

Creating a self-improving school system

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Resource

"The crisis of the world is, above all, an institutional crisis demanding institutional innovation" (Peter Drucker)

"The future is already here: it is just not distributed very well"
(William Gibson)

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Executive summary

In an era of diminishing centralisation, accelerating the rate and depth of school improvement and reducing the number of underperforming schools requires a new vision.

Since the birth of school improvement in the 1980s, the quality of school leadership has increased sharply and most schools have gained experience of working in partnerships and networks of many kinds. Increased decentralisation offers an opportunity for the school system to build on these and become self-improving.

There are four building blocks of a self-improving system: clusters of schools (the structure); the local solutions approach and co-construction (the two cultural elements); and system leaders (the key people). These are already partially in place but need to be strengthened so that schools collaborate in more effective forms of professional development and school improvement.

This thinkpiece explores the conditions necessary to achieve a sustainable, self-improving school system, with a particular focus on the development of school clusters and the associated provision of cluster leaders. A sketch of how such a system might evolve over the next five years is offered.

Introduction

On 18 October 1976, the UK's Labour prime minister James Callaghan gave a speech in Ruskin College, Oxford that started what became known as the Great Education Debate. At this time it was very unusual for a prime minister to discuss education policy in public. In his near-apologetic approach to the subject, Callaghan argued that education was now too important to be left almost entirely to the teaching profession and that many voices, including that of a prime minister, needed to be heard on the purposes of schooling and educational standards. More was being demanded from schools, and core issues, such as the desirability of a national curriculum and a stronger inspectorate, should be addressed.

Up to this point, England had a highly decentralised education system. The Ruskin speech marked the beginning of a new phase, which eventually led, under the Conservatives, to the 1988 Education Reform Act that introduced a national curriculum and a new assessment system. This was an unprecedented degree of centralisation but it was matched by a degree of decentralisation that delegated new financial powers to schools, and to their headteachers, the spirit of which was neatly captured in Caldwell and Spinks's *The self-managing school*, also published in 1988.

Significantly, this second half of the 1980s gave birth to the school improvement movement, which was driven both centrally by a more hands-on education department and some local education authorities as well as by more enterprising headteachers. Successive governments, both Conservative and Labour, have for over 20 years pursued this combination – uneasy to some – of centralisation in some respects and decentralisation in others. The constant challenge has been to minimise variation, not just within and between schools but also between local authorities, which has led central government to take ever greater powers of intervention, backed by national field forces and strategies. School improvement has thus come to be defined in terms of the processes of intervention in schools that are deemed, by whatever measure, to be underperforming. Much has been achieved, yet it has to be conceded that not all schools have improved substantially or even sufficiently over this last quarter century.

Should we persist with these same strategies for school improvement or is it time for a new vision? Two important changes have occurred that suggest the need for a new direction. First, the calibre of school leadership has improved, in many places to a dramatic degree, reflecting the National College's central task of ensuring the provision of leaders with relevant capabilities. Schools are more accustomed to managing their own financial affairs and many have developed sophisticated continuing professional development (CPD) for their staff. Second, virtually every school has experience of partnership with other schools, and the education service is now more networked. School leaders are more aware of schools as a system, and the coalition government's plans are evidently intended to change the shape of this system. A new balance is being struck between centralisation and decentralisation, with a clear reduction in centralised action, at both national and local levels, and a matching increase in the powers and responsibilities of schools.

In this thinkpiece, I argue that increased decentralisation provides an opportunity for a new vision of school improvement that capitalises on the gains made in school leadership and in partnerships between schools. It would usher in a new era in which the school system becomes the major agent of its own improvement and does so at a rate and to a depth that has hitherto been no more than an aspiration. It is essential that such a change would enhance parental confidence in the quality of schools and the effectiveness of teachers, on both of which better educational outcomes depend. This short thinkpiece suggests what could be done to realise such a vision. It is not a detailed policy prescription, but a sketch of the main lines of action that would need to be taken.

School improvement depends on improved leadership, but the necessary scale, speed and sustainability of leadership development cannot be achieved by centralised action alone. In the College's innovative local solutions approach to the shortage of headteachers, succession planning takes place across networks of schools (in the local authority or the diocese) in ways that are responsive to local circumstances.

A similar approach is being adopted elsewhere by the College to increase the provision of middle leaders through local clusters of schools as well as in City Challenge. In this sense, the College is acknowledging changes in the system and then developing them further in the interests of better leadership provision.

Scaling up such local solutions necessarily entails new ways of deploying the headteachers of successful schools, who accept responsibilities beyond the boundaries of their own schools and are prepared to help other schools. The College's action with such headteachers – in the form of national leaders of education (NLEs) and local leaders of education (LLEs) – runs parallel with the emergence of larger groups of schools in forms such as federations and chains (Hill, 2010), in addition to clusters of schools serving a wide variety of functions, all of which is altering the shape of the school system.

The College's work on the provision of school leaders has thus evolved from centralised provision to the point where the goal is making leadership development a largely self-generating enterprise, grounded in networks of schools. So can the changed strategy of leadership development become the basis for a largely self-improving system? Is it possible to move from a centralised model of driving every individual school to improve itself to a process of systemic self-improvement that matches the new model of leadership development? Indeed, do changes in leadership development and school improvement necessarily have to be aligned?

In addressing these issues, this thinkpiece poses five linked questions to frame the argument:

1. What would a self-improving school system look like and what would be its defining features?
2. In what ways would a self-improving system be an advance on our current system?
3. What would be the system's building blocks and to what extent is that architecture already in place?

4. How might the system move from where it is now to becoming a self-improving system? Do the College's current achievements (including those noted above) contribute to such a system? What additional action might be needed?
5. What would make a fully-fledged self-improving system robust and self-sustaining?

The language around the concept of a self-improving system of schools (henceforward a SISS) is confusing. Associated terms, such as a self-managing system or self-developing system, are used interchangeably despite variable connotations of the terms. At its core, the notion of a SISS assumes that much (not all) of the responsibility for school improvement is moved from both central and local government and their agencies to the schools. An obvious forerunner in England is local management of schools (LMS), the delegation of financial responsibilities to schools in the 1980s, which is generally regarded as a world-leading success story. However, a SISS is not merely the sum total of self-improving schools. The system element in a SISS consists of clusters of schools accepting responsibility for self-improvement for the cluster as a whole. A SISS embodies a collective responsibility in a way that neither school improvement nor LMS has ever done. In effect this involves the creation of a new intermediary body between the individual school and the local authorities, which are usually seen as the middle tier between central government and the individual school.

The architecture of a SISS rests on four main building blocks:

- capitalising on the benefits of clusters of schools
- adopting a local solutions approach
- stimulating co-construction between schools
- expanding the concept of system leadership

Family virtues

The idea of schools working collaboratively has a long history, but recently this has become more commonplace as a result of government initiatives (eg, leadership incentive grants), the needs of students (eg, post-16 provision, small A-level options), the attractions of formal association (eg, federations, trusts), the outcome of critical Ofsted reports (eg, NLEs), as well as projects aimed directly at fostering inter-school collaboration (eg, the College's networked learning communities (National College, 2006a), some of which continue to this day). So few schools lack experience of partnership, though the character and quality vary considerably, from a relatively shallow, short-term relationship affecting limited functions and few people (a loose partnership) to a deep, enduring relationship that affects most functions and most people in the schools (a tight partnership). Very few groups of schools are at the tight extreme, with common governance and a collective strategy.

Various names are used for these partnerships: the most common are cluster, network, chain and family. Agreement on what might be a generic term is lacking, so for the purposes of this thinkpiece I shall use the term family cluster, because of its organic associations and implications. The name has been used within City Challenge to identify schools with statistically similar intakes in terms of various contextual variables, including prior attainment. Each school can then examine how it compares with others in the family – to a maximum family size of 22 schools – in relation to student attainment and rate of progress. A member of staff from each school in the family joins a meeting once or twice a term with others to share ideas and materials as well as encourage mutual visiting. The aim is to share good practice and in particular help low-achieving schools to improve their performance. In terms of the continuum mentioned above, many of these partnerships are loose, though some are developing into tighter ones.

I use the term *family cluster* in a stronger sense to indicate an organic and sustainable relationship of a relatively small number of schools, between 3 and 12 per cluster. Considerable benefits potentially accrue to family clusters, which:

- **find it easier to meet the needs of every student** since the range of provision, including curricular and 14-19 provision, is much greater than that of a single school, and students can easily be moved within the family
- **deal more effectively with special education needs**, especially when a special school is a family member and professional expertise in particular aspects of such needs is shared between schools
- **find it easier to meet the needs of every staff member** since staff can job-rotate or be offered fresh opportunities between schools without changing jobs, and school-based professional development, enriched by the resources of several schools, replaces out-of-school courses
- **support new leaders** since the existing headteachers and leaders in the family cluster are at hand to support the newcomer
- **build leadership capacity and boost succession planning** since staff are interchangeable within the family of schools
- **protect their members**, for while even the most successful schools are, like businesses (Collins, 2009) vulnerable to crisis and failure, if this happens to a school in a strong or tight family cluster, other members get an early warning – earlier than Ofsted – and intervene with immediate support without provoking defensive resistance
- **distribute innovation** by sharing the costs, in time and resources, of new developments, and by working with other partners, such as business and further education
- **transfer professional knowledge more readily** through joint professional development and the ease of mentoring and coaching

- **aid the integration of children’s services** because external agencies find it more efficient to work with a family cluster than with separate schools
- **become more efficient in the use of resources** because schools share both material resources, (eg expensive technology or sports facilities) and human resources (eg, business and financial services), especially in primary schools

Many of the College’s NLEs and LLEs have discovered these benefits, sometimes as an unexpected effect of emergency action, where a family relationship originates in a crisis and an NLE assumes a role of responsibility for a school in difficulties. However, these are *potential* benefits. To my knowledge, no family cluster, even a tight one such as a federation, has yet reaped all these benefits in full. The best clusters have partially secured some of them, but full benefits await cluster maturity.

Several schemes¹ have demonstrated that pairing a high-performing school with a weaker one acts as a positive force for improvement. One unanticipated consequence is that the high-performing school actively gains from the pairing. There is, of course, a cost involved, but this is offset by the boost to morale and the professional skills of the lead school’s staff that arise from the help they offer to schools in difficulties. In the event, both schools improve. System-motivated altruism pays rich dividends.

The more family-like the cluster arrangement, I suggest, the greater the chance that more of the benefits will be realised and the more likely it is that all member schools will improve. Cluster arrangements do not preclude competition between members, but combine it with co-operation. This is often the case with business firms: ‘Co-operation is ceasing to be the opposite of competition and is becoming, instead, one of its preferred instruments’ (Deering & Murphy, 2003). The consequential benefits are the means

by which the process of mutual improvement occurs. Family members both challenge one another and support one another, and then celebrate their individual and collective achievements.

There is a powerful next step: *competition between family clusters*. This has yet to develop in our education system, though the phenomenon is well-established in the business world, where such clusters would be called strategic alliances or coalitions. Hamel and Prahalad (1994) highlight one problem in the business world:

“Almost every large company has a spaghetti bowl of alliances, but there is seldom an overall logic to the set of partnerships in that there is no distinctive, underlying point of view about industry future and no conscious attempt to assemble the companies that have complementary skills to turn that conception of the future into reality. Thus, although many companies have a wide variety of partnerships, the individual partnerships are often disconnected, each serving an independent and unrelated purpose. By way of contrast, what we have in mind are multilateral partnerships that possess a clear ‘cumulative logic’.”

Hamel & Prahalad, 1994

This is precisely the problem in many school partnerships too. Many loose clusters are simply too superficial to yield much in the way of family benefits. Tighter clusters in a SISS ensure that the different strands of partnership explicitly share a ‘cumulative logic’, the core purpose of which is the joint improvement of teaching and learning.

¹ Examples are City Challenge, Leading Edge, and the raising achievement transforming learning (RATL) programme of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT).

Hamel and Prahalad also observe that:

“Competition for the future often takes place between coalitions as well as between individual firms... Managing coalitions thus often entails a careful balancing of competitive and cooperative agendas over time. Coalition members must be careful to keep their competitive instincts in check or run the risk of undermining the partnership prematurely.”

Hamel & Prahalad, 1994

Clusters are a critical structural building block of a SISS, but three others are also essential, the first of which is breaking free from a dependency culture in which the solutions to school problems are thought to lie somewhere beyond the schools themselves.

Competition between school clusters similarly drives the mutual improvement within and between clusters to the next level, but it takes skilful leadership to know when to build on collaboration by the introduction of the friendly competition that drives up standards in the interests of collective achievement.

Schools do, of course, form clusters on a voluntary or self-selected basis, without an explicit aim of school improvement. The College's cluster-based middle leadership development programme (MLDP) is a projected alternative to the centralised provision of training for middle leaders that simply cannot cope with the numbers needed annually. In the new model, clusters of schools work together, with trained facilitators, to provide on-the-job professional development, supported by College-provided materials. In parallel, the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) has developed continuing professional development (CPD) clusters, showing how school-focused CPD can be locally provided in families. All such schemes have a beneficial impact beyond their stated goal: in particular, they help to foster and embed a culture of professional learning within *and between* schools, an advance that is critical in moving from a self-improving school to a self-improving system.

The challenge is whether clusters whose origins lie in issues other than improvement can make the transition to inter-school support where the main rationale of partnership becomes the cumulative logic of joint improvement.

The local solutions approach

The College realised that the impending crisis in the supply of headteachers could not be averted by means of a conventional, centralised model of succession planning; and a solution was hampered by the perception that headteacher supply was the College's responsibility and each school had to fend for itself in a competitive market. In reality, the detailed nature of the succession problem, the kinds of organisations necessarily involved, and the particular kinds of action demanded, all varied from place to place. So the College mapped the national landscape for succession planning, provided relevant data and evidence, and set in place the overall strategy and support. The solution, however, was determined and driven locally, tailored to local circumstances and resources. This local solutions approach involves local self-evaluation, local objectives and local action plans. It means that, with College help, problems have to be diagnosed and owned locally, and the commitment and creativity for solutions also generated locally.

The local solutions approach builds the culture of a SISS, because it necessitates the acceptance by schools of three related ways of thinking about their condition and what to do about it.

- Schools take ownership of problems and reject the notion that the school itself can do little or nothing because it is somebody else's responsibility to provide a solution.
- Solutions are seen to be available from within the school system, provided schools work together to diagnose the problems and devise solutions in their mutual interests.
- The school system is not simply an amalgam of isolated schools but a collection of groups of schools that sometimes need to collaborate in order to get better.

The local solutions approach also involves a recognition by central government that the centralised and clumsy one-size-fits-all approach that ignores local contexts is becoming less and less appropriate as the local solutions approach is embedded, and indeed impedes that process. What the College has done is very much in line with new approaches adopted by the new

government in generating system change by supporting local solutions in place of top-down prescription. As Bunt and Harris (2010) put it:

“Government has traditionally found it difficult to support genuine local solutions while achieving national impact and scale... Centrally driven initiatives have struggled to make an impact on many of the complex issues confronting us today.... [This] requires not only action from government, but engagement and local knowledge from citizens. But despite support from across the political spectrum, genuine localism is something governments find difficult to achieve. What makes 'local solutions' effective is their local specificity, and the ability of groups to tailor solutions to local contexts. Local groups are also best placed to encourage community engagement on a social issue, through access to local networks and existing relationships. There is therefore an inherent tension between the factors for successful localism and the impulse to achieve impact nationally... Policymakers need an alternative that combines local action and national scale – an effective approach to 'mass localism'.

Mass localism depends on a different kind of support from government and a different approach to scale. Instead of assuming that the best solutions need to be determined, prescribed, driven or 'authorised' from the centre, policymakers should create more opportunities for communities to develop and deliver their own solutions and to learn from each other. It is not enough to assume that scaling back government bureaucracy and control will allow local innovation to flourish.”

Bunt & Harris, 2010

The work of the College has demonstrated the power of such 'mass localism' in education and how it is an essential ingredient of a SISS.

Co-construction in family clusters

Families of schools working on local solutions, whether it is middle leadership or succession planning, share a common feature: their capacity to stimulate co-construction among the participants. The term *co-construction* has recently come into widespread use to refer to the way the partners agree on the nature of the task, set priorities, co-design action plans, and then treat their implementation as a co-production. In some schools, co-construction is also well-developed between students and teachers in the co-design of aspects of learning and is associated with the growth of mentoring and coaching among students. Co-construction is the action taken to ensure 'what works' in specific contexts with particular people; it is about adapting and adjusting the practices of teaching and learning to secure the promised outcomes.

Co-construction does more than get results. Through its processes, social capital (trust and reciprocity) within and between schools is built up and then fostered by the extent and depth of mentoring and coaching that is easier to achieve within a family of schools. The enriched social capital generated by these organic relationships enables the member schools' intellectual capital (knowledge and skill, core competences) to be exploited more fully. Schools that offer deep support to other schools, such as staff in national support schools working with their NLE headteacher, repeatedly insist that they too have gained from the partnership. The activities of co-construction lead to the co-evolution of the schools as effective organisations.

Family clusters provide the basic units of a SISS; the local solutions approach combined with co-construction provides its collaborative culture. The complexities of school systems mean that many of the family benefits arising from schemes of school improvement and professional development are being secured as a by-product of action with a more limited aim. It is opportune to consolidate what began as separate developments in a way that reaps the benefits of clusters. But for this to amount to a SISS, its fourth building block is critical.

Expanding system leadership

In education, the term *system leader*, originally introduced by Michael Fullan (2005) has now attracted various definitions. They have in common three core features, all of which reflect a deep moral purpose:

- a value: a conviction that leaders should strive for the success of all schools and their students, not just their own
- a disposition to action: a commitment to work with other schools to help them to become successful
- a frame of reference: understanding one's role (as a person or institution) as a servant leader for the greater benefit of the education service as a whole

The term is already expanding, despite being so new and relatively little known or understood. Originally the term was most often applied to headteachers ready to work with other schools in difficulties – thus NLEs and LLEs. It is now applied more generally to heads working to support schools other than their own and to school improvement partners (SIPs). The College's role in the development and provision of system leaders in England has been substantial (National College, 2006b; Carter & Sharpe, 2006; Coleman, 2008).

Recent and rapid changes in leadership development, including the College's projects on succession planning and middle leadership, indicate that the numbers of system leaders at headteacher level need to be increased and an understanding of system leadership needs to be extended to staff at every level. We need also to go beyond the need for some very good schools to intervene in failing schools to a position where good schools can learn with and from one another so that they become great schools. Happily, the evidence is that many headteachers are interested in some kind of system leader role; most teachers on leadership courses now want to take a big-picture or systemic view of schooling, not merely a narrow preparation for a particular role; and most do, or want to, spend time in schools other than their own.

All the projects linked to clusters entail forms of distributed leadership. Because professional work in clusters necessitates a system view and the three core features of system leadership noted above, it should be recognised as *system leadership now being distributed to all levels*. Teachers are, from early in their professional development, being progressively inducted into the knowledge and skills that will be required of system leaders at the higher levels. Individual professional development and organisational development are becoming inextricably interwoven. Teaching and leading go hand in hand and acting on this helps to build leadership capacity within and between schools in the family. Unless the ideas and implications for action of system leadership are widely diffused, the teaching profession and its leaders will not take collective responsibility both for the success of all schools in the system and for ensuring the development of system leaders.

In short, the College's work on succession planning and middle leaders has, along with parallel developments elsewhere in the education service, created new structures and cultures that are leading many teachers, and especially senior school leaders, to adopt a systemic perspective on their work and a commitment to system improvement. In the best current practice, students too are adopting a system view by offering support to students in schools other than their own. The leadership building blocks for a SISS are already being put in place.

Beyond the self-managing school

For the last quarter of the 20th century, a major task for school leaders in England was the development of the *self-managing school*, and in this England has led the way internationally. As schools became more self-managing over some two decades, they were enabled to become more self-improving – when they were well led. Today's system leaders are a direct product of successful leadership of self-managing schools. A major task for school leaders in the first quarter of the 21st century may be the development of the *self-managing school system*. Achieving this status is likely to be a precondition of becoming a *self-improving system*.

Central to the success of such a mission would be an increased *capacity* of schools to improve themselves. For many years, the process of school improvement was led, even determined, by central and local government intervention, because most schools had not reached the level of self-management to be able to move to self-improvement. Today's outstanding school leaders, who masterminded the powerful co-evolution of self-management and self-improvement, have often become NLEs or LLEs helping other schools *at the same time as* becoming the entrepreneurial leaders of established, longer-term family clusters of schools, which is a new organisational form.

A SISS depends on the creation of family clusters, but ones of the right kind will not emerge unless they are led, initially at least, by the headteachers of highly successful schools willing to be system leaders. What more, then, needs to be done, by the College and by other agencies, to pave the way for a self-managing and self-improving school system and to effect the transition from where we are now to a robust and sustainable SISS?

Conditions of a sustainable self-improving system

To create a sustainable SISS, three key questions need to be answered.

- **What sorts of family clusters are needed in a SISS and what action is needed to create them to scale?**

Many of the clusters in National College schemes are not newly formed, but based on existing clusters, such as SCITT and EBITT (school-centred and employment-based initial teacher training respectively) clusters, as well as federations and trusts. Collaborative clusters have over the years taken many forms: some senior staff retain fond memories of TVEI collaboration in the 1980s.

What types of family cluster are likely to populate a SISS? The most common, I suspect, will be a *homogeneous family cluster*, either from the same phase (eg, a cluster of primary schools) or same faith (eg, a group of Catholic schools). Most current ones are of this type.

There are also *heterogeneous family clusters*, for example comprising one secondary school with its feeder primaries, and perhaps a special school. These are particularly suitable for rural areas, where the single secondary school's intake comes mainly from local primary schools.

Mixed family clusters are a third type, for instance when a cluster of maintained sector schools includes just one faith school or an independent school, or when schools of different faiths, such as Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools, form a mixed-faith family.

Some existing federations, of either schools or academies, were formed with a business, charity or academic sponsor. In the case of what are popularly called hard federations, where the governing bodies of more than one school amalgamate, the ties could be difficult to dissolve. Some family clusters created by NLEs started, as it were, as an equivalent to a merger or acquisition in the business world. I suspect that most family clusters in a SISS will be brokered and essentially voluntary relationships, with a more flexible, less permanent tie than that of the hard federation or trust. In terms of the loose-tight continuum of partnership I proposed

above, few schools will opt for either extreme position – the near-permanent tie of federations or trusts at the tight end and the shallow commitments at the loose end – preferring the flexibility and moderate constraints of more central positions.

Most clusters will be geographically local, since two key features of close collaboration are ease of face-to-face contact and mobility of staff and students. Some existing clusters have members some distance apart, even in different local authorities, which have boundaries that are often arbitrary. Distant family clusters might later dissolve, with each member starting a new local cluster. Whilst local clusters will probably become the dominant type, some of which will span local authority boundaries, other types, for instance not-so-local clusters of faith schools, may thrive.

Some headteachers, and even more governing bodies, are wary or even sceptical about families of schools. Indeed, some governors find it difficult to think beyond the individual school that they may have loyally served over many years, and so are more resistant to new partnerships than their own headteacher. Much the same may be said of parents, only a small minority of whom have experience of a family cluster. But clusters cannot be imposed on unwilling schools: that would undermine a SISS. It would be essential to harness the support of headteachers, governors and parents by making them more aware of the many benefits of family clusters. Some start-up additional funding might be a necessary incentive until the benefits, including cost-saving ones, are recognised. Schools in mature family clusters happily pay into the cluster as a recognised investment (Hill, 2010).

Not all clusters would be newly formed: many already exist under a variety of names reflecting different purposes and origins, including some recent ones, such as national challenge trust schools and federations, and accredited school groups or providers. New clusters may well arise from policies adopted by the new government. Some outstanding primary schools will be reluctant to lose the support their local authority offers by becoming a lone academy, but might choose to become one within a self-managing family cluster with shared administrative support. This would reduce back-office costs and minimise the burden on individual headteachers. As they work with underachieving schools, a family of academies would become self-improving.

Some rationalisation of clusters could forestall unnecessary overlap and undesirable bureaucracy. It is possible to start with small clusters of three or four schools that could, with experience, expand into larger families.

For the system to become self-improving, it is not necessary for every school to join a cluster. Freestanding schools can, as now, be self-evaluating and self-improving units. Indeed, this is how many schools have achieved outstanding status. There may be good reasons why a school should not join a cluster and could continue as at present either within a local authority or as an academy, free school or trust. A balance would need to be struck between offering incentives to schools to join clusters and acknowledging that this would not always be the right way for some schools.

Were many, even most, schools to join family clusters, this would herald changes for local authorities and their relationships with schools. As schools became self-managing, they became less reliant on the local authority: the transition was not always easy. As schools become self-improving, the transition will again be one that local authorities must decide to support or resist. Hitherto, the local authority has been the middle tier between central government and the individual school, but clusters are now an emergent kind of middle tier. Some local authorities have been active in the promotion of clusters: they are well-placed to phase out their own school improvement arm and transfer self-improvement responsibility and activity to family clusters. In a SISS, the local authority would work

with the College to broker clusters, then support and monitor their self-improvement, in place of direct provision for school improvement.

- **Will there be enough system leaders to take to scale the number of clusters to make effective family clusters sustainable?**

NLEs, concludes a recent review (Hill & Matthews, 2010), are in the vanguard of transforming England's education system, and:

“the successful recruitment, deployment and expansion of a cadre of schools capable of sharing their excellence with other schools and, where necessary, taking over and rescuing failing institutions, introduces a powerful lever for change into the school system. By showing that they can bring about change in the most intractably underperforming or challenging schools, NLEs have demonstrated their capacity as agents of change. They and their schools relish such work; their governors are persuaded of the mutual benefits; and tens of thousands of children and young people are getting a better deal as a result.”

Hill & Matthews, 2010:116

Capturing the knowledge and skills of these exceptional pioneers of system leadership and transferring it to leaders who follow in the wake of the trailblazers is now the task of the College.

The leaders of outstanding schools fall into two categories: those who want to be or have become system leaders working with other schools, and those with little interest in system leadership. Among the latter are those who have simply not been given or have not availed themselves of opportunities for system leadership and those who may fear that a close partnership with other schools will jeopardise their achievements and reputation. The task is to persuade many of this group to join the former group, as could happen in the new government's policy that outstanding schools may become academies on the condition that they work with at least one other school.

The skills of leading a successful school and the skills of helping another school to become equally successful are not, however, coterminous. This was the mistake made with Beacon schools, introduced in 1998. Some schools knew how to make effective partnerships with other schools, and improved their skills in so doing. But others did not. It takes talent to be a successful head, of course, but that talent is not enough for the highest forms of system leadership. (As some headteachers in their second headship know to their cost, having run one school successfully does not in itself guarantee one can replicate this in a different school.) For a school to achieve an Ofsted grade of 'good' or 'outstanding', the headteacher must be expert at what in the business world would be called the *core competences*² that underpin success. In schooling, the most critical core competences are:

- the relentless focus on learning and teaching, and the conviction that the best teaching and learning yield high examination and test results and rounded persons with the right qualities for a successful life in the 21st century
- ensuring order, attendance and good behaviour as a precondition of improvement in learning and teaching

Knowing how to lead a high-performing school is a necessary but not always a sufficient condition of knowing how to help another school to succeed. NLEs and LLEs and similar cluster leaders are successful in what they do because they possess some additional competences. In the business world, the similar notion of alliance capabilities and how to develop them has been well-researched³, but its equivalent in the education field is at a much lower level. The ability to forge partnerships with other schools is not yet one of the core competences of highly successful schools. Creating a SISS entails ensuring that what one might call *partnership competence* becomes a core competence of all headteachers.

² Hamel & Prahalad (1994) define a core competence as 'a bundle of skills and technologies that enables a company to provide a particular benefit to customers.'

³ Robert Spekman & Lynn Isabella, 2000, *Alliance Competence*, John Wiley; James Austin, 2000, *The Collaboration Challenge*, Jossey-Bass; Deering & Murphy, *op.cit*; Koen Heimericks, 2008, *Developing Alliance Capabilities*, Palgrave Macmillan, where alliance capability is defined as an organisation's 'ability to capture, share, disseminate, internalise and apply alliance management know-how and know-why.'

In the business world some partnerships work and others fail, and it will be much the same with schools. Recent research suggests three core features of inter-firm partnership competence:

- **co-ordination:** building consensus on partnership goals, ways of working, roles and responsibilities
- **communication:** being open and honest, sharing information fully and with accuracy and in a timely way
- **bonding:** creating trust and ensuring that people get pleasure from working together

The distinctive constituents of partnership competence in education are becoming clear. Among them I would include:

- the conception of the school as a learning community, with the expansion of school-based CPD to embrace mentoring and coaching, teachers' observations of one another at work and the co-construction of better professional practice
- the investment in innovation in teaching and learning ('doing things differently in order to do them better'), arising from CPD that is school-based and classroom-focused, with 'learning as the bridge between working and innovating' (Brown & Duguid, 1991) so that improvement becomes an inherent part of teacher professionalism
- distributed leadership, with an emphasis on preparing leaders at every level, including pupils, by identifying talent and empowering the taking of responsibility and initiative

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- the recognition that working with another school is a reciprocal process, because there is *always* something to be learned both from and with others
 - local knowledge and the ability to adapt whatever arises, from necessity or preference, to the immediate context, with its distinctive history and culture

The first three are prerequisites for the whole staff of the lead school, not just the headteacher, to engage professionally with the whole staff of a partner school; the fourth removes the suspicion by staff in the partner school that they are being treated as inferiors without any worthwhile qualities and something is being done *to* them, not *with* them; and the last is the sensitivity to context, including the personalities and cultures in partner schools, to support making the right decisions in the right way at the right time.

System leaders build such competences into their own school, so they are well-placed to transfer them to a less successful one. It is never just a matter of what the headteacher does. It is because the rest of the staff, some of whom may have more experience and insight than their headteacher into the art of working laterally rather than vertically, are also able to transfer their values and ways of working – their shared partnership competence – to another school in their cluster. A precondition of being able to transfer professional knowledge and skills into another school is the honed experience of so doing in one's own school. This is precisely what distributed system leadership means in practice. The exemplary school has to replicate its culture, not just some of its practices, in the less successful one if the relationship is to be transformative on a sustainable basis.

Drawing on the business literature as well as directly from school partnerships, Robert Hill (2008; 2004) has provided a high-quality guide for school leaders. Key lessons include:

- ensuring that collaboration fits with the objectives of all the partners so that everyone involved wants to make the partnership work

- spending time understanding the culture and working methods of partners and using differences as a spur to learning rather than conflict
- having open communication between partners, covering performance data and, as they arise, differences and changing circumstances
- developing strong links between organisations at all levels so that partnership is supported by a dense web of interpersonal connections
- spending as much time on building up commitment to collaborative activity within an organisation as on building relationships with partners
- using interim or input measures to assess a partnership's early progress before the full value of a partnership comes through
- agreeing a clear status and remit and decision processes for the collaboration

It is system leaders with partnership competence who should take the lead in family clusters. Without them, teachers may busily share good practice, that is, talk about what they do, but without any significant change in their practice. As Michael Huberman (1995) puts it, 'There is a "discussion culture" among teachers... interspersed with timid attempts at the level of actual implementation... To get from a peer discussion to its enactment in one's classroom is a phenomenal leap.' What we are after is knowledge transfer, by which I mean that a teacher successfully puts into practice something new that has been learned from another teacher.

This is not a simple, straightforward business⁴, but conditions that facilitate it obtain in schools that distribute system leadership and work in a cluster. Huberman's model for effective knowledge transfer, which he calls the 'open collective cycle', is based on two premises: the group of teachers shares the same subject or discipline but its members come from different schools; the cycle of professional development is managed by this group, not a consultant. Family clusters are the ideal location for Huberman's approach.

It will take some time to generate a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of partnership competence within clusters of schools. In the interim, school leaders can profit from experience in the business sector⁵, where there is extensive advice on the selection of partners and making the partnership effective. One notion education could usefully borrow from business comes from Hamel and Prahalad (1994). In their study of business coalitions, they talk about a *nodal company* at the centre of the network or coalition with a large share of influence within it:

"Nodal firms must accept that all coalition partners may not have the same level of commitment to the concept. Partners exhibit a wide variety of interests and varying levels of commitment... Nodal firms need to have this perspective and understanding in order to manage each partner appropriately... Influence within the coalition comes from an ability to recognize and then exploit, or redirect and frustrate, the differing agendas and concepts of self-interest possessed by the various partners... Any one company's capacity to motivate, direct and manage the coalition derives not from legal control and unilateral dependency, but from political skills, possession of critical competences, a clearly articulated and inspiring point of view about the future, and a track record of honouring commitments to partners."

Hamel & Prahalad, 1994

⁴ Mark Ackerman, Volmar Pipek & Volker Wulf, 2003, *Sharing Expertise*, MIT Press; Gabriel Szulanski, 2003, *Sticky Knowledge*, Sage; Paul Hildreth & Chris Kimble, 2004, *Knowledge Networks*, Idea Group Publishing.

⁵ See footnote 3 above.

⁶ By May 2010 the College had recruited, designated and deployed 431 NLEs and 825 LLEs. At the same time there are 5,000 accredited SIPs and 600 professional partners (experienced headteachers who provide structured mentoring and support to newly appointed heads).

Without nodal system leaders at its heart, there is a serious risk that a cluster-based system would merely recycle mediocrity and affirm complacency, or would simply collapse because the headteachers lack partnership competence and/or there is too little pay-off from the partnership. Embedding the ambition, drive and know-how for deep school improvement in clusters is vital for a robust and sustainable SISS. Many clusters contain good schools that have the potential to be outstanding. The Good to Great (G2G) programme in London (Matthews & McLaughlin, 2010) has demonstrated that with the right kind of inter-school support, based on mentoring and coaching, good schools can indeed be raised to the level of outstanding, and that must be one of the purposes of family clusters.

Ideally for a SISS, then, there should be enough nodal system leaders to ensure one per cluster. At this stage, of course, it is impossible to estimate how many clusters of what size might arise over what timescale⁶. The College would need to determine the knowledge, skills and experience appropriate for a nodal system leader and then recruit and prepare them to the desired scale. This is an intellectual and practical challenge for the College, but one of its most urgent tasks. The College should use its current experience of brokering and supporting clusters, including its new approaches to succession planning and middle leadership development as well as the experience gained from City Challenge, to provide written guidance and training on best practice for self-improving clusters.

Is this task easier than it was with the first system leaders? Richard Elmore (2008) argues that once teachers adopt a system perspective, they treat their knowledge and skills not as professional private property, but as a collective good that should be shared with colleagues. He also questions the common view of leaders as people with highly unusual personal attributes who are, almost by definition, in a permanent minority. In place of this 'essentialist' definition of leadership, he argues that what outstanding leaders have is knowledge and skill of particular kinds. When such leaders first emerge, they are indeed unusual, as was the case with NLEs. The imperative task is to separate what they *do* (leadership) from who they *are* (leaders) so that their practices can be captured, codified and taught to others, often through mentoring and coaching. The task, in other words, is to ensure the wider distribution of partnerships competence, of which we now have a better grasp, through an expanded cohort of system leaders. The College and its partners have to prepare system leaders slightly ahead of the pace at which family clusters of schools are formed so that every family can initially be led by a prepared system leader. At the same time, many clusters do not contain members who are in, or close to, special measures, and so the high-level skills of NLEs and LLEs would not always be so critical to self-improving cluster success.

The pool from which system leaders can be recruited and trained is itself being enlarged. New forms of school-based leadership development are a rich breeding ground for future system leaders, such as the facilitators in the College's middle leadership development clusters and those in key roles in the national teaching schools, which have devised ways of:

- engaging in effective school-to-school support at middle leadership level that focuses on building sustainable leadership capacity
- developing expert practitioners able to deliver high-quality coaching and teaching programmes
- providing professional development in leading teaching and learning

- demonstrating leading-edge pedagogy
- exemplifying high-quality assessment for learning
- providing teams of experts (eg, advanced skills teachers) and enquiry and research teams

The extensive professional development of middle leaders and aspirant headteachers in recent years, as well as the College's work on succession planning, is producing a cohort of better prepared, system-orientated leaders at just below headteacher level, some of whom will be ready for more active system leadership in the near future. As elements of system leadership become an inherent part of the training of leaders at levels other than headteacher – middle leaders who have day-to-day responsibility for much inter-school mentoring and coaching, and the facilitator roles in the middle leadership development programme – headteacher leaders of clusters have a higher level of human capital on which to rely. Indeed, in best current practice leadership talent is being spotted and developed in initial teacher training and early years within the profession. It is now possible for the most talented to become an assistant headteacher within three years.

Hitherto much leadership development has been to increase the *organisational capacity* of autonomous schools. All the above demonstrates how the College's most recent focus on system leadership is geared to enhance the *system capacity* on which a self-improving system critically depends. The way forward for the College has two obvious elements:

- scaling up the recruitment and training of system leaders
- bringing together into a more coherent whole its wealth of experience of relevant work at various levels of leadership other than the headteacher, for here lies the essential complementary support that would make self-improving clusters effective

What inevitably began as separate strands of the College's work at different levels, often in different locations, and led by different people, should now be aggregated into a compelling vision of a SISS, with a consolidation of recent projects and a specification of the further work needed to realise the vision.

– **How can the process of self-improvement be assured?**

Although both schools and the inspection system have in recent times increased the importance of school self-evaluation, guidance has mainly been directed to the individual school rather than a family of schools, with the exceptions of a National College publication (NCSL, 2006c) and the TDA's development of a benchmarking tool for effective practice in CPD clusters. At present, many headteachers complain in vain that Ofsted ignores cluster membership, even when it evidently contributes to better teaching and learning. Ofsted should formally assess the quality not only of the individual school, but also of the cluster of which it is a member, including the extent to which the cluster realises the family benefits noted above. Ideally, Ofsted would also report on student performance and progress at the cluster level as well as at individual school level, which would show how family clusters raise the achievement of all students. Clusters need to be accountable for what they do and for their added value.

The most detailed knowledge about what makes an effective family cluster, including how well it manages continuous self-improvement, is likely to come from those who take the lead in brokering and supporting such partnerships, namely the College and the local authority. All three parties of College, local authorities and Ofsted play a role in identifying dysfunctional clusters (for some would undoubtedly come to light) and in shaping remedial action. As knowledge of what makes effective nodal school leaders and self-improving clusters sharpens, and it becomes easier to identify them, there is considerable scope for exemplary clusters to work laterally to support newly-formed clusters and those in difficulties.

Towards a mature self-improving system

Originally the College's task was to ensure the continued supply of school leaders. As the concept of school leaders has broadened and the scale of provision has grown, the College's focus has turned to problem prevention, creating system-based means by which schools and local authorities take ownership of leadership development and devise sustainable ways of identifying, preparing and supporting leaders at many different levels. Leadership development is now conceptualised as a progressive trajectory supported throughout a teaching career. As in turn the teaching profession progressively develops a more sophisticated conception of leadership and its role in school improvement, the building blocks of a self-improving system are put in place, ready for consolidation, expansion and further development.

An explicit intention to move to a SISS over the next five years would be an ambitious but attainable goal, fully in line with Secretary of State Michael Gove's declaration at the College's national conference in June 2010 that 'At the heart of this government's vision for education is a determination to give school leaders more power and control; not just to drive improvement in their own schools, but to drive improvement across our whole education system.'

Key policy decisions to help progress towards a SISS would include:

- confirmation of the College's direction of travel on leadership development, local solutions and school-to-school support
- a requirement that the College strengthen the building blocks of a SISS, especially the provision of system leaders and leaders of family clusters to greater scale, as well as written guidance on best practice for self-improving clusters
- the support for new roles and responsibilities for the key agencies (the College, TDA, local authorities and Ofsted)

What, then, would the landscape of a maturing self-improving school system look like? A short speculation is in order: what could be achieved by 2015?

Over a five-year period, the College recruited, prepared and designated sufficient system leaders for nodal schools and, with the local authorities, sensitively brokered cluster arrangements. Many schools now belong to two clusters:

- a homogeneous family of schools of the same phase/type (primary, secondary, special, faith etc) to ensure improvement of phase-specific matters
- a heterogeneous family of mixed phases/types, the most common of which would be a geographically local mix of primary, secondary and special schools, at the heart of which is a secondary school with its feeder primary schools

In both of each school's clusters, the content and timing of professional development are aligned across member schools so that close collaboration is common. Staff and students move between schools in accordance with needs and opportunities. A few schools are in very tight clusters in the form of federations or chains, with an executive headteacher. At the other extreme, some schools have chosen not to belong to a cluster. Whilst they mainly stand alone, they network with clusters as the need or inclination arises. Most family clusters fall between these extremes. As headteachers change, so do some cluster arrangements. It is the voluntary membership and flexible ties that make the family cluster so attractive and effective.

The NLEs, whose specialist skills of working with failing schools are not needed by most nodal school leaders, continue their work. Where a failing school has not been a member of a cluster, joining one and developing partnership skills is part of the remediation.

The emergent range of patterns is considerable and at first sight looks chaotic when compared with the isolated schools of the old local education authorities with their strict boundaries. This is a natural and inevitable consequence of local solutions: different kinds of cluster are appropriate to different areas, urban versus rural, and to local contexts and cultures. Moreover, some local authorities responded positively to their brokering role, but others did not, especially where clusters straddled local authority boundaries, necessitating intervention from the Department for Education. As in chaos and complexity theory, however, below the surface is a new kind of order in which schools working together in networks have aligned their continuing professional development and their leadership development, and woven these into their school development and improvement plans, both for each school and for other schools in the cluster.

It was quickly realised that the majority of school leaders lacked in-depth experience of working with other schools, and their partnership competence was over-estimated: enthusiasm outpaced skill. Progress in cluster formation and development was accelerated in two ways. First, as the College prepared more leaders of nodal schools, experienced clusters and their leaders at various levels worked laterally with new clusters. Some schools in well-established clusters left their cluster to start a new one. Second, local authorities provided facilitators for cluster development or outsourced the task to those with the necessary expertise – the College’s role being to quality assure and accredit training programmes. Mentoring and coaching has not been a normal part of teacher training, and only with help could many teachers develop the confidence and skills to ensure the transfer of best practice between schools. In the absence of such

support, clusters either failed to collaborate in sufficient depth or simply collapsed. In a few cases, the College had to de-designate a nodal school and its leader.

One example of the impact of the new arrangements on teaching and learning is the provision for middle leaders in primary and secondary schools. Each cluster runs a middle leadership course on a regular basis: every middle leader has, as an entitlement, access to such a course, which builds on work under way in each cluster’s routine professional development. As part of the course, middle leaders engage in development tasks that contribute to the improvement plans of their own school as well to those of the other schools in the cluster. The impact of the course on teaching and learning is a key criterion of course effectiveness. The strongest impact has been on secondary school subject departments of just one or two teachers, where the ability to work with their equivalents in other schools has come as a boon. Middle leaders now grow fast in their understanding of, and contribution to, system leadership.

A second example is the revised implementation of assessment for learning (AfL), an evidence-based approach to enhancing teacher action in classrooms that raises test scores and students’ meta-cognitive skills. The conventional way to induct teachers into AfL was by teacher attendance at a day’s course. Although teachers were strongly attracted to the ideas, in practice they found them simply too difficult to implement. Under the family cluster system, one school took several months to embed AfL through sustained professional development, and then used its expertise to transfer the practice to other schools in the family through mentoring and coaching. What was once a widespread failure has now become a successful model of effective professional development.

At the leading edge of such developments are clusters reaching a high level of maturity: they are reaping in full the benefits of family arrangements. Criteria for cluster effectiveness have been devised and disseminated. More schools are attracted to join clusters as the benefits become better known.

The key metrics for the effectiveness of cluster arrangements are the proportions of schools in difficulties or special measures and those rated outstanding by Ofsted. Clusters have demonstrated their power by the preventative action that has reduced the number falling into difficulties and, where this has happened, by speeding recovery. The number of schools rated outstanding has risen. Most importantly of all, student performance as measured by examination and test results is again rising steadily: the plateau effect of the previous era of school improvement has been overcome in the new era of systemic self-improvement.

Conclusion

It has long been known that the most powerful influences on teachers are other teachers, but policies have rarely built on the fact. The best way of exploiting this phenomenon is through regular, face-to-face encounters among professionals that focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. Under the direction of system leaders, clusters of schools are the simplest way of maximising inter-school professional development as the main driver of a SISS. Once established, a SISS potentially reduces the need for extensive bureaucratic, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context, with out-of-school in-service courses not tailored to individual professional needs, and external, last-ditch interventions to remedy schools in difficulties, all of which are very costly and often only partially successful. In a self-improving school system, more control and responsibility passes to the local level in a spirit of mutual aid between school leaders and their colleagues, who are morally committed to imaginative and sustainable ways of achieving more ambitious and better outcomes. England is part way there. Will it now decide to travel the rest of the journey?

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