

Education and Training Policy
Improving School Leadership
Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership

Summary in English



The role of school leaders has changed radically as countries transform their education systems to prepare young people to function in today's world of rapid technological change, economic globalisation and increased migration and mobility.

One of the new roles they are being asked to play is to work beyond their school borders so that they can contribute not only to the success of their own school but to the success of the system as a whole.

This publication examines what the specialists are saying about system leadership and school improvement. Case studies in Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Finland and the United Kingdom (England) illustrate how countries are encouraging school leaders to become system leaders and how they are developing and training new generations of school leaders to contribute to system transformation – so that every school is a good school.

The 21st century is still in its first decade, yet many countries have already seen dramatic shifts in the way schools and education systems are managed compared with those of the end of the last century. A prime stimulus for these changes is a combination of shifts in society, including greater migration, changes in social and family structures, and the use (and misuse) of information and communications technologies. Also influential is a greater emphasis on relative performance of different schools and education systems, between schools, school systems and countries.

The strong focus on education by governments and society is entirely appropriate. Only through education can we develop the knowledge and skills that are vital for our countries' economic growth, social development and political vitality. And most importantly, for the success of the children who will be our future generations.

The challenge of system leadership

In this new environment, schools and schooling are being given an ever bigger job to do. Greater decentralisation in many countries is being coupled with more school autonomy, more accountability for school and student results, and a better use of the knowledge base of education and pedagogical processes. It is also being coupled with broader responsibility for contributing to and supporting the schools' local communities, other schools and other public services.

As a result, there is a need to redefine and broaden school leaders' roles and responsibilities. This means changing the way school leadership is developed and supported. It implies improving incentives to make headship in particular more attractive for existing heads and for those who will be taking up school leadership positions in the future. And it implies strengthening training and development approaches to help leaders face these new roles.

One of school leaders' new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.

This study's approach

This study focuses on a set of innovative practices that provide good examples of systemic approaches to school leadership. These are particular innovative approaches adopted or developed in Flanders (Belgium), England, Finland, Victoria (Australia) and Austria which are showing emerging evidence of positive results. Each of these cases is developed in detail in the relevant chapter of this book.

The case studies result from research and visits by OECD staff and

education experts to each country. The visits included meetings and discussions with national and local government representatives, and site visits to exemplary schools. The case studies are complemented by articles by two authorities in education leadership: Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and David Hopkins of the Institute of Education, University of London. The five countries visited were chosen because they met two main criteria: they demonstrated models of school organisation and management that distribute education leadership roles in innovative ways; and showed promising practices for preparing and developing school leaders.

A companion report *Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practice* (Pont et al., 2008), looks at 22 countries and regions and provides a set of policy recommendations for improving school outcomes.

The benefits of system leadership

Throughout OECD countries, there is significant cooperation and collaboration on school leadership. While every country participating in the OECD activity has some arrangements for cooperation between schools, one group of jurisdictions has made system leadership the centre of their school improvement strategies. In Flanders (Belgium), England and Finland, they have done so by creating possibilities for cooperation that promote going beyond leaders' own schools to support local improvement. In Victoria (Australia) and Austria, they have launched leadership development programmes for system-wide school improvement.

These innovations focus on system-wide school improvement by encouraging and developing school leaders to work together. Although the approaches were at early stages of development, the researchers found a number of significant benefits emerging. These included development of leadership capacity, rationalising of resources, increased cooperation, leadership being distributed further into schools and across education systems, and improving school outcomes.

The challenges to practice

Nevertheless, the study also found that there are considerable challenges to overcome before the concept of system leadership can be widely implemented. Sustainability is inevitably a critical factor, as is the quality of school leaders – because system leaders must first be successful school leaders.

The key features identified were: in-school capacity to sustain high levels of student learning; between-school capability (the “glue” that is necessary for schools to work together effectively); mediating organisations to work flexibly with schools to help build in-school capacity along with the skills necessary for effective collaboration; critical mass to make system leadership a movement, not just the practice of a small number of elite leaders; and cultural consensus across the system to give school leaders the space, legitimacy and encouragement to engage in collaborative activities.

The authors note that these conditions for long-term success were not all in

place in any of the case studies, but all conditions were seen in some case studies. They add that the cases that demonstrate more of these conditions are more successful in implementing system leadership. Other important factors for system leadership are: recognising and supporting system leaders; identifying and recruiting them; providing professional development; enabling school leaders to cooperate in an environment often still dominated by competition; and scaling up the innovations so that they can influence the whole education system.

Recommendations: let school leaders lead

The report's authors concluded that systemic leadership needs to come more from principals themselves and from agencies committed to working with them. They suggest that top-down approaches are not likely to work well. Developing ownership by participants, as Victoria (Australia) or the Austrian Leadership Academy are doing, is important.

A more lateral approach may be to create mediating organisations (such as the National College for School Leadership and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust 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 in developing and spreading practice, as the Finnish have done. The intention must be not to create a new bureaucracy but to facilitate relationships between schools so that they can collaborate for the good of all students.

There is already significant system leadership activity in the five case study countries, this report finds. System leadership can build capacity in education; share expertise, facilities and resources; encourage innovation and creativity; improve leadership and spread it more widely; and provide 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, say the authors. But attaining this future demands that we give school leaders more possibilities in taking the lead.

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