

## Chapter 9

### **Approaches to system leadership: lessons learned and policy pointers**

*by*

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*The purpose of this concluding chapter is to provide a first international comparison and assessment of the state of the art of system leadership in OECD countries. The chapter summarises what the research is saying about system leadership, and examines the actual practices in which school leaders are collaborating and working together with other schools in five different countries. The analysis reveals the benefits: leadership capacity building, rationalisation of resources, improved co-operation, a greater distribution of leadership within schools and improving school outcomes. It also presents the challenges to sustainability of system leadership: the difficulty of marrying co-operation and competition; the need to recognise and support distributed leadership within the school; the need to identify, recruit, develop and reward system leaders; and the need to find the right institutional support for the practice. The authors propose that eventually, the collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience will create richer and more sustainable opportunities for school transformation than can be provided by isolated institutions. But attaining this future demands that we give school leaders more possibilities in taking the lead.*

## 9.1 Introduction

System leadership is a new and emerging practice that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete national networks or programmes. When taken together they have the potential to contribute to system transformation. Because this is an emerging practice, there has been little attempt to date to document how system leadership is being enacted. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to provide a first international comparison and assessment of the state of the art of systemic leadership in OECD countries.

The chapter first summarises what the research and the specialists are saying about system leadership, then continues by examining the actual practices in which school leaders are collaborating and working together with other schools in five different countries. It then analyses the perceived benefits and the potential challenges, and ends with a summary of the key issues and recommendations of the implications of this system leadership role for policy makers and stakeholders.

## 9.2 System leadership: A new role for school leaders?

There has been little attempt to date to document how system leadership is being enacted. This section of the chapter elaborates the concept of system leadership and illustrates its potential power as a catalyst for systemic reform in two ways:

- providing an initial conceptualisation of system leadership based on the contemporary literature;
- building on the papers by Richard Elmore (“Leadership as the Practice of Improvement”) and David Hopkins (“Realising the Potential of System Leadership”) included as Chapters 2 and 3 of this book by giving a broader perspective on their work.

The concept of system leadership has recently caught the educational imagination. Take for example this quotation from a leading educational commentator whose work has a global reach:

*“... a new kind of leadership is necessary to break through the status quo. Systematic forces, sometimes called inertia, have the upper hand in preventing system shifts. Therefore, it will take powerful, proactive forces to change the existing system (to change context). This can be done directly and indirectly through systems thinking in action. These new theoreticians are leaders who work intensely in their own schools, or national agencies, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organisations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders within similar characteristics.”(Fullan, 2004)*

This quotation contains three implicit assumptions. The first is that if we are ever to achieve sustainable education change it must be led by those close to the school; the second is that this must have a systemic focus; and the third is that “system leadership” is an emerging practice. As a concept it has a rich theoretical and research context. The conceptual concerns of system theory for relationships, structures and interdependencies (Katz and Kahn, 1976; Senge, 1990; Campbell *et al.*, 1994) underpin the contemporary

work of system leaders in practice. The key insight here has been well summarised by Kofman and Senge, (1993:27) when they state that the “... defining characteristic of a system is that it cannot be understood as a function of its isolated components. ... the system doesn’t depend on what each part is doing but on how each part is interacting with the rest”.

This leads to the realisation that to maximise the value of system leadership one needs to view it within the context of a learning organisation. This in turn requires the assiduous development of the range of skills to transform not only the organisation but also the system as a whole.

An important perspective on this skill set, as seen in the chapter by Hopkins, is offered by Heifetz (1994) through the concept of “adaptive leadership”. His argument is that leaders increasingly require skills that move beyond traditional management solutions for technical problems to provide adaptive responses to challenges “without easy answers”. Technical problems, such as how to teach numeracy, and their solutions will of course remain vital. But system leaders will also need to work adaptively to lead people and organisations beyond restrictive boundaries, perceived wisdoms and entrenched cultures where they exist as obstacles to improvement.

This theme underpins Fullan’s (2005) exposition of the role he believes school leaders will need to play as “system thinkers in action” if sustainable large scale reform is to be achieved. This, Fullan argues, will necessarily involve adaptive challenges that “require the deep participation of the people with the problem; [and] that is why it is more complex and why it requires more sophisticated leadership” (p. 53). For Fullan, examples of this new work include: leading and facilitating a revolution in pedagogy (p. 57); understanding and changing the culture of a school for the better (p. 57); relating to the broader community, in particular with parents, and integrating and co-ordinating the work of social service agencies into the school as a hub (p. 61). This will demand “... above all ... powerful strategies that enable people to question and alter certain values and beliefs as they create new forms of learning within and between schools, and across levels of the system” (*ibid*, p. 60).

These demands are further illuminated in theory by Peter Senge (1990), who argues that for organisations to excel, they have to become “learning organisations”, which he defines as “organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (p. 3).

To Senge, the key to becoming a learning organisation is for leaders to tap into people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels, to clarify broader systemic interdependencies and how to make them more effective (*ibid*, p. 4).

System leaders need a shared, central skill set to be effective. There is however a real concern about the increasing tendency in the literature to distort the generic competences of leaders through celebrating singular aspects of the role. Leithwood and his colleagues (2004, p. 4) express this worry succinctly: “... we need to be skeptical about the ‘leadership by adjective’ literature. Sometimes these adjectives have real meaning, but sometimes they mask the more important themes common to successful leadership, regardless of the style being advocated.”

However, the concept of system leadership is embracing rather than esoteric, for three reasons. First the concept of system leadership flows from the general literature on

systems theory and thinking. Second system leadership is a theory of action that embraces a range of disciplines in order to exert its power (see for example Elmore 2004, Leithwood *et al.* 2006). And third, system leadership will only exert any influence to the extent that it focuses on teaching and learning (*i.e.* is instructional), shares its authority with others (*i.e.* is distributed) and so on.

The literature, the evidence and the practice are pointing to a set of school leadership roles that are key to improving teaching and learning, as the companion volume, *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*, proposes based on a review of the literature. There is a set of core responsibilities which lead effective school leadership: *i)* supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality, *ii)* goal setting, assessment and accountability; *iii)* strategic resource management; and *iv)* leadership beyond the school borders. It also proposes that school leadership needs to be distributed. Richard Elmore in his inspiring Chapter 3 on leadership as the practice of improvement proposes that leadership in the context of improvement is about *i)* managing the conditions under which people learn new practices; *ii)* creating organisations that are supportive coherent environments for successful practice; and *iii)* developing the leadership skills and practices of others. It is within this mandate that the systemic approach to school leadership appears.

Professor Elmore also proposes that there is a need to invest adequately in knowledge and skills needed for effective leadership and for the “practice of improvement” (Chapter 3). There is a failure to invest adequately in the human capital required for this practice. He suggests that policies need to create the institutional structures that support the development of the knowledge and skill to lead improvement, and the social capital that connects individuals’ knowledge and skills. What is most interesting is that according to Elmore, the most effective way to do this is by investing close to the ground – through networks and institutional arrangements that connect people with the knowledge required to the classrooms and schools, and with other practitioners faced with similar problems of practice. From that base leadership development approaches can build knowledge and skills throughout the practice of leadership.

Richard Elmore pursues these ideas in more depth in his book *School Reform from the Inside Out*. Illustrative of this is his definition of the leadership purpose:

*“Improvement, then, is change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don’t....Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. This is a deliberately de-romanticised, focussed and instrumental definition.”(Elmore 2004, P. 66)*

This definition of leadership underpins Elmore’s (2004, p. 68) further contention that “the purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance” and its four dimensions:

- instructional improvement requires continuous learning;
- learning requires modelling;
- the roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution;
- the exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

David Hopkins in Chapter 2 proposes that “... if our goal is ‘every school a great school’ then policy and practice has to focus on system improvement. This means that a school head has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as he or she is about his or her own school. Sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward.”

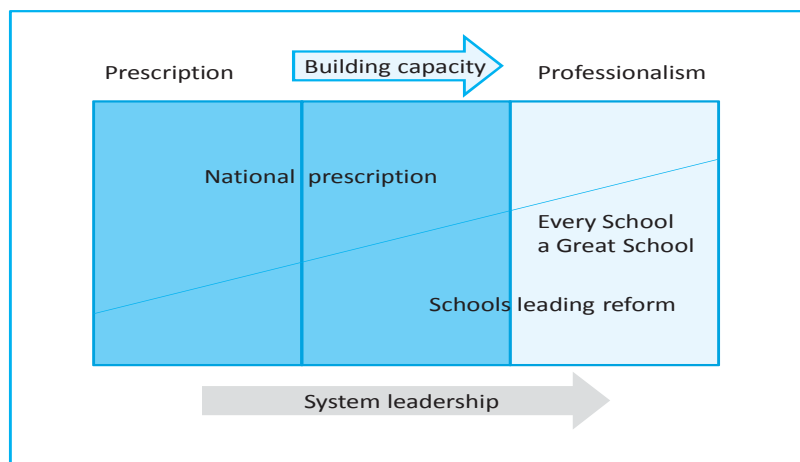
To him, system leadership is a new role, and he bases his evidence on review of current practice in England. System leaders engage with the organisation of teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment to personalise learning for all students and reduce within-school variation and to support curriculum choice. To do this, these leaders develop their schools as personal and professional learning communities, with relationships built across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities.

This leads Hopkins in his book *Every School a Great School* to claim that:

*“There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform. But if the hypothesis is correct, and this is much contested terrain, it must categorically not be a naïve return to the not so halcyon days of the 1970s when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted.... The implication is that we need a transition from an era of Prescription to an era of Professionalism – in which the balance between national prescription and schools leading reform will change.”*  
(Hopkins 2007, p. 44)

However, achieving this shift is not straight forward. As Michael Fullan (2003, p. 7) has said, it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to “professionalism” provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is “how do we get there?”, because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. This progression is illustrated in Figure 9.1.

**Figure 9.1 Towards system-wide sustainable reform**



It is worth taking a little more time unpacking the thinking underlying the diagram. This is because it is fundamental to an understanding of the connection between “every school a great school”, systemic reform and system leadership. There are three further points that underpin the argument.

The first is to emphasise that this not an argument against top down change. Neither top down nor bottom up change work by themselves, they have to be in balance – in creative tension. The balance between the two at any one time will of course depend on context.

Second it should be no surprise to realise that the right hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from what we know now. The main difficulty in imagining this landscape is that the thinking of most people is constrained by their experiences within the power structure and norms of the left hand segment of the diagram. Glimpses of the new landscape envisioned by the right hand segment are scattered throughout the book.

Third, this is not to suggest that one always has to start from the left hand side of the diagram and move in some sort of uniform way to the right. Some systems may well start from the middle and move into the right hand segment, as could be the case in Finland. Others may initially believe that they are in the right hand segment. However on further reflection it may be realised that if they really want to raise the standards for all students, then as in the case of Ontario a clear direction of travel from left to right may be the best place to start. If this diagram has any value it is as a heuristic – its purpose is to help people think rather than tell them what to do.

The OECD report has termed this “leadership beyond the school borders” and proposes this as one of the key roles for improved school outcomes. These wider engagements focus leadership beyond the people in the school leaders’ own buildings to the welfare of all young people in the area and to the improvement of the profession and its work as a whole, but in ways that also access learning and support from others to provide reciprocal benefits for leaders’ own communities. Schools and their leaders are strengthening collaboration, forming networks, sharing resources and working together. The report actually presents evidence of much school and leadership collaboration approaches across OECD countries.

This concept of moving beyond the school borders is also proposed by Hargreaves and Fink (2006), who explain that the key challenge to school improvement today is for school administrators to become leaders who develop and raise high level achievement by working with, learning from and influencing the behaviour of others within and beyond their schools. Educational leaders of the future will be system leaders as well as school leaders. They summarise what Michael Fullan and David Hargreaves term “lateral leadership”. They refer to this as a reaction to top down policy strategies and to increased school competition and isolation of schools, by which there has been a growth of school networks that create improvement gains by schools helping schools through sharing best or “next” practices, especially with the strong helping the weak. This is happening more and more, as principals and teachers are becoming engaged in more lateral networked leadership that promotes participation in networks for improved learning and achievement.

In summary, linking schools together can contribute to improving capacity of the education system with common purposes and improvement goals. At the heart of this role



is the fact that schools and their leaders are not alone, and that working together they can reach higher levels of practice. Practitioners are trying to respond to the broadened roles and responsibilities that have not been reciprocated with appropriate development efforts for them to take on these tasks. It can also be something that is coming as a top down initiative to help improve performance of schools, develop capacity quickly and help rationalise resources.

### 9.3 How are school leaders collaborating and becoming system leaders in practice?

Throughout OECD countries, there is a great deal of school leadership co-operation and collaboration going on. Practitioners do not work alone, and many benefit from a variety of networks. Approaches to co-operation range from informal networking to new management structures, such as the Portuguese or the Dutch approaches, in which structures are created above the school level to share management issues (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). In Hungary “micro-regional partnerships” have been sponsored for economic and professional rationalisation. In Norway, some schools merge to form an administrative unit governed by one principal. In the Netherlands, the increase in scale following merged schools has led to educational innovations that have had a considerable effect on the duties of school leaders. In Portugal, this approach is the regular governance structure. In fact, in all countries participating in the OECD *Improving School Leadership* activity, there are some arrangements for co-operation between schools. School leaders are the key to these and are also strongly influenced by them.

Table 9.1 lists different types of approaches and some of the reasons for co-operation across OECD countries. There are school communities, school pools, networks, possibilities for sharing expertise by principals, actual merging of schools and shared management across schools. We are not able to gauge the extent of their success in most countries because we have not pursued this systematically, but we can say that most of these have explicit objectives which concentrate on the following: sharing and rationalising resources, improving coherence of educational provision, supporting well-being and improving educational opportunities and outcomes.

Instead, to explore the practice, we have chosen to focus on a set of innovative practices that we think can provide good examples of systemic approaches to school leadership. These are particular innovative approaches adopted or developed in England, Finland, Belgium, Austria and Victoria (Australia) which are showing emerging evidence of positive results. Annex 9.A1 provides a summary, description, some results and challenges. Each individual case is developed in detail in the relevant chapters of this book.

Comparing these approaches shows that different countries and different political, social and economic contexts may respond differently to similar challenges and pressures; alternatively, the system approach may be a response arising from different sets of needs. Each individual case has its specificities, as we describe in the following paragraphs, but there are also common patterns and features.

**Table 9.1 Co-operation arrangements across OECD countries**

<b>Belgium</b>	School communities have been created as voluntary collaborative partnerships between schools. They aim to have common staffing, ICT and welfare resources management.
<b>Denmark</b>	Co-operation in post-compulsory education has been promoted by the creation of administrative groups set up locally or regionally to optimise the joint resources of several self governing institutions.
<b>Finland</b>	2003 legislative reform has enhanced school co-operation aiming to ensure integrity of students' study paths.
<b>France</b>	“School basins” have been implemented to ensure collaborative partnerships between schools to work together in student orientation, educational coherence between different types of schools, common management of shared material and human resources.
<b>Hungary</b>	“Micro-regional partnerships” based on economic and professional rationalisation have resulted in the spreading of common school maintenance in almost all Hungarian micro regions. This network-type co-operation enables professional and organisational learning leading to new forms of education governance and efficient innovation.
<b>Korea</b>	Small schools cooperate to overcome problems of size in teacher exchange, curriculum organising, joint development activities, and integrated use of facilities.
<b>Netherlands</b>	In primary education, “upper management” takes management function responsibility for several schools. About 80% of primary school boards have an upper school management bureau for central management, policy staff and support staff.
<b>New Zealand</b>	School clusters are based around geographical communities and communities of interest.
<b>Norway</b>	Tendency is to merge several schools to form an administrative unit governed by a school principal. Three-level municipalities require networks between schools.
<b>Portugal</b>	Schools are commonly grouped together with a collective management structure; executive, pedagogical and administrative councils are responsible for their areas.
<b>Scotland</b>	Important political promotion of collaboration. “Heads together” is a nationwide online community for sharing leadership experience.
<b>Sweden</b>	Municipal directors of education steer principals. Most of them are members of director of education steering group where strategy, development and results are discussed.
<b>UK (England)</b>	There are different approaches to co-operation stimulated by the government – federations of schools, national leaders of education, school improvement partners...

Source: Pont, B. D. Nusche, H. Moorman (2008), *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*, OECD, Paris.

The English practices of system leadership are some of the most developed in this field, and have been publicly developed and supported in recent years. There are a wide range of possibilities: schools can collaborate with each other formally with the possibility to “federate” since 2002. In addition, a specialised institution has even been created to such effect. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) is an independent organisation that promotes school networks of different types. Its network approach to school improvement applies clearly defined tools for principals and its many programmes follow the philosophy “by schools, for schools”. There are also special training courses to develop the capacity of leaders to become skilled in system leadership.



Individuals can work as “change agents” by acting as mentor leaders in networks or becoming school improvement partners. Also in England a group of National Leaders of Education has been created to take on a system leader role and their schools become national support schools (Matthews, 2008).

Two of the schools visited during the OECD study visit had successfully introduced a school improvement model that had managed to turn around some negative school results and in three years had significantly improved test results. This was done by a strong leader and a leadership team that focused on instructional leadership. They used an IT tool by which with individual students were followed up every six weeks, and they were able to measure school, classroom, individual teacher and individual student performance. Specific teams distributed the roles of detecting the key areas for improvement and intervention teams focused on quickly finding solutions to the key challenges. In one of the schools, after watching this success, and finding that a neighbouring school was going through rocky times, both schools voluntarily decided to join forces to improve performance overall. The more successful school’s leader became school director of the other school and they jointly started working on applying the school improvement model in the second school site.

In Finland, the OECD team was able to find two approaches which seemed to be systemic. On the one hand, from the way in which Finnish education responsibilities are distributed and shared across the system, one could say that there is system leadership of an organic nature. It is embodied in Finland in the way policy making and collaboration play out. The national curriculum is the driving force, and in order to define it, there is a wide scope of consultation and co-operation from the national down to the school level. Once the curriculum is finalised at all levels, there is a high degree of consensus built around the professional body of teachers, principals and policy makers at local, regional and national level. At the same time, teachers are of extremely high quality and have a high degree of professionalism, teamed with a high degree of decentralisation and a national consensus on the value of learning. The whole system cooperates for school improvement. This shows in its excellent PISA results, which are not only consistently the best among all the countries studied but also highly equitable, so that any student is assured high quality education no matter what neighbourhood he or she lives in.

In addition, there is a new scenario in Finland due to declining school enrolments, declining resources in education, and an increasing workload for principals (who have been calling for strategies to deal with these issues). Municipalities are developing ways to transform school leadership to benefit the broader community. We found one of these municipal reforms which had redistributed leadership at different levels: five school principals were working as district principals, with a third of their time devoted to the district and the rest to their individual schools. This meant also the leadership was redistributed within the schools. Although when the OECD team visited it was too early to know about results, this looked promising and had created a new environment of co-operation and interdependence. Overall, it showed signs of: rationalising resources; integrating services; increasing transparency; improving problem solving; enhancing a culture of co-operation; and developing leadership capacity.

In Flemish Belgium, the development of communities of schools has tested the benefits and effectiveness of collaboration. The Flemish education department gave these school communities specific competences and additional resources by way of staff points (chapter 6). These competences are establishing agreements in the organisation of education provision, pupil orientation, the establishment of a common staffing policy,

establishing teaching labour markets, or ICT co-ordination. They can eventually name a co-ordinating director to ensure that these communities operate smoothly.

This innovative approach has had some positive results (at least at secondary level, where it has been going for longer): at present, communities of schools cover more than 95% of secondary schools in Flanders, with an average of 6 to 12 schools belonging to a community. The immediate effects of the innovation were to establish internal markets which regulated competition for students between schools and increased opportunities for collective action on allocation of staffing and other resources, and for student guidance systems and curriculum. Yet, while these are important features, it must be acknowledged that the scope for collective decision-making was at the margins and did not affect the principals' autonomy.

An extremely interesting aspect of this approach is that it was possible to see how co-operation could be more or less successful, as each community of schools was left to themselves to develop their own strategies. Some schools did not make any changes while at the other extreme a school community has appointed a principal as a full-time co-ordinating director of the community. In this setting, the principals of this community have begun to meet monthly and are building trust and working together. They have established a clear agenda for improving guidance and counselling services, agreeing a common process for selection, and thus reducing competition within the community, and negotiating common working conditions for teachers, and creating curricula for students with special educational needs. They had recently agreed to provide targeted support (from the envelope of hours provided to the communities) for one of its schools having recruitment difficulties.

The Austrian and Australian innovations concentrate on leadership development, but both also have a systemic dimension to them that merit their inclusion with the rest of the approaches analysed in this report.

In Victoria, Australia, a state wide approach to leadership preparation and development (*Learning to Lead Effective Schools*, 2006) was developed as part of a broader strategy targeting school improvement (*Blueprint for Government Schools*, 2003) (chapter 7). The reform consisted of initiatives aimed at improving practice, enhancing performance and reducing achievement gaps. Leadership development was an essential part of this strategy. There is multi-layered system-wide leadership, which provides a common vision of leadership, promoting a common shared vision of high, evidence based expectations and collective responsibility. The conceptual framework for this vision of transformational leadership follows a specific model (Sergiovanni) which provides clear domains and descriptions of responsibilities for leadership. Nineteen different training programmes for different stages of leadership underpin this programme.

The Victorian vision of effective schools and culture of leadership development is leading to system leadership capacity with a common view. Through participation in these programmes and the creation of strong networks of common practices, school leaders are contributing to the improvement of Victorian schools as a whole; one of the courses is specifically on developing high performing system leaders. This results in strategic alignment, and the common language and culture of school improvement are permeating all levels of school leadership. The approach engages the workforce, provides clear expectations and emphasises peer learning.

Austria's approach to support leadership reform is built around the Austrian Leadership Academy, which was launched in 2004 to equip leaders with a new, more

proactive and entrepreneurial vision of leadership that would focus on improving school outcomes. It aims to meet the challenges facing Austrian education, and “should have the skills to implement significant new educational reforms and constitute a critical mass of proactive, system-wide leaders capable of transforming the system”. The Leadership Academy participants meet twice a year for two years and gain a combination of principles of learning, structure and curriculum, focused on developing leadership skills. They form partnerships, coaching teams, regional and virtual networks. At the outset, participants were school leaders, but as the Academy developed, it was clear that to develop capacity and system change it was also necessary to involve those working in leadership and management at regional and national departments of education. At present, around 20% of the total potential participants have graduated from the Academy, and there are plans to continue until around half of principals, or enough critical mass has been reached. The Academy follows a model of leadership for learning developed at the University of Innsbruck which draws on five dimensions of leading and learning.

The Academy has already begun to achieve a degree of culture and systems change, with a high degree of voluntary participation, engagement and enthusiasm and appears to have positive effects on individual development and improved practice over the long run. It is introducing system change by acting on the agents who are to introduce this change. However, to reach its full potential and to be sustainable it would need to have formal, structured support from the Ministry and be more embedded within the broader initiatives for reform. In addition, for system change to occur other variables in the system might need to be modified to adapt to this new reality.

These country innovations provide a range of examples of leadership for systemic school improvement. (The detailed case study reports describe these innovations, develop the theoretical underpinning, provide some evidence and analysis of effectiveness, and offer some recommendations for sustainability). The countries have worked or are working to strengthen leadership practice, through either development or creating co-operation networks that promote going beyond leaders’ own schools. These practices have some common features: They are all focusing on preparing and developing leadership for system-wide school improvement through capacity building, sharing of resources and working together.

## 9.4 Benefits of system leadership

Most of these innovations have had some success because they had clearly defined objectives, and strategies to reach them. Yet the results are still tentative, mostly because these practices were just starting when the OECD teams visited the countries. Still we can say that they are slowly producing desired results. They are changing the perception and the practice of school leadership to focus on broader system outcomes, in different ways. The Belgian, the Finnish and the English examples are focusing their efforts on school improvement by strengthening shared leadership capacity and shared practice. The Austrian and Victorian approaches are directly acting upon developing system capacity through training and development.

There are some common patterns as well as differences in these practices. We have grouped the benefits, positive outcomes and challenges together. Overall, these innovations are responding to new education environments that are calling for changes in schools and school leadership practices. Some are focusing on improving school outcomes overall and some are rather managerial processes.

### ***a) Developing leadership capacity***

Strengthening leadership capacity implies creating opportunities for school leaders to work with each other, to share ideas, and to learn through the development of networks and by collaborating in their day to day practice. In the English example of a federation of schools, an underperforming school working with a neighbouring school develops its own capacity because the school team has the opportunity to train, to follow more successful patterns of school improvement and to learn. Both schools benefit: even a successful school can learn things from a struggling one. In Finland as well, the leaders who were working one third of their time with the municipality were also developing and strengthening their capacities as system leaders. The broader benefit was that they were all working together for the improvement of the municipality as a whole.

In Victoria and Austria, the leadership training programmes are directly influencing the development of leadership capacity at a larger scale. They are aiming at changing the perception and the practice of leadership to focus much more on school outcomes, and to develop clearly defined sets of leadership skills that seem to be missing in the system.

All these approaches can have the positive effect of systemic change in education if they manage to make long lasting sustainable impact on the people who participate in these training and co-operation actions.

### ***b) Rationalising resources***

Much of the school and school leadership co-operation across countries shows that there is a need to rationalise management processes, sharing appropriate tasks, which may involve financial and resource management. It can allow principals to concentrate on their key pedagogical leadership tasks. Rationalisation can also increase efficiency when budgets are limited. In Finland, for example, budget reductions were one of the reasons for sharing work between the municipality and individual schools. Similarly in Belgium part of the rationale behind the creation of communities of schools was rationalisation of resources.

Sharing resources and infrastructures can also broaden the supply of courses or services. The case of special needs provision in England was an example. In local authorities, special needs students were benefiting from the provision of different schools, working together to respond to this specific group. Working with other schools can attain economies of scale, reduce individual school costs and improve provision as a whole.

### ***c) Increased co-operation***

Working together has developed greater interdependence among leadership teams in Belgium, Finland and England. This also happened in Austria and Victoria, through participation in training. A principal in Belgium, comparing how schools used to compete against each other while now they are collaborating, described it as a small revolution. Over the long run collaboration generates better processes and outcomes. In Finland, this greater degree of co-operation was enhancing a shared culture of trust, co-operation and responsibility in the pursuit of increased effectiveness.

But co-operation for its own sake, which has been described as contrived “collegiality”, may not produce the desired results; some may even see it as simply a burden. The Flemish example shows that some communities of schools have not evolved, and pushing co-operation on to agents who are not willing to take on this task may not

work. In England, we were told that the federations or networks that worked were based on successful matching up of the partners. This may be crucial, and that matching should include shared values and aims, and clear perception of the benefits to all parties.

#### *d) Distributed leadership*

Most of the practices which have called for system leaders have also resulted in greater distribution of leadership within the schools. Principals need to have time to work on their system leader roles and thus need to delegate some of the school management and other tasks more.

In Flanders, some communities of schools added to school leaders' workload and there are calls for middle management to be further developed to take on some of these tasks. In Finland, where the principals are working at the municipality, leadership within larger schools has been redistributed with other staff members. This releases the principal from other responsibilities and develops increased leadership experience and capacity within the schools. In England, the leaders developed strong leadership teams that were able to take on the school roles necessary when the principals were away.

#### *e) Improving school outcomes*

Many of the processes seen in the countries visited were intended to improve the education and outcomes for students. In fact, this was one of the criteria for selection of the case studies. Such success is hard to measure, but it seemed that most of the examples seen were on the way to achieving it to some degree. Measuring the impact of school leadership on student outcomes is conceptually and methodologically challenging (see Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008), but in broad terms we find:

- Improving and rationalising supply of courses or joining forces to provide a broader curriculum and better education for students can improve school outcomes for some.
- Greater integration of services is a way of reaching students and their families better.
- System leadership can lead to better and more consistent pupil orientation and support.

In England, there is significant evidence to show that where a successful school has partnered a school in difficulties there has been actual improvement in grades of students in both schools within a relatively short (18 month) period of time (Chapter 5).

#### *f) Sustainability*

All these examples of approaches to reach systemic improvement are also contributing to sustainability of leadership and of schools. This is happening through developing capacity within and between schools, through the creation of co-operation networks, and through development of institutions that contribute to spread leadership across schools. In Finland the commitment to co-operation has become so institutionalised that it is now part of the organisational culture of schools. Sustainability depends on building capacity within individual schools. This can also help to strengthen leadership succession over the long run.



## 9.5 The challenges to practice

If the concept of system leadership is to be widely implemented, there are considerable challenges to be overcome. We begin with sustainability, as this is inevitably the most critical.

### *a) Sustainability*

Sustainability is not only a benefit of system leadership, it is also a challenge. Most of the conclusions of the case studies highlight the need to support these innovations if they are to be sustainable. In Belgium, to achieve the communities of schools, the OECD team highlighted the need to develop a new collective and distinctive vision through training and development of leaders. In Austria, the question was raised as to whether the Austrian Leadership Academy will continue to operate, and whether its training will have effects long lasting enough to attain systemic change. In Victoria, Australia, this is also a challenge: system-wide improvement can only be reached when a large proportion of principals are reached by the programmes. In England although there have been a number of short term successes in improving student learning as a result of system leadership, it is still not clear whether they are sustainable into the medium and long term. In Finland as well, while the systemic reform had produced some positive results and is improving leadership capacity and rationalising practices, unless support is maintained the long term impact is uncertain.

When looking across these instances of system leadership from the perspective of sustainability five conditions necessary for effective sustainability stand out:

- *Internal capacity* within the school to sustain high levels of student learning.
- *Between-school capability*, the “glue” that is necessary for schools to work together effectively.
- *Mediating organisations* that work flexibly with schools to help build internal capacity and the competences necessary for effective collaboration.
- *Critical mass* so that system leadership becomes a movement rather than the practice of a small number of elite leaders.
- *Cultural consensus* across the system that gives school leaders the space, legitimacy and encouragement to engage in collaborative activities.

It is clear that these conditions are not all in place in any of the case studies, but they are all seen in some. It is also apparent that those cases that contain more of these conditions are the more successful in implementing system leadership. These conditions for sustainability therefore act as a useful checklist for the strategic implementation and institutionalisation of system leadership in national and local systems.

### *b) School leadership co-operation in an environment of choice and competition*

Co-operation among school leaders working in school systems which have been based on competition and school choice may not be easy. Day *et al.* call it a dilemma of democracy in Flanders, where the education system is strongly committed to competition as a means to increase effectiveness and school quality (chapter 6). At the same time the communities of schools are aiming to make schools work together, so the nature of the collaboration-competition balance seems unclear.



In England, Hopkins notes that system leaders are appearing in contrast to the “competitive ethic of headship so prevalent in the nineties”. This is at the heart of system leadership, as system leaders are the ones willing to work for the success of other schools as well as their own. This role is also emerging in other education systems across OECD. However, although system leadership in England is now a recognisable movement, it is not yet a mainstream practice. Although it is strongly advocated by the national government it is still not widely accepted by local politicians, local education officers or governors of schools – who worry that collaboration may lead to a dilution of excellent practice in their leading schools.

So system leadership is a challenge for policy makers, who may have to reflect on how system leaders can work beyond their schools to get systems improvement in an environment of competition and choice. It may be a matter of finding spaces for co-operation and sharing of resources where all benefit and competition is not hampered. Eventually, there would be positive spill over, and co-operation can widen its scope as the relationships strengthen and benefits are perceived by all involved. The challenge for policymakers is thus to develop sound and consistent policy with an appropriate, and probably changing, balance between choice/school competition and collaboration.

There may be a need for developing school leaders that see themselves not as an individual school leader but as a system leader. In England, since 2006 National Leaders of Education have been developing as those “outstanding leaders who are willing to involve themselves in system leadership outside their own school, taking lead responsibility for one or more schools in very challenging circumstances” (Matthews, 2008). In Finland, Hargreaves *et al.* (Chapter 4) recommend the need to employ current principals now near retirement by extending their services to help others in the system.

### ***c) Recognising and supporting system leaders***

While taking on this broader role may be beneficial for the education system as a whole, it may not be easy for school leaders with their busy schedules to take on the additional role. The national background reports prepared for this study show that in some countries, individual school leaders are already working long hours; an additional role could be too much. While distributed leadership can support this role, in times of challenges or difficulties, the focus on the individual school will always prevail. In addition, some ask about the accountability of system leaders: who are they accountable to and how? What are the measures of their practice?

While distributed leadership should accompany system leadership, this has not been fully acknowledged in policy and in practice across countries. The practice shows that those participating in leadership teams are not well recognised, nor do they receive incentives commensurate with the tasks they are taking on. Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008) underline the need to effectively distribute leadership across teams, based on contextual needs and models. But for this to happen, policy makers need to recognise and support this practice.

### ***d) Identifying and recruiting system leaders***

It is clear from the case studies that there is currently a lack of clarity about how system leaders can best be identified and the key skills that should be required. There is also a need to differentiate potential candidates in terms of prior experience and current capacity. It may be helpful to think of key target groups along the following lines:

- *Existing*: Those who are currently undertaking system leader roles or have successfully done so in the past.
- *Designate*: Those who have recently taken on, plan to take on or are deemed capable of taking on system leader roles.
- *Aspiring*: Those who have the potential to take on such roles in the future.

Clearly each group would need to be recruited separately but there is some similarity in the way these leaders can be incentivised to take on the role. While appeals to altruism may prove a successful means of attracting high quality leaders, such goodwill cannot be relied upon and it can be exhausted.

More formalised incentives can contribute to encouraging and effectively recruiting these system leaders. These include professional acclaim and recognition of the role they are taking, financial reward, and highlighting the positive challenge and enrichment of a change in the pattern of work.

### *e) Professional development of system leaders*

Generating a pool of high quality system leaders requires appropriate professional development. System leaders need to focus on the promotion of student learning, the schools' contexts and capacity building, problem-based learning, and a repertoire of practices rather than a single style.

Across the case study countries, approaches to developing system leaders could be categorised:

- *Formal qualifications*: In England and Victoria, this approach was seen to have benefits of recognition, and a high level of quality assurance. There may be concerns that a qualification may not meet needs, as it may be too detached from the context and may put off existing and aspirant heads who have a heavy workload.
- *Tailored learning*: These approaches provide an informal range of learning opportunities that can be personalised to individual need, reflect the experience and aspiration of the leader, focus on contexts and around significant problems and combine theory and practice.
- *Through practice*: The Finnish and Belgian approaches have shaped system leaders by promoting their practice. However, this might need to be supported with some more formalised training approaches that provide the required skills for successful leadership. Otherwise, they can have a negative impact by reproducing leadership styles that might no longer be suitable.

### *f) How to move system leadership to scale*

In reflecting on the case studies there appear to be three issues that would become increasingly significant were the model of system leadership be moved to a larger scale. These are:

- *Brokerage*: There needs to be a focus on how the crucial partnership between schools should be brokered. This inevitably needs to be based upon a good

knowledge of the context, including the true capacity of each school and the specific challenges facing them.

- *Resourcing*: There are a number of potential costs to consider, such as payment to system leaders to undertake more work and pressure, the financial position of collaborating schools, a short term improvement fund to achieve urgent changes. The amount and necessity for these recourses is highly contextual.
- *Support*: There is also a concern about the provision of ongoing personal and professional support. This is a critical factor for success and needs to be designed into effective policy. It can require the specification of responsibilities, provision of professional development to school boards and local education officers to better support system leaders, and identification and dissemination of best practice.

## 9.6 Food for thought

School leadership co-operation and collaboration have different traditions and developments across countries. There seem to be clear objectives: capacity building across the system, rationalisation and cost savings, improvements in leadership practice due to a more efficient distribution of tasks, and more coherent supply of educational services for those in the community. This chapter has reviewed the different country approaches to developing leadership for systemic improvement. Through leadership co-operation and collaboration as well as development and training programmes, countries are reaching different degrees of systemic improvement.

Developing systemic approaches to school leadership needs public support. Objectives and expected benefits need to be clear, and incentives are needed. When schools and school leaders realise the benefits they can reap from co-operation, principals will make time to engage. One general conclusion that stands out from the chapters by Elmore and Hopkins as well as the five national case studies is the increased emphasis on student outcomes and the greater linkage between leadership and learning. Whether this can be attributed to system leadership is an arguable point, but it is a very welcome trend.

As we have seen, there are clear benefits to these approaches, which are contributing to leadership capacity building, to rationalisation of resources, to improved co-operation, to a greater distribution of leadership within schools and to improving school outcomes.

Yet, there are challenges to be overcome if this approach is to be made sustainable. These have been seen as: the difficulty of marrying co-operation and competition (policy choices need to be made); the need to recognise and support distributed leadership within the school; the need to identify, recruit, develop and reward system leaders; and the need to find the right institutional support for the practice.

In concluding this chapter and the book it may be worth reflecting on an implicit distinction that has pervaded virtually all of the previous chapters. It is this: the distinction between system leaders working in national programmes and those working in locally organised, often *ad hoc*, roles. There is a tension between those system leaders who operate in national programmes that have incentivised activity through organisation, funding and professional development, such as seen in England and Victoria; and those system leaders whose roles are locally developed and contextually responsive, such as in Belgium and Finland. In such activity, professionals not only deploy their experience and

skill to lead improvements, they also define the terms on which such activity is undertaken and sustained.

There are of course variations to this bottom up / top down dialectic, as has been seen in the five case studies. If, however, a shared criterion is to develop effective system leadership in a growing number of schools, then the following suggestion for more short term action - *Incentivise rather than legislate* - may prove instructive.

The argument is that this leadership needs to come more from principals themselves and from agencies committed to working with them. It is clear that the more bureaucratic the response the less likely it will be to work. A more lateral approach may be to create mediating organisations, such as the NCSL and SSAT in England and the Leadership Academy in Austria, to promote system leadership and collaborative activity. Another approach is to foster local education authorities and municipalities to develop and spread practice, as the Finnish have done. The intention that must be maintained is that instead of creating a new bureaucracy the brief for these mediating organisations is increasingly focused on facilitating relationships between schools to maximise the potential of purposeful collaboration.

This chapter has shown that there is already significant system leadership activity in the five case study countries. It has demonstrated that system leadership can contribute decisively to a full range of government and local agendas by capacity building; sharing of expertise, facilities and resources; innovation and creativity; leadership and management; and skills support. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience will create much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions. But attaining this future demands that we give school leaders more possibilities in taking the lead.

## Annex 9.A1

### Comparative overview of policy reforms, outcomes and challenges

Country	Purpose	How/Reform	Outcomes/results	Hindrance/challenges
<b>Belgium</b>	Enhance student guidance; reduce administrative burden so that focus is on pedagogical leadership; increase use of ICT; rationalisation of resources staff recruitment, curriculum, evaluation) More equity while preserving autonomy	Communities of schools: these can be created through allocating additional staffing to be used through collective decision making of the communities of schools	98% of schools integrated in community of schools Local labour markets for teachers (can be moved from one school to another within the community so less risk for teachers) Different degrees of co-operation have been reached, more successful ones have created additional co-ordination post to share and distribute leadership tasks Increased collective action for staff and other resources. More co-operation in a competitive environment	An additional layer of bureaucracy Many still remain nested within traditional network structures Centrally initiated – contrived collegiality. No additional support for system leadership training, for evaluation or to disseminate examples Lack of middle management to support communities of schools, as they need to take on leadership responsibilities Lack of support by government for these to be developed effectively, not much follow up
<b>Finland</b>	Reorganisation of public services; budget reduction accommodation; development of good quality leadership	Allocation of some school leaders to new district wide responsibilities; 1/3 of time in district, rest in schools Other municipalities are adopting similar arrangements Finland embodies the concept of system leadership as it is distributed across different levels (organic system leadership), not one strong leader	Rationalising resources; integrating services; more transparency; better problem solving through more interaction and collective learning; developing leadership capacity and succession (redistribution at municipal and school level) More interdependence, less competition Greater co-operation on curriculum, professional development.	Develop system of leadership beyond administrative and social roles More coaching and mentoring of retired principals. Concrete results still to be confirmed

Country	Purpose	How/Reform	Outcomes/results	Hindrances/challenges
<b>UK (England)</b>	Increase performance of low performing schools by a) ensuring that well qualified heads share their expertise with other schools through a variety of systemic arrangements, and b) providing schools with tools for improving leadership practice.	Systemic approach to school Leadership: range of possibilities for schools and principals to work with other schools: SSAT promoting school networks; collaboration between federations in which schools agree to work together and build capacity together even up to merging Individuals working as change agents: School Improvement Partners; National Advisory Leaders	Improving results of underperforming schools and broader curriculum and resources Greater distribution of leadership at the schools Better sharing of knowledge and skills, responsibility and problem-solving Cost-savings and economies of scale: sharing of equipment and of personnel, teaching staff and services such as cleaning/catering. Creating a culture of learning and results orientation Less competition, more collaboration and mutual responsibility	Need to balance policy initiatives for school principals with a policy environment constantly changing to provide more time for reform to take effect Can work when it is voluntarily entered into and when there is enough capacity Need to strengthen capacity of school boards and local education authorities Need to develop new forms of accountability and financial support Need to encourage new culture of collaboration in a competitive environment
<b>Austria</b>	To prepare leaders at all education levels to provide effective leadership Responding to Austrian context Develop leadership skills beyond those skills included in induction programmes Premise: leadership quality is the starting point for systemic innovation	Austrian Leadership Academy (2004): 2 year programme combination of principles of learning, structure and curriculum content: 4 two to three day forums to learn through partnerships, coaching teams, regional networks, virtual network Participants are not only school leaders but those involved in leadership and school management in regional and national departments of education Based on theoretical model: Leadership Competence Model emphasising leadership for learning (developed at U. of Innsbruck)	1500 out of 6000 have voluntarily participated and graduated (25%) High level of participant engagement and enthusiasm about content and processes Effective in instilling new leadership orientation and skills in many participants; LEA appears to have positive effects on individual development and improved practice over the long run Launching a range of innovative school improvement projects Creating a set of relationships across different elements of the overall education and governmental system Education system seems to be on its way towards making system-wide change	Sustainability of the LEA is still unclear, (although OECD visit contributed to strengthen support by Ministry) Not clear whether the effects will extend to the sustained leadership capacity needed for wide scale innovation Programme needs to be aligned with other Ministerial reform initiatives and with other teacher and administrator training No permanent structure of LEA While support exists, some express a considerable degree of scepticism ("messianic tenor" of LEA's message) Programme aiming at change culture is not accompanied by parallel effort to change structure of system. School leadership practices need to be rethought, inc. greater principal autonomy in hiring firing, reducing workload Participant follow up and networking is not consistent



Country	Purpose	How/Reform	Outcomes/results	Hindrances/challenges
<p><b>Victoria, Australia</b></p>	<p>High quality schools for all                      Improve leadership quality in highly devolved schools controlling 90% of budget                      Increase leadership capacity of current school leaders, support development of leadership teams within schools, increase the number of applicants for posts and prepare individuals to take up leadership positions as leadership development is recognised as strategic issue</p>	<p>Leadership Development Strategy (Learning to Lead Effective Schools, 2006) embedded in <i>Blueprint for Government Schools</i> – coherent school reform process                      Framework based on Sergiovanni's model of transformational leadership; clear statement of what is expected of leaders and types of skills required for selection, recruitment, training development and appraisal of leaders                      19 different programmes for different stages of leaders' careers, including a course on system leadership                      All courses have a school based component matching participants' performance plans and schools' strategic plan</p>	<p>Emphasis on coaching, mentoring and peer learning, encouraging networking and collegial exchanges, involving "critical friends"                      Satisfaction of programme participants, improvement in their leadership capacities and more applications for promotions. Positive gains after participation in programmes                      Evidence of differential of improvement in schools in 3 years (school climate; based on teachers' perceptions). Evidence of improvement in quality of instruction                      High performing principals' programme provides skills and knowledge needed to meet new roles in school and larger systems</p>	<p>None respond to specific needs of improving equity and of disadvantaged students                      Capabilities listed for effective school leaders could be seen as too top down within the system and within a school                      System leaders developed are not being well used, can be that leadership capacity is generated at a faster pace than being absorbed                      Model needs to ensure that teachers engage with the reform process                      Changes in leadership behaviour need to be supported with changes in culture to encourage this type of transformational leadership</p>

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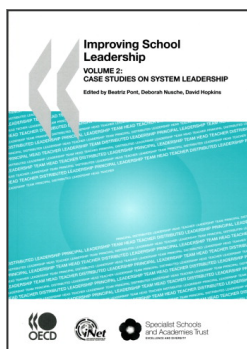
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