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System Leadership: Federations and Executive Headship

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Background / Rationale

Most agreed that standards in the English school system 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 and this was confirmed by international comparisons. After this initial success, progress plateaued however, and whilst a bit more improvement might be squeezed out by continuing with this approach 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. But if this hypothesis is correct, and this is much contested terrain, there are two key questions. First, how can we ensure we do not make a naïve return to the not so halcyon days of the 1970s when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted? Second, how do we move from national prescription to a system where both the national government and schools support each other to raise the bar and to narrowing the gap in achievement? The premise of this paper is that we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. It is argued that existing school leaders can provide an important part of the solution if they take on System Leadership roles.

Scope

The term ‘system leader’ refers to a school leader who is 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. Thus whilst system leaders work across schools, this in itself is not sufficient criterion. Most school leaders are involved in some form of collaboration or networking. What differentiates system leaders is that they:

- actively improve student learning (for every child) within the schools they work with – including narrowing the gap(s) as well as increasing attainment overall;
- develop the leadership of learning in others schools – combining high expectations with an understanding of a range of best practice in teaching and learning and an ability to transfer this to other schools;
- change school (and local level) systems and structures to make certain that improvement can be sustained – (wider responsibility; social cohesion).

There is already a range of such system leadership roles emerging across England. These can be summarized as head teachers who:

- develop a successful educational improvement partnerships between several schools, often around a set of specific themes that no single institution can deliver, including: curriculum design; 14-19 consortia; behaviour and hard to place students;
- partner another school which is facing particular difficulties and improve it – either through collaborative support or in a federation;
- choose to lead a school that is in extremely challenging circumstances and change local context by build a culture of success;

- act as a community leader to broker and shape partnerships and / or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children's welfare and potential, often through multi agency work;
- work as a change agent or consultant leader within the system, identifying best classroom practice and transferring it to support improvement in others schools.

These roles hold a very significant potential to effect systemic educational improvement. If a sufficient cadre of system leaders were developed and deployed, they would be:

- a wider resource for school improvement: making the most of our leaders to transfer best practice and reduce the risk of innovation and change focused on attainment and welfare;
- a authentic response to failing schools (often those least able to attract suitable leaders);
- a means to resolve the emerging challenge of, on the one hand, falling student rolls and hence increasingly non-viable schools and, on the other hand, pressures to sustain educational provision in all localities.

Process

As a means of exploring this emerging trend, and analyzing its potential, this case study presentation will draw on both the research of a range of federations and the specific case of Chalvedon School that has federated with Barstable School. Chalvedon is a "School Facing Challenging Circumstances" that has transformed into a "high value-adding" school that now supports other schools in this transformation. Barstable is a "School Causing Concern". In recent years the school has been in "Special Measures" and is now in "Serious Weaknesses". During this time there has been no progress in the quality of learning. Progress in raising pupils' aspirations and pupil achievement has been disappointingly slow. Consequently, Barstable willingly enlisted Chalvedon's support in its development and transformation. The case study presentation will consider how Chalvedon has worked to raise the academic achievement of all pupils by developing the characteristics of a high-reliability school and then replicating these in another context. The case study will then build on the case of Chalvedon to propose a model of how the 'Executive Heads' of federations work to improve schools.

Results

There is now growing evidence in the English secondary school system that system leadership is having a positive impact. Three examples make the point:

- Waverley School, under leadership of Sir Dexter Hutt from Ninestiles, improved from 16% 5 A-Cs at GCSE in 01 to 62% in 04.
- Sir Michael Wilshaw has instilled excellent behaviour, a focus on teaching and learning, and high expectations at Mossbourne Academy which is also having wider impact in the community.
- Valley Park School, under leadership of Sue Glanville, improved from 31% 5A*-C in 04 to 43% in 05. Invicta Grammar, Sue's lead school, also benefited by developing its leadership team and curriculum offer.

Building on such evidence, the case study concludes that a key challenge for English education is to ensure more leaders and their school teams have the capabilities and capacity to design and undertake system leadership roles that fit for their specific contexts.