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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Partnership working: its potential and the role of a senior leader

Thinkpiece

Resource

Partnership working: its potential and the role of a senior leader 1

What is 'working in partnership'?

In the literature, there is no agreed definition of educational partnerships: Powell and Dowling (2006:305) describe them as 'the indefinable in pursuit of the unachievable.' Dhillon (2005:4) observes that:

The term is used to cover a range of working arrangements, which involve multiple organisations, agencies, groups and individuals working collaboratively or co-operatively to achieve common goals or purposes.

In practice, the definition of partnership working will vary depending on the context of the situation and the experience of those involved. If you ask some school leaders they will probably speak about working collaboratively with other schools, in order to raise achievement levels or work on identified local issues together, for example behaviour or low achievement levels for particular groups of pupils or students. They may be involved in partnerships to share resources, premises or staff. Partnership projects may have a focus on a particular age group or curriculum area, such as sports or arts partnerships or 14–19 provision. This form of partnership can either be informal or formal.

In the current context, partnership working will also include schools being formally linked through academy trusts or chains of schools.

Other schools will have experience of working beyond the school sector with community, voluntary or private sector organisations to meet community needs. They will probably have experience of involving the community in the identification of local need and the use of volunteer parents or community members to provide low-cost or no-cost solutions (Friedman, 2005).

Some schools will work very closely with other agencies, such as health, housing, social care and the police in order to jointly work on addressing social issues and priorities together for the benefit of the whole community.

There are also examples of partnership for mutual benefit between schools and business and schools from the independent sector.

Whatever the partnership arrangements, the focus of partnership or collaborative activity should be that it should improve educational outcomes for pupils.

It should meet an identified need and should be a meaningful solution to an issue, working on the principle that many brains are better than one and that the solution already exists but may not have been explored from the correct perspective.

Working in partnership should produce a wider range of potential solutions because you are asking for the opinions of others, particularly those affected by the issue – they will often know exactly what needs to be done or addressed in order to find a way forward. The sad thing is that often we, as professionals, forget to ask them or, even worse, come to the issue with a professional arrogance believing that our qualifications and years of experience entitles us to know all of the answers – even to questions that have yet to be identified.

For the purpose of this module, we define partnership or collaboration as joint working that involves more than one constituent group or organisation. The focus will be on partnership with parents, the governing body, other schools and the wider community, considering how each can contribute to school improvement outcomes, in terms of improved outcomes for children.

Two types of partnership drivers

In English schools, partnerships have two main drivers: external-political and internal-social. The strong external driver is government policy, which in recent years has encouraged and imposed collaboration as a basis for key educational initiatives (see 'Policy drivers' below).

The rationale of the internal driver is the shared desire between partner organisations to work together for the collective benefit of the learners based on a commitment to work collaboratively in order to achieve shared goals. There is also a belief in the benefit of the processes of social learning for staff. Staff can share effective practice through discussion or professional development opportunities. In this respect, Dhillon (2005:215) envisages partnership as the 'social glue' for achieving shared goals, enabling organisations to achieve more collectively than could be achieved independently. This, often ad hoc, process has not always led to improvement in the past.

Hargreaves (2011) takes this one step further by introducing the concept of 'joint practice development'. He defines joint practice development as a joint activity in which two or more people interact and influence one another, in contrast to the non-interactive, unilateral character of much conventional 'sharing good practice'. He sees it as an activity that focuses on teachers' professional practice, that is, what they do, not merely what they know and it focuses on developing the practice.

He goes on to say:

It captures a process that is truly collaborative, not one-way; the practice is being improved, not just moved from one person or place to another. Joint practice development gives birth to innovation and grounds it in the routines of what teachers naturally do. Innovation is fused with and grows out of practice, and when the new practice is demonstrably superior, escape from the poorer practice is expedited.

Hargreaves, 2011:11

The contexts for collaboration are very complex, leading to a range of levels at which educational partners collaborate. Partners may seek and achieve varying degrees of collaboration, depending upon their contexts for partnership.

Research has identified a number of typologies for collaboration to enable further understanding and analysis of partnership activity, (Himmelman, 1992; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Shinnars, 2001; Frost, 2005). Each of these pieces of research has resulted in a continuum of collaboration, the levels of which can be used to determine the depth of engagement. Himmelman made the case that collaboration was just one of four common strategies for working together, each representing a unique inter-organisational linkage, requiring 'different commitments of trust, time and turf' (1992:5). His four strategies were:

- **Networking.** This is an informal relationship in which information is exchanged for mutual benefit. This choice often reflects limited time, low levels of trust and a reluctance to share or concede turf. Himmelman cites an example of an early childhood centre and a public health department exchanging information about their approaches to supporting early childhood development.
- **Co-ordination.** This involves a more formal linkage in which information is exchanged and activities are altered in pursuit of mutual benefit and achievement of a common purpose. It involves more time and higher levels of trust. A special school working in partnership with a mainstream school so that pupils with special educational needs or disabilities can have mainstream experience is an example of this.
- **Co-operation.** This involves an exchange of information, altering activities and resource sharing for mutual benefit in pursuit of a common purpose. Organisational commitments are higher, formal agreements can be used. This linkage requires higher levels of time and trust. An example of this is an independent and state school partnership that shares resources for the benefit of pupils.

- Collaboration. This involves a willingness of the parties to enhance one another's capacity for mutual benefit and common purpose. The parties share risks, responsibilities and rewards. They invest substantial time; have high levels of trust and share common turf. An example of this could be senior staff working across schools to develop practice through mentoring and coaching.

Ainscow et al (2006:192–193), when investigating collaboration as a strategy for improving schools in challenging circumstances, ask the very pertinent question:

Within an education system that places an emphasis on both competition and choice, why should schools choose to work together?

They suggest that achieving authentic collaboration has proved a challenge, because it requires the surrendering of some degree of independent control in return for collective influence. Morley (2006) also raises the point that schools with a history of internal failings will find it even more difficult to collaborate because they may have a low capacity for within-school collaboration, thus making it difficult for them to develop effective partnerships with colleagues in other schools.

Ainscow and West (2006) remind us that the processes involved in partnership working are socially complex and time-consuming and can often result in little more than aimless meetings and time-consuming talk that has minimal impact. Therefore we must be mindful that any partnership work in which we engage is more solutions- focused and action-oriented and focused on making a positive difference to pupils' lives and attainment.

Hill (2008) argued that there is a strong intellectual case for working collaboratively. He asserted that lateral learning, applied in a disciplined way, is the key to transformation. He goes on to say:

Collaboration is a key part of the jigsaw in helping to ensure that good ideas and excellent practice don't get trapped on location but travel laterally (and vertically) to improve the quality of educational provision being offered to each and every student.

Hill, 2008:14

Policy drivers

Within the UK, there has been a long-standing focus on partnership working and inter-school collaboration because in the main, education is a collegial activity. Many schools have worked in partnership with other schools or with other agencies (for example, health, housing, police, social care) in order to do their best for the pupils they serve. This process was often ad hoc and informal, relying more on personal relationships or common interests, which does not always lend itself to sustained school improvement.

Factors relating to a child's domestic situation and their health impact on their learning, so a more holistic approach was needed if real improvements were to be achieved over the longer term. The belief that it was impossible for any government department to deal with these issues in isolation underpinned a range of initiatives which sought to promote a more cohesive and co-ordinated approach to tackling deprivation and social exclusion, for example Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Sure Start, New Deal for Communities and targeted Single Regeneration Budget funds. This focus on more joined-up thinking culminated in the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2003). This agenda saw a basic shift to placing children at the heart of service provision, being configured around their needs rather than those of provider organisations.

In 2005, the government promoted Education Improvement Partnerships (EIPs) as a way of rationalising existing partnerships and the secretary of state indicated that co-operation was necessary for the delivery of comprehensive education for all pupils (DfES, 2005a). This report stated that confident schools want to collaborate with others in the community to drive a shared agenda for improving standards, to share resources and good practice, to ensure high-quality provision for all young people and underpin community cohesion.

In addition, in 2005, following the working group on 14–19 reform, the government introduced a white paper proposing radical reform of the system of 14–19 education. This has also driven the development of greater collaboration between schools. This reform included the widening of the curriculum and the range of opportunities on offer to students so that they are much more tailored to the talents and aspirations of young people, as well as greater flexibility about what and where to study and when to take qualifications (DfES, 2005b).

The current context

There has been a growth in schools working in partnership through initiatives that are clearly focused on school improvement, such as national and local leaders of education (NLEs and LLEs), executive headships, networks, collaborations, federations, teaching schools and chains of schools.

The coalition government's white paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' (HMSO, 2010), introduces the notion of a self-improving system, where schools are now primarily responsible for school improvement. This self-improving system stems from the principle that teachers learn best from one another and should be in more control of their professional and institutional development. The white paper clearly states:

We expect schools to use their increased autonomy to explore new ways of working together – but collaboration in the future will be driven by school leaders and teachers – not bureaucrats.

HMSO, 2010, Paragraph 5.6:52

Hargreaves (2010) in a thinkpiece for the National College that explored the defining features of a sustainable, self-improving school system, recognised this potential for further development.

Most schools have gained experience of working in partnership and networks of many kinds. Increased decentralisation offers an opportunity to build on these and become self-improving.

Hargreaves, 2010:3

Hargreaves identified the particular benefits of working as a cluster:

Supporting new leaders, protecting their members, distributing innovation, transferring professional knowledge more readily and becoming more efficient in the use of resources.

Hargreaves, 2010:6

In his next National College thinkpiece, Hargreaves (2011) develops his maturity model of a self-improving school system, which contains three dimensions. Each dimension contains four inter-connected strands.

- The professional development dimension:
 - joint practice development (JPD)
 - talent identification and development through distributed leadership
 - mentoring and coaching
 - distributed staff information

- The partnership competence dimension:
 - high social capital
 - fit governance
 - evaluation and challenge
 - distributed system leadership

- The collaborative capital dimension:
 - analytical investigation
 - creative entrepreneurship
 - alliance architecture
 - disciplined innovation

Senior leaders will have a key role to play in the development of this self-improving school system, both within their own school and across schools and other agencies and organisations. They will need to know their staff really well, identifying those with particular strengths, particularly those with the capacity to work well with others, to lead joint practice development groups within or across schools. This can be supported by developing a culture of mentoring and coaching within the school. Senior leaders will have to share and distribute their knowledge and find opportunities to share the knowledge of others. They will need to work closely with their staff to identify the time for joint practice development.

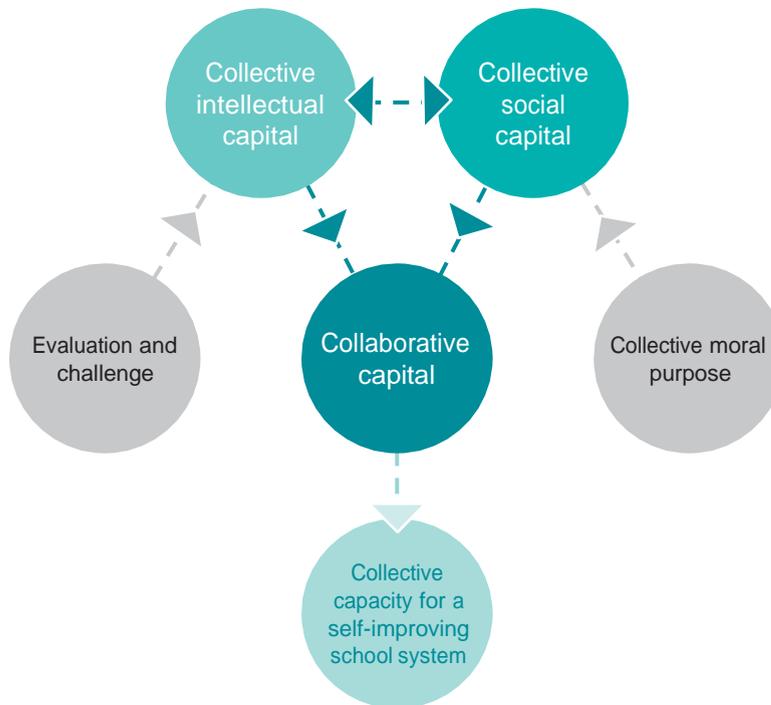
High social capital can be developed by senior leaders who will need to model trust in order to create a climate where trustful relationships between colleagues, and across schools, are the norm. These relationships need to be developed across all stakeholder groups, including pupils, parents, the governing body and the wider community. They need to develop collective moral purpose by distributing leadership across the institution. Evaluation and challenge need to be fully embedded and involve all staff.

Hargreaves (2012) states that the third dimension, collaborative capital, will arise out of the interactions of the strands of the first and second dimensions through the interventions of senior leaders.

As trust increases across the partnership along with reciprocities at all levels in activities linked to JPD, there emerges a form of collective social capital across the schools.....This collective moral purpose provides a huge boost to collective social capital, which in turn allows a more effective exploitation of the collective intellectual capital, which is also greater than the intellectual capital of each individual school....As the partnership's overall knowledge, skills and experience are augmented and evaluation and challenge operate at the levels of staff and students, not just senior leaders, the quality of JPD rises to new levels, and becomes the powerful but disciplined innovation which drives the better practices that are essential to a self-improving school system.

Hargreaves, 2012:23

Figure 1: Hargreaves' model of collaborative capital



Contribution of partnership working to school improvement outcomes

For the purpose of this module, the focus will be on partnership with parents, the governing body, other schools and the wider community, considering how each can contribute to school improvement outcomes, in terms of improved outcomes for children and young people.

There is a large body of evidence which demonstrates a strong and positive link between parents' involvement and interest in a child's learning and a child's subsequent adjustment and achievement (Desforges, 2003).

A follow-up survey on parental involvement in children's education (Peters et al, 2007) supported Desforges findings:

- Parents are now more likely to see a child's education as mainly or wholly their responsibility. This represents a shift from previous years, when parents were more likely to see it as the school's responsibility.
- Two in three parents said they would like to be more involved in their child's school life. (Peters et al, 2007:2)

A research report (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011) undertaken for the Department for Education identifies evidence-based messages on interventions to support parental engagement in their children's learning. They found that there was a distinction between the types of evidence and interventions they identified:

- The general features of parental engagement strategies, examples of which were strong leadership, targeted approaches and effectively involving parents in school-home links.
- A specific set of actions and practices, for example, offering flexible arrangements for parents' evenings and encouraging parents to ensure that homework diaries were completed.

Schools, in the main, have seized on the potential of parental involvement and engagement in order to improve achievement and raise standards in schools.

Research also claims that pupil attainment levels have risen as a consequence of collaborative activity. For example, an analysis of exam GCSE results found that these had improved at a faster rate in collegiate academies than the average results for the rest of the city of Birmingham (Rutherford and Jackson, 2006). The sharing of good practice and increased professional development for teachers fuels improvements in pupil attainment.

West-Burnham (2011) identifies the following potential benefits of collaboration between schools:

1. Standards are likely to rise as the result of the dissemination of best practice across schools and between schools: closing the gap is more achievable through collaboration and the de-privatisation of successful practice.
2. Succession planning will be significantly enhanced by the development opportunities offered through systems leadership strategies.
3. There is the potential for significant economies of scale in economic terms, notably in terms of learning resources and materials.
4. Shared continuing professional development has the potential to enhance consistent practice and embed improvement and cross-fertilise good ideas and best practice.
5. Strategic planning is more likely to be effective through collaborative governance.
6. Integration across phases and primary–secondary transfer are likely to enhance the learning experience of pupils through integrated and collective approaches.
7. Intervention to support pupils would be more effective with consistent record-keeping, monitoring and use of data.
8. Deployment of staff could be more flexible and effective.
9. The potential for successful collaboration with other agencies would be significantly enhanced.

He concludes that there are real and positive benefits of collaboration, not just to those schools in receipt of support but also to donor schools, particularly in terms of talent management and succession planning. The absence of headteachers, who may be out of school more frequently engaging in partnership work, provides significant opportunities for senior leaders and middle leaders to experience very positive leadership development (by taking on additional responsibility). Senior leaders will get authentic experience of aspects of headship and middle leaders can be developed through having the opportunity to engage with whole-school issues.

Beneficial conditions for collaborative leadership

The diagram below (Briggs, 2010:12) proposes that a necessary starting point for collaborative leadership is where government policy creates conditions for collective accountability and responsibility. It also shows the organisational factors which are beneficial to collaboration which are closely linked to the factors for leaders and staff.

Organisational factors which Briggs sees as being beneficial to collaboration are those which enable the partner institutions to mesh together (on the left-hand side of the diagram below):

- a perception of mutual benefit to each organisation and its learners
- a willingness to understand different cultures and purposes and to accommodate difference
- a preparedness to change and to learn together for mutual benefit

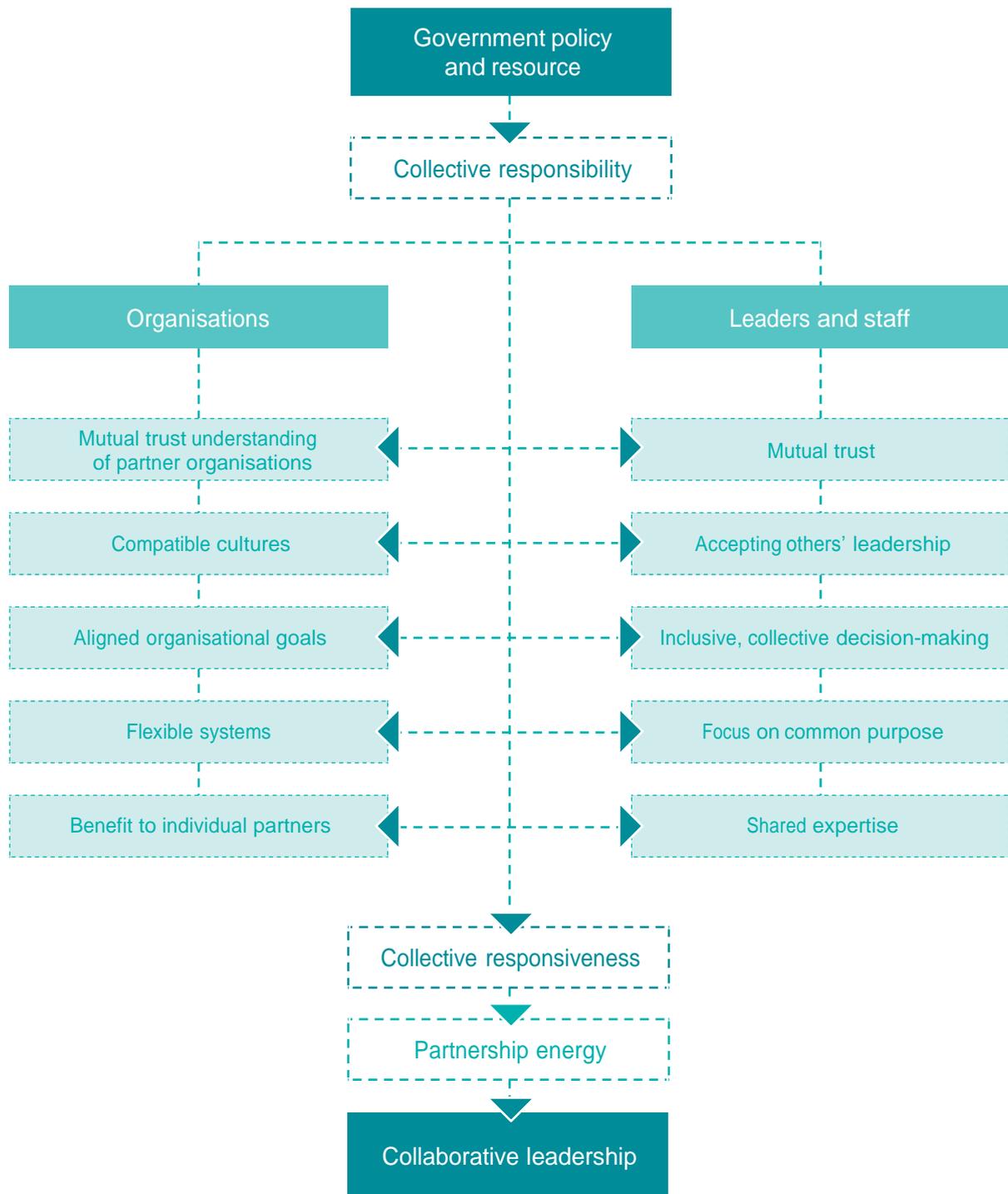
Factors relating particularly to leaders and staff (on the right-hand side of the diagram), Briggs states, are:

- mutual accommodation – a focus on common purpose
- trust, including accepting the leadership of others who may be situated in partner organisations
- sharing expertise about learning and the contexts which support it, particularly inclusive conditions for learning and teaching

The model implies that both leadership influence and ownership of expertise are agreed to be distributed across the partners.

These factors create the conditions necessary for collective responsiveness and joint decision-making to achieve aligned goals. The partnership energy can then be more focused on improving achievement for learners.

Figure 2: Factors beneficial to collaboration



Leadership of partnership working

Collaborative leadership is not simply a 'bigger model' of single-organisation leadership. Collaborative leadership has joint responsibility and joint accountability for a wide range of partnership outcomes. Leadership in partnership working can call on new or slightly different skills from leadership within one organisation. Senior leaders need to be mindful, because the stability of individual institutions may seem to be threatened by partnership working. Leaders still have to maintain the internal coherence of their own organisation as well as striving for external coherence of working with partners. This is why the foundations of partnership working need to be developed – clear shared vision and purpose, roles and responsibilities agreed, monitoring processes, intended outcomes and so forth. Leaders who have developed their professional experience in single-institution models may find it hard to adapt to such strongly collaborative ways of working (Briggs, 2010).

Working in a community context, with other agencies, is not always easy and straightforward. Many agencies are used to working within their own 'silos', with their own language and traditions and it can be a very slow process to develop close, trusting relationships with other professionals, who are using the same words but meaning something very different. This process cannot be rushed. Research shows that it is important to get to know other professionals as people too and this can only be done if the time is taken and the effort is made (Coleman, 2006). This is not easy given the crammed agendas of many agencies and the shortage of staff and resources in the current political and economic climate.

Partnerships are by no means easy to develop, and leaders have to be prepared to invest time and resource in a long-term process of building trust and developing ways of working. But, working in partnership brings with it many new opportunities for learning, developing new skills, fine tuning and further developing old skills and meeting new and interesting challenges, which many leaders find inspiring and stimulating.

Ainscow et al (2006:200) note that the most effective management and leadership of partnerships:

involves forms of shared accountability, often orchestrated through written agreements and then strengthened through experiences of learning how to work together.

Factors which characterise strong collaborations are:

- a unified and integrated approach to learning
- holistic programmes across all types of learning
- a strong sense of local professionalism, leadership and shared knowledge of the area
- a reflective, locally generated approach to capacity building
- pooled local and national funding

Effective partnerships may require new structures and activities, particularly if they are to engage in shared accountability in terms both of inspection and performance (Arnold, 2006). Each school involved may need to rethink how it operates, as well as how it might work in partnership (Stoll et al, 2006).

The leadership skills needed for collaborative leadership across schools can often be seen in senior leaders who have already established collaborative ways of working with their own staff (Ainscow et al, 2006). In successful partnerships, all stakeholders are enabled through effective leadership to have a strong sense of ownership of the partnership. This involves an inclusive approach to decision-making, based upon trust, honesty and openness between the partners. Each partner also has to acknowledge their own individual strengths and weaknesses (Rudd et al, 2004).

The role of senior leaders

The role of senior leaders has changed in nature because of the changing nature of school leadership. They are expected to take on significantly more accountability for whole school performance than previously. Indeed, they may be fulfilling many of the former roles of a headteacher, particularly if their head is committed to providing support to other schools or is heavily involved in partnership work. Senior leaders will be expected to exhibit competencies and behaviours similar to those of a headteacher.

The senior leader role needs to be about the strategy and direction as well as day-to-day management. They need to know how to lead and manage people, processes, information, communication, finance and resources. They need to develop efficient and effective systems for monitoring, evaluation and review of performance. They need to manage governance and perhaps most importantly they need to develop themselves and others.

They need to model the behaviours they would like to see in others, for example, passion, commitment and optimism. They should be:

- able to communicate effectively with a range of different people
- good listeners – taking an interest in others' needs
- consistent, fair, honest and transparent
- available to give quality time to people, being approachable
- calm but determined, demonstrating tenacity when necessary
- able to empathise with others, showing sensitivity, care and warmth

Above all, leaders should be totally committed to securing the best educational experiences for their pupils.

A senior leader's role in partnership working will draw on all of these skills and capabilities, but with the added dimension of working in an environment where they may not necessarily have any line management responsibility, particularly for partners from other schools, other agencies or parents and community.

This module will help you to consider your role in relation to the different partnerships in which your school may be involved now or in the future.

What can we learn from others?

Leaders in children's centres have been working in partnership with their community since the first one opened in 2004. Leading a children's centre is an inherently complex and difficult task, given the breadth of the remit and the need to work effectively with partners in other services to improve outcomes for children and families. These leaders are often operating in and through partnerships over which they have no control or line management responsibility. This makes relationship-building crucial if they are to meet the needs of their local community and hit targets.

In a research report by Sharp et al for the National College, (2012:9), 'Highly Effective Leadership in Children's Centres', the researchers report that:

The most effective centre leaders are change managers. They see change as an opportunity to be pro-active and solutions-focused, taking the opportunity to reshape today's world to create solutions for tomorrow. They also have a high degree of emotional intelligence, demonstrated through resilience, optimism, motivation, intuition and the ability to form strong relationships and work in partnership to make a difference for children and families.

The report goes on to identify eight core behaviours displayed by effective children's centre leaders. These are:

1. having a clear vision to improve outcomes for children and families
2. engaging responsively with families
3. using evidence to drive improvements in outcomes
4. using business skills strategically
5. facilitating open communication
6. embracing integrated working
7. motivating and empowering staff
8. being committed to their own learning and development

While the children's centre sector is relatively new compared to the long history of schools, there are some important lessons that can be learnt from them on partnership working. Leaders of children's centres, because of the nature of the work, have to be more outward facing than school leaders have been historically.

This then raises a key question for schools and for you, as a senior leader in the school system. How important is it for schools to become more outward facing and what role can I play, as a senior leader, in developing this?

As the National College reflected in its seminar report (2012):

Currently the system is short on confidence, and leaders are still inclined to be compliant.... The actual direction of travel will depend on whether the bold or the fearful prevail; the choice will be ours because the future is in our hands.

National College, 2012:11

Questions

As you embark on this module you might find it useful to consider the following questions:

- How do you, as a senior leader, live your vision in your daily relationships with pupils, parents, staff and other partners? How do you ensure that the school's vision is shared by all staff? How do you develop a shared vision with a wider range of partners?
- How does your school respond to the changing needs of the pupils and families you serve? How do you ensure that the views of pupils and parents influence school policy and practice?
- How do you ensure a relentless drive for improvement, based on a systematic and strategic use of data to support decision making? How do you involve other staff and the governing body in this process?
- How do you ensure that budgets and resources are being best used to improve outcomes for pupils? Do you feel able to use entrepreneurial skills to look for innovative and creative solutions through partnership?
- Are you confident that you make best use of your communication skills? Do you engage in active listening so that you fully understand the needs of others? Can you persuade and negotiate effectively?
- Do you fully understand the power of partnership working? Do you champion constructive and inclusive approaches to working with a wide range of partners for the benefit of your school community?

- How do you motivate and empower your staff both collectively and individually? Do you fully understand the power of a collaborative and inclusive leadership style, based on distributed leadership and delegation as a way of raising staff confidence and morale?
- How do you keep abreast of current policy? How do you use theory and research to develop critical practice for yourself and others? Are you able to identify your own strengths and areas for further development? How do you elicit constructive feedback on your own performance?

This module will lead you through a wide range of activities and reading which should challenge your current practice and understanding of working in partnership and support you in considering how to develop further your role as a senior leader.

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