



National College for
School Leadership

**Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives**

Schools leading schools: the power and potential of national leaders of education

Executive summary

Attainment in schools is rising, but schools vary significantly in how effective they are.

- In 2006/07, Ofsted assessed only 60 per cent of primary schools and just over 50 per cent of secondary schools in England as grade 2 (good) or grade 1 (outstanding). This leaves a large proportion in which substantial improvement is needed.
- Results for the 2007 Key Stage 2 tests showed that in nearly 1,500 primary schools, fewer than 65 per cent of pupils achieved the expected standard of level 4 in English. In just over 2,000 schools, pupils failed to reach the equivalent level in maths.
- In the 2007 GCSE examinations, 638 secondary schools saw fewer than 30 per cent of their students securing at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including in English and maths.

Every parent wants a good school for their child and every child deserves one. The challenge for politicians and educators is how to ensure that every school is a good school – that is their holy grail. There is no magic solution to this problem. Various initiatives, such as closing a school and giving it a 'Fresh Start' and parachuting in a 'superhead', have had mixed success. Academies are a more recent vehicle the government has used to raise aspirations and challenge the acceptance of failure.

Increasingly, the evidence from both this country and overseas shows that pairing high-performing schools and their leaders with weaker ones can be a significant and positive force for improvement.

- Evaluations of government-sponsored programmes, such as Excellence in Cities, London Challenge and school support federations, show that focusing on improving five factors is at the heart of effective school-to-school improvement: behaviour and attitudes; curriculum; teaching and learning; leadership and management; and the school environment.
- School-to-school support usually runs through four phases: a preparatory phase that triggers and sets the scene for support; an initial phase that ensures basic school operating systems (often imported from the stronger school) are in place; a development phase to address underlying weaknesses and build up staff skills; and a final phase in which plans are made for the long-term future of the weaker school.
- The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that system leadership – where headteachers play a role in education beyond their own school – is becoming an increasingly influential force in school improvement.

Acting on this evidence and the advice of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), in autumn 2005 the government formalised the role of excellent school leaders and their schools in driving school improvement by commissioning NCSL to establish a programme of national leaders of education (NLEs) and national support schools (NSSs).

NLEs, supported by key staff in their school, are now a growing and powerful force for improvement in the school system. Their numbers are increasing and the use of them is spreading.

- The first 68 NLEs were identified in October 2006. Those designated were required to be very good or outstanding leaders of schools, and had to show that their school had a good track record of supporting other schools in difficulty.
- A second group of 60 NLEs was designated in July 2007. A third group joined in September 2008 and further designations are due in January 2009. By the beginning of 2009, there will be a total of 200 NLEs.
- The longer-term aim is to establish 500 NLEs by 2012 – 300 in primary schools and 200 in secondary schools – to create a critical mass of system leaders across the country.
- Local authorities commission NLEs to work with schools that need intervention and support to improve. Individual local authorities are responsible for the costs of any intervention involving NLEs and NSSs.

- NCSL provides NLEs with a bursary to cover incidental and set-up costs. NCSL support also offers an induction programme, written guidance, seminars, access to advisors and a network of NLEs and NSSs to provide peer support.
- NCSL assures the quality of the programme by reviewing NLE designation annually and by monitoring local authority and Ofsted reports on the schools that are supported through NLE system leadership.

NCSL has worked closely with local authorities to ensure that NLEs and NSSs are deployed to good effect. In May 2008:

- nearly 9 out of 10 of the NLEs designated in the first two tranches were actively supporting another school or schools
- nearly a third of NLEs were acting as executive heads for another school. Other NLEs were deployed as consultant leaders, associate headteachers or similar non-executive support roles
- NLEs and NSSs were supporting approximately 150 schools, of which some 20 were or had been in special measures. The remainder had received either an Ofsted notice to improve or were a source of concern to their local authority
- 45 per cent of local authorities in England had used an NLE

As we understand more about the potential of school-to-school improvement, and as the need to raise standards becomes more pressing, NCSL is also developing local leaders of education (LLEs). The LLE model builds on the successful role of consultant leaders in London Challenge. LLEs will work in the new City Challenge areas of Greater Manchester, the Black Country and elsewhere to support schools identified through the government's National Challenge.

Partnership initiatives take time to develop and prove their full benefits, but NLEs and NSSs are already demonstrating the value of their support.

- By July 2008, the first group of NLEs had helped 19 schools either out of special measures or in having a notice to improve withdrawn. Reports by Ofsted on schools that are in these categories highlight the powerful role that NLEs and NSSs are increasingly playing in helping inadequate schools to improve.
- Key stage and GCSE examination results in 2008 show a marked improvement in the great majority of schools with which phase 1 NLEs have worked for a year or more.
- Independent evaluation reports commissioned by NCSL over the two years the NLE programme has developed (Matthews 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b)

have found the NLE programme to be effective in selecting, appointing and deploying NLEs, in delivering improvements and in 'pulling a growing number of schools out of Ofsted categories'.

- Improving teaching and learning is the crucial area in which NLEs and NSSs add most value. Independent evaluation highlights the key processes that help to make NLE and NSS support effective, including the principle of providing intensive support in the early stage of the working relationship between the two schools.
- The role of NLEs as system leaders is growing as they lead groups or chains of schools and play a greater part in local and regional school improvement initiatives.
- National support schools themselves benefit from their role and continue to improve, as well as adding value to partner schools.

The introduction of NLEs and NSSs is proving a success but there are challenges for NCSL, school leaders, the government and local authorities to consider if the programme is to realise its full potential. It will be important to:

- secure better buy-in from local authorities by improving the distribution of NLEs across authorities. NCSL is addressing this in current and future rounds of NLE recruitment. In turn, local authorities need to become more open to using NLEs and NSSs to drive school improvement. And the government for its part should clarify the role of the various school-based improvement initiatives it promotes and make sure that they all follow the principles and practice that make school-to-school support effective.
- promote greater commitment among school governors by involving them closely in all stages of an NLE's/NSS's role and in helping to make sure that their school continues to make good progress while supporting other schools
- improve how the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and local authorities work with NLEs and governors so that NSSs have the staff ready and available when they are asked to deploy their expertise, while being sure that the cost of investing in this upfront will be covered either by commissions from the local authority to support other schools, or by some other arrangement
- consider the merits of NLEs only working with schools with a similar age-group of pupils, and establish whether there are circumstances in which it makes sense for NLEs or NSSs to support schools on a cross-phase or cross-sector basis
- ensure that, as some NLEs take on more system leadership responsibilities, a strong link between an NLE and an NSS is maintained. This is important partly because of the added strengths and resources a support school brings but also because leading a high-quality, high-performing school brings authenticity to the NLE in their school-to-school improvement role

- ask the School Teachers Pay Review Body (STPRB) to examine and report on how to develop fair and consistent remuneration criteria as NLEs become an established feature of the school system
- review the exercise of quality assurance as the NLE/NSS programme expands over the next few years

Too many government and public sector programmes start strongly but then fade or are allowed to wither. NLEs and NSSs are not cure-alls for dealing with underperforming schools, but the evidence shows that they are making a strong contribution to school improvement. School leaders, policymakers and politicians should continue to make sure that NLEs and NSSs are sustained and maintained in the years to come.