

# Teachers into leaders: networking and leadership development

Growing leaders of the future  
is becoming an accepted central  
responsibility of leaders of the present

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

**Yvonne Lawrence**

Former Headteacher, Horsell Church of England  
Junior School

**Debbie Robins**

Headteacher, Wray Common Primary School

**Bob Twells**

Headteacher, Furzefield Primary School

## Introduction

Growing leaders of the future is becoming an accepted central responsibility of leaders of the present. Well publicised national shortages of potential future leaders, along with the rapidly developing complexity of the role, is resulting in many schools seeking their own innovative solutions.

This work focuses on the approach adopted by the 'Nevah network', designed to develop and extend existing self evaluation processes, by establishing a system of peer review visits to partner schools focusing on school development priorities.

The 'Nevah network' comprises seven primary Surrey schools. The approach used within the model involved an initial planning meeting between the partner schools to identify the visit focus and the expertise required from the visiting team. A two-day review visit by the team of teachers includes discussion meetings with key teaching and non-teaching staff, parents, pupils and governors. A developmental written summary report is produced based on feedback to the host school at the end of the visit, and used to support ongoing focused school development.

This research explores the developmental opportunities offered to these teachers by this network. In particular, it looks to provide an insight into their growth as leaders and the resulting contribution made to the schools in which they work.

## How the research was organised

Semi-structured interviews provided the main method of data collection. Schools identified three members of staff who were tracked during the research. Individuals were selected according to their broad level of experience.

All the teachers involved in the research were interviewed before the visits took place. Questions focused on their perceptions of what leadership meant to them and their understanding of their own current skills. Researchers then observed staff presenting feedback to the host schools and the teachers leading each team undertook a shared review of their leadership learning supported by a facilitator. After the visits to network schools, staff were interviewed again in relation to their understanding of their role, their growth and what the impact had been on themselves and their school. Finally, headteachers of network schools were interviewed, providing an additional perspective on leadership growth and school impact. To maintain objectivity, the views of the three headteachers leading the research were not included.

## Findings

The main findings from this research are presented separately from teachers and headteachers.

### Key findings from teachers

Teachers identified a range of areas where their skills had been developed. These included:

- coaching
- motivating
- use of diplomacy
- organisational time management
- communication
- prioritising
- questioning

The opportunity to develop leadership skills was also highlighted by teachers. Central to this was improving their understanding of approaches to distributing leadership and effective delegation. The approach also increased their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as a leader, encouraging them to develop skills in areas of identified weakness. Time on the network also offered an opportunity for them to reflect on their own broader development needs. Finally, receiving feedback themselves helped to develop their capacity for providing sensitive feedback to colleagues in support of their personal development.

Several respondents had progressed further in leadership roles, and indicated that the support they received via this programme had assisted them in this process. For instance:

- one promoted to acting headteacher
- one promoted to deputy headship
- two promoted to Year Leader posts (middle leaders)
- three less experienced teachers leading whole school development projects

In addition, a number of individuals indicated that their involvement in the programme had increased their interest in pursuing headship.

## Key findings from headteachers

Headteachers noted a number of positive aspects resulting from this network to their schools. As one head noted:

*‘Since the first round we have observed our school adopting practices and procedures at a practical level; these have affected our climate and culture...’*

Foremost amongst these were positive contributions to team building, including the development of rapport, increased empathy and a wider sharing of aims between members of the school. Heads also noted a general increase in the degree of support offered.

At personal levels, headteachers felt they were more effective in managing their own time, prioritising their work and coaching others. Their ability to motivate and encourage colleagues had been enhanced and many reported increased self-confidence in this respect.

Headteachers also stated that the support offered had led to greater reflection throughout the school, and a sense that the culture had become more open. Development opportunities had become more widely available, for instance in relation to time management and planning. Headteachers noted that the networking opportunities had been especially helpful in providing opportunities for individuals to lead the implementation of new initiatives in areas outside their own school. As one head noted:

*‘It has enabled our school to raise individual profiles and identify strengths previously unrecognised, including those of support staff and new teachers.’*

Other school level improvements reported by headteachers included an enhancement of the self-evaluation process and an improved approach to continuous school improvement, general increases in the level of leadership capacity and the introduction of a range of school development initiatives.

## Key learning points

The following represent the main learning points from this project.

- 1.** Existing levels of trust between the heads of the schools was an essential factor in the overall success of the network. Taking time to build trust between staff in all the schools is critical. Approaches to this include joint conferences, joint staff meetings, regular review meetings and social events.
- 2.** Protocols provide a valuable framework for structuring visits, to ensure they are conducted equitably and professionally. In this instance, these were developed as the network learned from its mistakes.
- 3.** Headteachers play a critical role in making their staff comfortable in the new structure and encouraging them to take risks to maximise the potential opportunities offered by the network. The development of a shared approach to visits provided further confidence to the staff to 'have a go'.
- 4.** The process of trust building was also critical in providing the opportunity for headteachers to delegate responsibility for school visits in the second and subsequent years, thereby building capacity more broadly.
- 5.** Participants' personal learning was enhanced through the provision of structured support in reflection, offered by senior members of staff during and after the process.
- 6.** Comparable coaching training was offered to all staff involved in the review visits via an independent consultant. This increased individuals' confidence in the impartiality of the feedback received and promoted parity of experience.
- 7.** Network schools demonstrated a commitment to distributed leadership and regular provision of leadership development opportunities. These factors encouraged staff to take advantage of development opportunities offered through this inter-school collaboration.
- 8.** The development of the network benefited from a clear, shared commitment to 'build leadership potential through networking' across the schools involved. This was embedded in each institution's school development plan, thereby ensuring it was supported by the allocation of time and funding.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank headteachers and staff of all participating schools and John West Burnham for his advice.

## Research associate reports available in autumn 2008

### ■ **Only connect**

Using a critical incident tool to develop multi-agency collaboration in two children's centres

Alison Cummings, *Policy & Practice Development, Sure Start & Extended Services, East Riding of Yorkshire*

### ■ **Healthy body: healthy mind**

How headteachers are managing their schools to help improve children's health

Barry Dawson, *Former headteacher, Bidston Avenue Primary School, Wirral*

Colleen Taylor, *Headteacher, Broadoak Primary School, Salford*

Gordon Scholefield, *Former headteacher, Brookdale Primary School, Wirral*

Marie Egerton-Jones, *Headteacher, Leamington Primary School, Liverpool*

### ■ **Can federations help stars to come out?**

Exploring the unique contribution of federations to the development of school leaders

George Ford and Elaine McCue, *Dual Headteachers, Federation of Abbey Schools, Darlington*

### ■ **Parents matter**

How can leaders involve parents in the self-evaluation process and further development of children's centre and extended school services?

Liz Klavins, *Head of Centre, Fairfield Children's Centre*

### ■ **Student Leadership and School Improvement**

How can school leaders involve students in the school improvement process through developing students as researchers?

Jean Watt, *School Improvement Officer, Education Bradford*

## Research Associate Programme

To download this publication, please visit  
**[www.ncsl.org.uk/publications](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/publications)**

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:  
**[www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates)**

**National College for  
School Leadership**  
Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0845 609 0009  
F: 0115 872 2001  
E: [enquiries@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

### Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.