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# School Leadership and System Leadership

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School effectiveness and improvement research shows that leadership plays a key role in ensuring the vitality and growth of schools. Yet, there is growing appreciation (Elmore 2000, 2) that “public schools and school systems as presently constituted are simply not led in ways that enable them to respond to the increasing demands they face under standards-based reforms.” For Elmore (2000, 2) and others, the way out of this problem is “through the large scale improvement of instruction, something public education has been unable to do to date, but which is possible with dramatic changes in the way public schools define and practice leadership.”

Though there has been large-scale improvement in instruction in England, there is still room for improvement. Through the introduction of national strategies and regional and district infrastructures, the focus on teaching reading, writing, and math to students aged 4 to 14 years has sharpened considerably. Targets for student outcomes in literacy and numeracy at school, district, and national levels were introduced simultaneously. All public schools are regularly inspected by external teams of inspectors, and their findings have been made public for over a decade. Standards have risen significantly.

In the last two years, however, the year-to-year rise in student standards has altered its trajectory and now appears to have reached a plateau. Policy makers believe that to bring about the next wave of change, the English school system needs to be transformed. Given the widespread acknowledgment that reform is needed and that leadership is critical in times of change, this transformation rests largely on dynamic leadership at both the school and system levels. Fullan (2003, 4) agreed with this perspective:

Improving the overall system will not happen just by endorsing the vision of a strong public school system; principals in particular must be cognizant that changing their schools and the system is a simultaneous proposition.

The importance of school leadership prompted the establishment of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in Nottingham, England in 2000. The College, which was the brainchild of central government and directly funded by it, was founded on the belief that a need exists for dramatic changes in the way school leadership is defined and practiced in a standards-based system.

### The National College for School Leadership

The Secretary of State for Education, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, identified three key areas of activity for the NCSL:

- to provide a single, national focus for school leadership development and research;
- to be a driving force for world-class leadership in our schools and the wider education service; and
- to be a provider and promoter of excellence, a major resource for schools, a catalyst for innovation, and a focus for national and international debate on school leadership issues.

Though ambitious, these goals deserve applause for avoiding a narrow focus on leadership by emphasizing international perspectives, commitment to research, and an evidence-informed approach. These areas form the basis of the College's key objectives:

- develop and deliver a range of leadership programs that enable leaders to build the confidence, skills, and understanding to transform the quality of learning for all students;
- find, analyze, describe, and celebrate good practice in school leadership to build a usable knowledge base for school leaders to share;
- promote collaborative learning and communication so that all school leaders feel that they are a part of a network of vibrant professional learning communities and have opportunities to contribute to educational policy developments;
- make NCSL a challenging, supportive, and dynamic place to work, which in and of itself demonstrates the qualities of a learning organization; and
- demonstrate the impact of NCSL on school leadership and progress toward achieving our key goals.

Given the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a difference in organizational health, performance, and growth, central government invested in a national organization to ensure that school leaders were supported, developed, and had access to research and leading-edge thinking nationally and internationally.

NCSL is housed in a high quality, purpose-built conference centre for leadership and learning at the University of Nottingham. The building, paid for by central government and opened officially in October 2002 by Prime Minister Blair, is a symbol of the esteem in which leaders and their schools are held by government. Many international visitors to the College comment that they wish school leaders had such support in their

## Southworth and Du Quesnay

nations. The decision to locate in the College in Nottingham resulted from a competitive bidding process. Though the College is located on university land and has access to the university library and staff members in the business, computer, and education schools, it is not part of the university.

The College initially was charged with managing preexisting national programs for leadership development. These were the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), the Leadership Program for Serving Heads (LPSH), and the Headteacher Leadership and Management Program (HEADLAMP). NPQH prepares established leaders to move into headship (principal positions) and has been a mandatory qualification since April 2004. LPSH offers participants a 360-degree evaluation of their leadership skills, with feedback and action planning built into the program. HEADLAMP provides new heads with grants (£2,500 or US\$4,000) to spend on their developmental needs during the first two years of their initial headship.

Each of these programs has been reviewed and substantially revised in content and structure since becoming the responsibility of the College. In a fast-moving world, it is imperative to continually update the programs to ensure they remain on the leading edge of thinking and practice, embody the latest available evidence about effective practice, and respond formatively to evaluation data. Some structural changes included moving HEADLAMP to a three-year cycle, using a more modular, diagnostic, and needs-based approach, and renaming it the Headteacher Induction Program. Program managers and directors currently are working on modularized provisions in other programs to cater to individual and school needs.

All programs the College offers are underpinned by a leadership development framework, which resulted from collaboration between headteachers and experts in leadership development from the public and private sectors and from education systems worldwide. The framework was designed to provide a coherent and flexible model for the development and support of school leaders, recognizing the different strengths, needs, and aspirations of leaders in all stages of their careers. The framework recognizes five stages of leaders:

- *Emergent leaders.* Teachers who are beginning to take on management and leadership responsibilities, including heads of departments and subject leaders.
- *Established leaders.* Experienced leaders who do not intend to pursue headship, including assistant and deputy headteachers.
- *Entry to headship.* Those preparing for their first headship and for newly appointed headteachers.
- *Advanced leaders.* Experienced headteachers looking to refresh themselves and update their skills.
- *Consultant leaders.* Experienced headteachers and other school leaders who are ready to develop further their training, mentoring, and coaching skills.

The College's developmental programs are structured to help school leaders progress through the framework for the benefit of their school and their own professional development.

This framework has guided the College as it has developed other programs and activities to increase its scope and reach beyond NPQH, LPSH, and HEADLAMP. A major program for subject leaders and heads of departments in secondary and primary schools, called Leading from the Middle, has been piloted and launched. Leading from the Middle blends face-to-face, school-based, and online learning. The Consultant Leader Program has proven to be popular with headteachers and is being expanded to include deputies and other leaders. That program was the basis for the Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders' Initiative in which 1,000 primary heads were trained to support 4,000 primary schools during 2003–2004. Consultant leaders provide peer support among leaders in different schools, thereby promoting collaboration on a large scale, and are a part of a strategy for systemic change with "the best leading the rest."

### Distinctive and Innovative Work

The College's work centers around four professional groups:

- the Program Group, which coordinates and manages the national programs and much of our pilot work;
- the Online Group, which deals with electronic communications;
- the Networked Learning Group, which brings schools together in new combinations; and
- the Research Group, which is the College's knowledge creation and management unit.

Demonstrating that leadership makes a real and measurable difference is a major challenge to practitioners and scholars.

These groups are supported by the corporate services and marketing and communications groups. The Program Group's work has been described earlier in this paper. Descriptions of the work of the Online, Networked Learning, and Research groups are provided here.

### Online Group

The Online Group is responsible for Web-based, e-learning, and electronic communications with educators and NCSL stakeholders. The NCSL Web site, [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org), is an interactive, one-stop shop that brings together information and practical tools, including examples of school policies, educational news, tools to help leaders work and plan, and links to information on policy, research, training, and development. Online communities at [www.talk2learn.com](http://www.talk2learn.com) offer school leaders access to an extensive, confidential network of colleagues with whom they can debate, discuss, share ideas, and model new practice. These communities also offer access to "hot seats," in which policy makers and leading thinkers discuss issues and answer questions online, giving community members unique access to decision makers in government and education. The College

## Southworth and Du Quesnay

plays an important role in bringing “e-consultation” to the profession so that more interactive communication occurs between policy makers and practitioners.

### Networked Learning Group

The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) project is a pioneering initiative in which more than 1,000 schools across England are working together to share best practice and promote innovation. Co-funded by NCSL and the Department of Education and Science in National Government, this project brings together clusters of schools, local education authorities (school districts), universities, and community partners to work collaboratively to improve standards and opportunities for students.

The initiative aims to develop networks through which schools can learn and find solutions to common problems. A belief in collaboration, rather than competition, is fundamental to the work. By working in interdependent and mutually supportive ways, groups of schools have formed learning networks and are using the diversity within and across their institutions for knowledge sharing, creation, and innovation.

The College provides support to these schools in the form of conferences and seminars, materials, and funding. The Networked Learning Group also researches what each school group is doing to understand the networking processes and to capture the outcomes for staff members and students in participating schools.

### Research Group

Through its research, NCSL seeks to create new knowledge about school leadership, collate what is known and emerging from other studies, and communicate the findings and implications of this knowledge to practitioners and policy makers. The goal is to promote the application of research to practice and policy. The group is committed to:

- practitioner inquiry, involvement, and voice;
- bridging the gap between practice and research;
- modeling evidence-informed practice;
- identifying, studying, communicating, and promoting the application of best practice; and
- innovation and leading-edge thinking.

The research focuses on two related fields of knowledge: leadership and leadership development. The College is dedicated to learning about best practice in these two fields wherever it exists—whether inside schools or outside education, or in the United Kingdom or international venues. The College is committed to developing the leadership and management research community, including spearheading efforts to bring together researchers and users to forge strong research partnerships and promote dialogue between practitioners, scholars, and policy makers.

The College’s international role includes appointing visiting professors to act as advisers and critical friends, working with visiting scholars who supplement our knowledge and understanding about school leadership, and supporting international research.

For example, the College is funding Andy Hargreaves's International Leadership in Education Research Network (ILERN) initiative, which draws together researchers from across the world to share, develop, and disseminate findings that highlight the human side of school leadership, in areas such as moral and ethical leadership, the emotional aspects of leadership, distributed leadership and social justice, and the relationship of leadership to diversity and inclusion issues.

Those who work in the research group are primarily empiricists, studying what is happening in practice and what works well in schools, and communicating their findings for widespread consideration and application. Though steadfast in its concern to understand "what is," the group also wants to consider "what might be." It is imperative that long-held beliefs are not unthinkingly recycled. Some of the assumptions and practices that may be outmoded or inappropriate for today's students must be challenged. That is one reason why the Research Group is working with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its counterparts in Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand to consider what schools of the future might look like.

### Current Research and Development

An overriding question of the research group is *how* do leaders make a difference in the schools they lead? This question largely stems from the work of Hallinger and Heck (1996) who argued that research should move away from earlier concerns about what leadership is and whether leaders make a difference to studying the pathways by which leaders influence the quality of teaching and student outcomes.

Hallinger and Heck's (1996) view that investigation of school leadership needs to be broadened has influenced the College's research. One proposition that informs the College's work across all groups is the belief that leadership should be distributed across the school community (NCSL 2001). As a national college for school *leadership* rather than principalship, the College maintains an inclusive, wide-ranging view of leadership, rather than a narrow perspective on principals.

Perspectives on distributed leadership by educational theorists (e.g., Lambert 1998; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 1999; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1999; Elmore 2000; Leithwood and Riehl 2003; and Bennett et al. 2003) have been reviewed, and in some instances, close working relationships with these academics have been established to further the understanding of the concept. The notion of distributed leadership is not only theoretically attractive, but also powerful in practice based on school inspection evidence in England (Ofsted 2004).

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## Southworth and Du Quesnay

The concepts of how leaders influence what happens in their schools and distributed leadership not only overlap, but they also interrelate. When leadership is dispersed, what is distributed? The response is not simply (and vaguely) “leadership,” but a particular type of leadership. In most schools, a need always exists for as many leaders as possible to influence positively the quality of teaching and learning. In other words, what distributed leadership involves is spreading instructional leadership across the school.

The notion of “instructional leadership” does not transfer well in an English context. Therefore, the term “learning-centered leadership” has been adopted in line with some scholars in the United States (e.g., Hoy and Hoy 2003). Learning-centered leadership is concerned with influencing the quality of teaching and student outcomes. Through a number of projects dedicated to exploring the ways in which leaders at all levels make differences in what happens inside classrooms, we have begun to capture what they do and which strategies appear to make the most difference.

The findings are intricate, but can be categorized into two sets. The first set is behavioral and the second is organizational. Learning-centered leaders rely on three behavioral strategies:

- modeling;
- monitoring; and
- dialogue.

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The organizational findings are that leaders carefully design and deploy organizational structures and systems that enable them to influence their colleagues, and they simultaneously use these systems to create and sustain the school as a learning organization.

These findings are supported by the work of Jo and Joseph Blase (1998), which showed that the three leadership behaviors noted earlier are valued by their teacher colleagues as precisely what followers want from their leaders.

Teachers expect leaders to lead by example, take a strong and consistent interest in what teachers do, and talk and engage with them about student learning and their teaching practices. The College also has worked with Mike Knapp (2003) and his team at the University of Washington, Seattle, and drawn upon their Wallace-Reader’s Digest funded analysis of *Leading for Learning*.

A detailed exposition of these findings is being compiled (Southworth in press). In the interim, many of the findings are available on the College’s Web site, [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk).

Additional work, also in progress, focuses on learning in general and more personalized forms of learning.

Personalized learning is about putting espoused beliefs that every child matters into action. It involves:

- greater attention to each child's learning styles and needs;
- increased use of assessment for learning, student self assessment, and individual improvement targets; and
- students supported by learning assistants and parents, as well as by high-quality teaching, with more attention given to student perspectives and voices.

The need for more personalized forms of learning is not a return to individualized learning where many students simply worked on their own. Rather, it is recognition by teachers and school leaders that this approach is more effective educationally. It also reflects policy makers' concerns that schools consider a major and growing trend in our societies. This trend was identified by Zuboff and Maxmin (2002, 4), who claimed that individuals today "want tangible support in leading the lives they chose" and that commercial organizations and public institutions presently are not doing this. According to Maxmin (in Zuboff and Maxmin 2002, 25), "Business organizations and other institutions too continue to treat the new individuals according to the terms of the older mass society."

This outlook is no longer viable. Public institutions must become more responsive and reflexive to individual personal needs and wants. Not only students, but also their parents and communities now demand higher levels of information and action. For some, mass customization is the solution. Others talk of the need to resolve old and false dichotomies by arguing for *both* high equity and excellence in schools. These issues, as well as the steps schools are taking toward more personalized learning forms and the lessons leaders need to learn to implement these changes, are being explored in the College's development and research work.

## Conclusion

The NCSL is an ambitious project, and it is important to understand the scale of the enterprise. As a National College, we reach and engage 25,000 schools and their principals. These numbers increase rapidly when assistant principals and middle leaders are included. The College's client base is estimated at 250,000 individuals. We are connected with many high-quality centers, including ones in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and the United States.

Though we have much to celebrate in the field of educational leadership, we have many challenges too. Agreement is currently widespread that leadership matters and that leaders need to be developed in a variety of ways. That is the upside. The downside is that we must demonstrate that all this investment, energy, and effort makes a difference to the leaders themselves, to their schools and faculty members and, most importantly, the students they serve.



## Southworth and Du Quesnay

Demonstrating that leadership makes a real and measurable difference is a major challenge to practitioners and scholars. There is a hazy notion of the causal chains that link leadership to student outcomes, and these linkages vary and take time to establish. Nevertheless, unless we—all of us who are involved in leadership development and research—can show some payoffs for our efforts, then the current interest in leadership may subside or even evaporate altogether. The longevity of leadership development rests, in large part, on being able to describe the differences leaders make in terms of improvements to school and students' performance.

The NCSL is a bold initiative that increases the profile and visibility of leadership as a field of study and development. Fullan (2003, 16) claimed, "Leadership is to this decade what standards were to the 1990s." This claim may exaggerate the position, but it shows that the stakes have been raised, along with the profile of leadership development.

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