationship assumed to exist between policy and practice, the Change Agent study demonstrated that the nature, amount, and pace of change at the local level was a product of local factors that were largely beyond the control of higher-level policy makers.

Her phrase 'policy cannot mandate what matters' captured the zeitgeist of the time and became the conventional wisdom for over a decade.

Perversely, the nineteen nineties saw a resurgence in large scale reform efforts in most Western countries but in line with McLaughlin's prediction few had much impact on levels of student achievement. The failure of the reforms of the nineties to accelerate student achievement in line with policy objectives has been widely documented.³

For example, Ken Leithwood and his colleagues⁴ reviewed the impact of a number of 'performance based' approaches to large-scale reform: an approach to centralised educational change had become widespread during the nineties. The Leithwood review examined in a comparative manner, five cases of performance-based reform that are well known and have been widely documented – Kentucky, California, New Zealand, Victoria (Australia), and Chicago. On the basis of this review two striking conclusions were reached:⁵

- The first was that on the available evidence there was no increase in student achievement in any case except Chicago, and even that was "slow in coming"
- The second was the "the disappointing contribution that performance-base reforms have made to improving the core technology of schooling"

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear as to why these educational reforms did not in general have the desired impact and why McLaughlin's dictum was supported.

First, many reforms focused on the wrong variables. There is now an increasingly strong research base to suggest any strategy to promote student learning needs to give attention to engaging students and parents as active participants, and expanding the teaching and learning repertoires of teachers and students respectively.

² McLaughlin, M.W. (1990) The Rand Change agent Study revisited: macro perspectives, micro realities. *Educational Researcher*, 19 (9), p. 12.

³ See for example - Hopkins D (2001) *School Improvement for Real*, London: Routledge / Falmer.

⁴Leithwood K, Jantzi D and Mascall B (1999) *Large Scale Reform: What Works?* Unpublished manuscript, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

⁵ (Leithwood et al 1999:40). (Leithwood et al 1999:61-63).

Secondly, although the focus on teaching and learning is necessary, it is also an insufficient condition for school improvement. Richard Elmore⁶ explains it in this way:

Principles of [best] practice [related to teaching and learning] ... have difficulty taking root in schools for essentially two reasons: (a) they require content knowledge and pedagogical skill that few teachers presently have, and (b) they challenge certain basic patterns in the organisation of schooling. Neither problem can be solved independently of the other, nor is teaching practice likely to change in the absence of solutions that operate simultaneously on both fronts.

What is required is an approach to educational change that at the same time focuses on the organisational conditions of the school as well as the way teaching and learning is organised. The more the organisation of the school remains the same the less likely will there be changes in classroom practice that directly and positively impact on student learning.

Third, most reforms did not adopt a systemic perspective. Focussing on individual classrooms or schools may improve performance for those limited number of students but if the concern is with social justice and whole populations then a whole system perspective is required. It is helpful to think about this issue along two dimensions – reform efforts need to be both ‘system wide’ and ‘system deep.’ ‘System wide’ applies to the coherence and contingency across a policy spectrum, whereas ‘system deep’ refers to clarity and coherence at both the top and the bottom of the system – at the level of policy and in the minds of the majority of teachers – and all the levels in between.

For a country to succeed it needs both a competitive economy and an inclusive society. That requires an education system with high standards, which transmits and develops knowledge and culture from one generation to the next, promotes respect for and engagement with learning, broadens horizons and develops high expectations. It needs to ensure that all young people progressively develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values in the curriculum, and become effective, enthusiastic and independent learners, committed to lifelong learning and able to handle the demands of adult life. This is a pretty good description of an educational system committed to ensuring that every school is at least good school and that most are on the journey to becoming great.

This aspiration, although easy to articulate, has implications that challenge the resolve of many national and local governments:

- First, *this is an avidly social justice agenda redolent with moral purpose and needs to be communicated as such.* Sadly many of our leaders feel uncomfortable talking about values that have concrete outcomes, yet without this one cannot build a consensus for social change.
- Second, *it places the focus of reform directly on enhancing teaching quality and classroom practice rather than structural change.* Government policy implementation has mostly commonly used the school as the unit of intervention, yet international research evidence shows that (a) the classroom is key in raising achievement and (b) the range of variation within any school dwarfs the difference between schools in the UK by a factor of three or four times.
- And third, *it requires a commitment to sustained, systemic change because a focus on individual school improvement always distorts social equity.* The evidence from the Charter

⁶ Elmore, R.F. (1995) Structural reform in educational practice. *Educational Researcher*, 24 (9), p.23-26.

School movement in the United States and Grant Maintained Schools in England suggests that although such initiatives may raise standards for those involved they depress standards in surrounding schools. This is not at all to argue against school autonomy, but to caution that it should be done within inclusive and collaborative settings.

With these key implications in mind, let me try and summarise the argument so far:

- The key paradox is that although large scale reform is required to ensure a socially just and competitive society the performance based approach taken in the nineties was largely ineffective in terms of raising standards and adjusting the organisational context of teaching and learning in schools.
- What is required if the goal of every school a great school is to be achieved is a systemic approach that integrates the classroom, school and system levels in the pursuit of enhancing student achievement.

What has only been implied in the preceding pages is that system change requires an entirely new approach to educational reform that has three key features:

- One that adopts a pedagogy designed to enable virtually every young person to reach their potential
- The redesign of the landscape of schooling with independence and innovation, and networking and lateral responsibility its central characteristics.
- An approach to leadership that recognises the necessity to shoulder wider roles that work for the success of other schools as well as one's own and a realization that in order to change the system one has to engage with it in a meaningful way.

This territory is not yet clearly charted so this chapter can at best only present an initial survey. But it is a terrain that is beginning to be explored by other educational change adventurers. The most prominent is the prolific Michael Fullan who in three recent monographs⁷ has given us increasingly precise insights as to what the new landscape will look like. Readers of his work will therefore find many of the concepts discussed in this chapter familiar. But there are two significant differences. The first is that Fullan refers to his 'tri-level solution' which is a similar idea to our three levels of classroom, school and system. Fullan's three levels however do not include a specific focus on the classroom but does distinguish between local and national system levels. Fullan also refers more generally to 'system thinkers' as a wider more encompassing role whereas in this chapter we prefer to explore the role of the system leader. But these are differences of emphasis rather than substance, and there is clear agreement on the need for agency and leadership for system reform. In the following section I attempt to locate the role of the system leader within the broader context of system change as a whole.

⁷ Fullan M (2003) *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Corwin Press.

Fullan M (2005) *Leadership and Sustainability*, Corwin Press.

Fullan M (2006) *Beyond Turnaround Leadership*, Jossey-Bass.

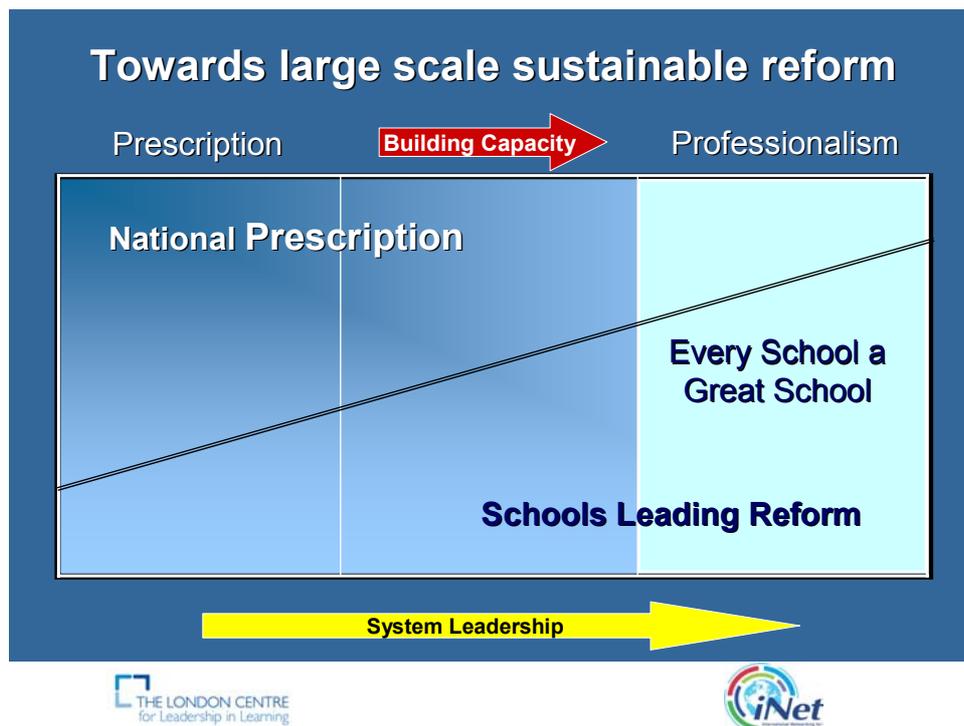
Prescription or Professionalism – the Crucial Policy Conundrum

In describing the shift in policy and agency necessary for ensuring that every school is a great school I will locate the analysis within the context of educational reform in England. This is because it is the system I am most familiar with. I would also claim however that the direction of travel as well as the uncertainties seen in England is reflected in some way in most other educational systems.

The back story is well known. Most agreed that educational standards in England were too low and too varied in the 1970s and 80s and that some form of direct state intervention was necessary. The resultant ‘national prescription’ proved very successful particularly in raising standards in primary schools – progress confirmed by international comparisons. But progress plateaued in the second term of the Labour Government, and whilst a bit more improvement might be squeezed out of prescription nationally, and perhaps a lot more in underperforming schools, one has to question whether it still offers the recipe for sustained large scale reform in the medium term. There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform.

Although this realisation emerged from working on the educational reform agenda in England it appears to have a wider relevance and seems to be a feature of most large scale change efforts. Crucially this implies a transition from an era of Prescription to an era of Professionalism. This is not to argue that ‘top-down’ is bad or ‘bottom-up’ is good, we now know to our cost that in isolation neither works. The key idea here is the change in the balance between national prescription and schools leading reform over time. However achieving this shift is not straight forward. As Michael Fullan⁸ has said, it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to ‘professionalism’ provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is ‘how do we get there?’, because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. It is this progression that is illustrated in the diagram below.

⁸ Fullan M (2003) *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Corwin Press, page 7.



This is a classic example of what Ron Heifetz⁹ has termed an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge is a problem situation for which solutions lie outside current ways of operating. This is in stark contrast to a technical problem for which the know-how already exists. This distinction has resonance for educational reform. Put simply, resolving a technical problem is a management issue, tackling adaptive challenges however requires leadership. Often we try to solve technical problems with adaptive processes or more commonly force technical solutions onto adaptive problems. The slide below captures this distinction and illustrates how this issue underpins the policy conundrum of making the transition from prescription to professionalism and emphasises the importance of capacity building.

⁹ Heifetz R (1994) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Belknap Press. See also his essay on 'Adaptive Work' in Bentley T & Wilsdon J Eds (2003) *The Adaptive State*, Demos.

System Leadership as Adaptive Work



Technical problems can be solved through applying existing know how - adaptive challenges create a gap between a desired state and reality that cannot be closed using existing approaches alone

Almost by definition, adaptive challenges demand learning, because progress here requires new ways of thinking and operating. In these instances it is 'people who are the problem' because an effective response to an adaptive challenge is almost always beyond the current competence of those involved. Inevitably this is threatening and often the prospect of adaptive work generates heat and resistance.

Mobilising people to meet adaptive challenges, as we shall see later, is at the heart of leadership practice. In the short term leadership helps people meet an immediate challenge. In the medium to long term leadership generates capacity to enable people to meet an ongoing stream of adaptive challenges. Ultimately, adaptive work requires us to reflect on the moral purpose by which we seek to thrive and demands diagnostic enquiry into the realities we face that threaten the realisation of those purposes.

But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves here. The purpose of referring to the 'adaptive challenge' has been to stress the point that in making the transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity within the system. Hence the four drivers for system reform which I believe have a more general applicability as an approach to system wide reform.

Four Drivers for System Reform

Building capacity demands that we replace numerous national initiatives with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. There seems to me to be four key drivers that if pursued relentlessly and deeply have the potential to deliver every school a great school. These are personalised learning, professionalised teaching, networks and collaboration and intelligent accountability. As seen in the 'diamond of reform' diagram below they coalesce and mould to context through the exercise of responsible system leadership.



Together these key trends provide a core strategy for improvement. It would of course be tempting to provide instead more immediately digestible answers or implement able initiatives. For instance, I am sometimes asked ‘would more teaching assistants or greater use of ICT ensure learning is tailored to student need?’ Although these are legitimate questions, they are actually second order questions. We must first pursue the core trends, because with these in place teachers will be best able to decide how to deploy more teaching assistants or use ICT - funded overall by the centre, but determined by informed professionals.

On this I believe it is important to remember Jim Collins’ argument in his book **Good to Great**¹⁰:

“None of the good to great companies began their transformations with pioneering technology, yet they all became pioneers in the applications of technology once they grasped how it fit [with their core improvement strategies] and after they hit breakthrough.”

“The comparison companies frequently tried to create a breakthrough with large, misguided acquisitions. The good to great companies, in contrast, principally use large acquisitions after breakthrough, to accelerate momentum in an already fast spinning wheel.”

This is the approach being advocated here, it is the relentless focus on these four trends that lays the foundation for every school being great.

Driver One - Personalised Learning

The current focus on personalisation is about putting citizens at the heart of public services and enabling them to have a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them. In

¹⁰ Collins J (2001) **Good to Great**. New York: HarperCollins, pages 162 and 168.

education this can be understood as personalised learning, the drive to tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to fulfil every young person's potential.

Personalised learning is an idea that is capturing the imagination of teachers, children and young people around the world. It is an idea that has its roots in the best practices of the teaching profession, and it has the potential to make every young person's learning experience stretching, creative, fun and successful.

In particular, personalised learning is:

- An educational approach that focuses on every individual achieving their potential and enhancing their learning skills
- About designing teaching, curriculum and the school organisation to address the needs of the student both individually and collectively
- A system that is more accessible, open to customisation and involves the learner in their own learning
- A learning offer to all children that extends beyond the school context into the local community and beyond

It is important to realise that personalised learning is not a new idea. Many schools and teachers have tailored curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people with great success for many years. What is new is the drive to make the best practices universal.

Driver Two - Professionalised Teaching

As we strive for a high equity, high excellence education system it is the continuing professional development of teachers (CPD) that is at the heart of the response. Put simply, unless teachers see their continuing development as an essential part of their professionalism the system will be unable to make the next big step forward in standards of learning and achievement. This is not just an "academic" issue about making teaching more comparable to other great modern professions - it is a highly practical, standards-based, issue about how we deliver personalised learning and fulfil the potential of every student. To personalise learning, teachers must increasingly focus on how they use data and evidence to apply a rich repertoire of teaching strategies to meet their students' needs. This in turn implies radically different forms of professional development with a strong focus on coaching and establishing schools as professional learning communities.

The key elements are:

- enhancing the teacher's repertoire of learning & teaching strategies to actively engage and stretch students.
- opportunities for teachers to engage newly learnt skills in the workplace through: immediate and sustained practice; collaboration and peer coaching; studying development and implementation.
- performance management systems that focus explicitly on learning and teaching in the classroom.

Achieving these goals would go along way to ensuring consistency of practice in all classrooms – creating a truly whole school effect.

Driver Three - Networks and Collaboration

Over the course of the past ten to fifteen years there has been a movement particularly in OECD countries for schools to increasingly engage in collaborative activity. These have taken a range of forms. From ‘clusters’ to ‘partnerships’, ‘collaboratives’ to ‘networks’, schools across the country have been, and currently are, part of them. Frequently, schools are finding themselves belonging to three or more networks, with some schools in England listing as many as ten in their portfolio.

The prevalence of networking practice supports the contention that there is no contradiction between strong, independent schools and strong networks, rather the reverse. Effective networks require strong leadership by participating heads and clear objectives that add significant value to individual schools’ own efforts. Without this networks wither and die, since the transaction costs outweigh the benefits they deliver. Nor is there a contradiction between collaboration and competition – many sectors of the economy both nationally and internationally are demonstrating that the combination of competition and collaboration delivers the most rapid improvements.

So it is clear that networks support improvement and innovation by enabling schools to collaborate on building curriculum diversity, extended services and professional support and to develop a vision of education that is shared and owned well beyond individual school gates.

Driver Four - Intelligent Accountability

Over the past ten years most educational systems have begun to introduce some form of educational accountability as a driver to raise standards. In this respect England has been ahead of the pack where a fairly sophisticated national framework for accountability has evolved since the early 1990’s. That framework, which links together standardised achievement tests and examinations, target setting, publication of performance tables and independent inspection, has no doubt made a major contribution to the raising of standards during the period. There have however criticisms of the accountability framework. Oft quoted examples are of teachers ‘teaching to the test’ and schools increasing their ‘competitiveness’ through adjusting their admissions policy to boost their position in the published performance tables. Many would also argue that an over emphasis on external accountability increases the degree of dependence and lack of innovation within the system.

But the solution is not to abandon the accountability framework that would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but to make it more ‘intelligent’. In the move from ‘prescription’ to ‘professionalism’ any accountability framework needs to be able not only to fulfil its original purpose but also to build capacity and confidence for professional accountability. This is not just in terms of its’ own remit but also in supporting the capacity building function of the other three drivers.

To better support progress towards ‘every school a great school’ a more intelligent accountability framework would achieve a more even balance between External and Internal assessment with over time an increasing emphasis towards the latter. Critical to this shift is the operational clarity between formative and summative assessment to enable each to more effectively support their core purpose. In terms of formative assessment in particular, there is a need to develop increasingly precise methods for assessment for learning, pupil progress data, contextual value added and school profiles. These can become tools not just for personalising learning and enhanced teacher professionalism, but also, for assisting school self evaluation and holding schools open to public scrutiny.

Segmentation as the Key to Every School a Great School

Each of these four drivers is integral to a social democratic settlement for education. Their system wide impact however is both complicated and facilitated by the high degree of differentiation within most secondary school systems. Yet system transformation depends on excellent practice being developed, shared, demonstrated and adopted across and between schools.

So, in the move towards ensuring that every school is a great school, the four drivers provide a necessary but not sufficient condition. The missing ingredient is the concept of *segmentation*. The key idea being that all schools are at different stages in their improvement cycle, on a continuum from ‘failing’ to ‘leading’. This opens up a highly differentiated approach to school improvement given that different schools will both need, and be able to provide, different forms of support and intervention at different times. An outline of this approach is set out in the table on the following page.

In the right hand column is a basic taxonomy of schools that reflects the various stages of the performance cycle. This typology is based on an analysis of secondary schools in England. The number of categories and the terminology will vary from setting to setting, the crucial point being that not all schools are the same and each requires different forms of support. It is this that is the focus of the second column, where a range of strategies for supporting schools at different phases of their development are briefly described. Again these descriptions are grounded in the English context, but they do have a more universal applicability. There are two key points here:

- The first is that one size does not fit all.
- The second that these different forms of intervention and support are increasingly being provided by schools themselves, rather than being imposed and delivered by some external agency.

Type of School	Key strategies – responsive to context and need
Leading Schools	Become leading practitioners Formal federation with lower-performing schools
Succeeding, self-improving schools	Regular local networking for school leaders Between school curriculum development
Succeeding schools with internal variations	Consistency interventions: such as Assessment for Learning Subject specialist support to particular departments
Underperforming schools	Linked school support for underperforming departments Underperforming pupil programmes: catch-up
Low attaining schools	Formal support in Federation structure Consultancy in core subjects and best practice

Failing schools	Intensive Support Programme New provider such as an Academy
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To be successful however the segmentation approach requires a fair degree of boldness in setting system level expectations and conditions. There are four implications in particular that have to be grappled with:

- All failing and underperforming (and potentially low achieving) schools should have a leading school that works with them in either a formal grouping Federation (where the leading school Principal or Head assumes overall control and accountability) or in more informal partnership. Evidence from existing Federations in England suggests that a national system of federations would be capable of delivering a sustainable step-change in improvement in relatively short periods of time. For example a number of ‘federated schools’ have improved their 5 A*-Cs at GCSE from under 20% to over 50% in two years.
- Schools should take greater responsibility for neighbouring schools so that the move towards networking encourages groups of schools to form collaborative arrangements outside of local control. This would be on the condition that these schools provided extended services for all students within a geographic area, but equally on the acceptance that there would be incentives for doing so. Encouraging local schools to work together will build capacity for continuous improvement at local level.
- The incentives for greater system responsibility should include significantly enhanced funding for student most at risk. Beyond incentivising local collaboratives, the potential effects for large scale long term reform include:
 - a more even distribution of ‘at risk’ students and associated increases in standards, due to more schools seeking to admit a larger proportion of ‘at risk’ students so as to increase their overall income.
 - a significant reduction in ‘sink schools’ even where ‘at risk’ students are concentrated, as there would be much greater potential to respond to the social-economic challenges (for example by paying more to attract the best teachers; or by developing excellent parental involvement and outreach services).
- A rationalisation of national and local agency functions and roles to allow the higher degree of national and regional co-ordination for this increasingly devolved system.

These proposals extend the previous discussion on networking but are consistent with the direction those recommendations were taking us. These current proposals also have a combination of school and policy level implications. This is consistent with the phase of adaptive change the overall system is currently in. If we are to move towards a system based on informed professional judgement then capacity has to be simultaneously built at the school and system level as both schools and Government learn new ways of working, establish new norms of engagement and build more flexible and problem oriented work cultures.

But still there is a missing ingredient – the necessity for outstanding leadership as the system as a whole grapples with the challenge of adaptive change. As we shall see in the next section it is system

leadership that has the power to maximise the impact of both the four drivers and the energy of segmentation and make them work in different contexts.

System Leadership as the Catalyst for Systemic Change

I have argued that it is leadership that shapes the drivers to context, but this is obviously not a form of leadership that is commonplace. Traditional leadership and management approaches are well able to accommodate technical problems. The future however is about solving problems for which there is no immediate solution, and then to build the capacity for doing this into the medium and long term. This requires leadership of a different order.

The literature on leadership has mushroomed in recent years as have leadership courses and qualifications. All seem to have a slightly different take on leadership and claims on truth which I for one find a little confusing. In this section I will set out an approach to leadership, which I am calling ‘system leadership’ that accommodates the arguments for sustainable educational transformation made in the preceding pages.

‘System leaders’ are those Head teachers who are willing to shoulder system leadership roles: who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. In England there appears to be an emerging cadre of these head teachers who stand in contrast to the competitive ethic of headship so prevalent in the nineties. It is these educators who by their own efforts and commitment who are beginning to transform the nature of leadership and educational improvement in this country. Interestingly there is also evidence of this role emerging in other leading educational systems such as Sweden and Finland¹¹. These educational leaders seem to embody and share three striking characteristics:

1. System leaders measure their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s).
2. System leaders are fundamentally committed to the improvement of teaching and learning. They engage deeply with the organisation of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment in order to personalise learning for all their students. It is this engagement and mastery of the teaching and learning process that gives the system leader the licence and currency with which to engage with other schools.
3. System leaders look both into classrooms and across the broader system, they realise in a deep way that the classroom, school and system levels all impact on each other. Crucially they understand that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.

In terms of the argument here, this leads me to a simple proposition:

If our goal is ‘every school a great school’ then policy and practice has to focus on system improvement. This means that a school head has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as he or she is about his or her own school. Sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward.

Space precludes a full discussion of the system leadership concept. Indeed we are still in the process charting the movement as we work inductively from the behaviours of the outstanding leaders

¹¹ Hopkins D ed *Innovative Approaches to Contemporary School Leadership* OECD (forthcoming)

we are privileged to collaborate with¹². The following aspects of the role do however require some further comment:

- The moral purpose of system leadership
- System leadership roles
- The domains of system leadership.

The first thing to say is that system leadership as Michael Fullan¹³ has argued is imbued with moral purpose. Without that there would not be the passion to proceed or the encouragement for others to follow. In England for example, where the regularities of improvement in teaching and learning are still not well understood, where deprivation is still too good a predictor of educational success and where the goal is for every school to be a great school, then the leadership challenge is surely a systemic one. This perspective gives a broader appreciation of what is meant by the moral purpose of system leadership.

I would argue therefore that system leaders express their moral purpose through:

- understanding personalised learning, as the drive to tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to fulfil every young person's potential.
- measuring their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s).
- developing their schools as personal and professional learning communities, with relationships built across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities.
- striving for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture. This is not just about eradicating poverty, as important as that is. It is also about giving communities a sense of worth and empowerment.
- realising in a deep way that the classroom, school and system levels all impact on each other.

Although this degree of clarity is not necessarily obvious in the behaviour and practice of every head teacher these aspirations are increasingly becoming part of the conventional wisdom of the best of our global educational leaders. It is also pleasing to see a variety of **system leader roles** emerging, within various systems that are consistent with such a moral purpose. At present, in England, these are:

- Partnering another school which is facing particular difficulties i.e. to run two schools. This role is now commonly referred to as being an *Executive Head* or when more schools are involved in a Federation as the *Chief Executive*.

¹² Higham R and Hopkins D *Elaborating the System Leadership Concept* (forthcoming)

¹³ See Fullan M (2003) *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Corwin Press, and Fullan M (2005) *Leadership and Sustainability*, Corwin Press.

- Choosing to lead a school that is in *extremely challenging circumstances* or becoming an *Academy Principal*.
- Acting as a *'civic leader'* to broker and shape the networks of wider relationships across their local communities that can support children in developing their potential. In England currently this role currently relates to leading an Education Improvement Partnership or a cluster of Extended Schools.
- Working as a *'change agent'* within the system such as a *consultant leader* with a school leadership team to improve levels of attainment, or operating as one of the new *School Improvement Partners*.

No doubt these roles will expand and mature over time, as indeed these roles have evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of system change.

The third issue is what are the **'domains of system leadership'** what does the task involve? One of the clearest definitions is the four core functions proposed by Ken Leithwood¹⁴ and his colleagues. These are:

- Setting Direction: to enable every learner to reach their potential, and to translate this vision into whole school curriculum, consistency and high expectations.
- Managing Teaching and Learning: to ensure that there is both a high degree of consistency and innovation in teaching practices to enable personalised learning for all students.
- Developing People: to enable students to become active learners and to create schools as professional learning communities.
- Developing the Organisation: to create evidence based schools and effective organisation, and to be involved in networks collaborating to build curriculum diversity, professional support, extended services.

This outline stands up well when it is tested against existing approaches to school leadership that have had a demonstrable impact on student learning. Take for instance, Richard Elmore's¹⁵ contention that "the purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance" and its four dimensions:

- Instructional improvement requires continuous learning;
- Learning requires modelling;
- The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution;
- The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

¹⁴ Leithwood K et al (2006) *Successful School Leadership*, Report to the Department for Education and Skills – 30th March 2006

¹⁵ Elmore R (2004) *School Reform from the Inside Out*, Harvard Education Press (pages 66-68).

Finally, while it is true that ‘system leadership’ is a relatively new concept, it is one that is not only fit for purpose but also finds a resonance with the outstanding school leaders of the day. It is also not an academic or theoretical idea but has developed out of the challenges that system reform is presenting us with and the thoughtful, pragmatic and morally purposeful responses being given by our leading Principals and Heads. Ultimately the test of system leadership is – is it having an impact where it matters? Can our school leaders answer the hard questions?

Michael Barber¹⁶ phrases then like this:

- Who are your key stakeholders in the local community? Do they understand your vision? Are they committed to it? How do you know?
- Have you established a core belief that every pupil (yes, every pupil) can achieve high standards? And then have you reorganised all the other variables (time, curriculum, teaching staff, and other resources) around the achievement of that goal? If not, why not?
- Is each pupil in your school working towards explicit, short and medium term targets in each subject?
- Does each teacher know how his/her impact in terms of results compares to every other teacher? Have you thought about whether governors or parents should have access to this data? And what do you do to make sure that teachers who perform below the top quartile are improving?
- How do you ensure that every young person has a good, trusting relationship with at least one significant adult in your school?
- What do you and your school do to contribute to the improvement of the system as a whole?

These are the types of questions that the best system leaders test themselves against and are now comfortable with. When all our school leaders can do so then surely we are well on our way to every school being a great school.

Coda - Realising the Vision of System Leadership

There is no doubt that sustainable increases in student learning are possible with a boldness of vision and resoluteness of approach. Such transformation however is neither only nationally led nor only schools led, but necessarily both supporting each other within a system committed to raising the bar and to narrowing the gap. Crucially, a balance needs to be achieved between national prescription and schools leading reform, with the presumption towards the latter, except when schools find themselves in very challenging conditions.

In turn, through self-evaluation, schools will become increasingly aware of how to improve and how to contribute to improvement in other schools. For instance, in increasingly dynamic policy contexts, schools must use external standards to clarify, integrate and raise their own expectations. Equally schools, by themselves and in networks, must be enabled to lead improvements and

¹⁶ Michael Barber (2005) ‘A 21st Century Self Evaluation Framework’ Annex 3 in ‘*Journeys of Discovery: the search for success by design*’ Keynote speech, National Center on Education and the Economy, Annual Conference, Florida, USA, 10th February 2005.

innovations in teaching and learning with the support of highly specified, but not prescribed, best practices.

These are all glimpses of a new landscape for education which cannot flow simply from government legislation. Indeed, it is when schools help to lead reform of national educational systems that deep and sustainable progress occurs. This as I have argued in this chapter requires 'system leaders' within the profession - school leaders who are willing and able to shoulder wider roles and, in doing so, to work to improve the success and attainment of students in other schools as well as their own. At its heart, therefore, system leadership is about improving the deployment and development of our best leadership resources, in terms of both:

- greater productivity: with successful leaders using their own and their staff's knowledge and skills to improve other schools; and,
- social justice: by using our most capable leaders to help deliver a national system in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

In concluding it is important to remember that the challenge of 'system leadership' has great moral depth to it because it addresses directly the learning needs of our students, the professional growth of our teachers and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change. The emphasis on transformation is key – sustaining high standards of learning and attainment for all of our students now needs to be seen within a systems context. It is this that will characterise the next phase of educational reform in England and elsewhere and the role of the system leader is crucial in this development. Unless we embrace such a leadership role then all the evidence suggests that society will continue to set educational goals that are, on current performance, beyond the capacity of the system to deliver.