System Leaders

System leadership is a developing concept and practice in many jurisdictions as policy makers attempt to harness the potential of schools working collaboratively as a mechanism for school improvement.

Dimnock (2016)[1] argues that there is a need "to clarify the concept of 'system leadership', and that more is needed in developing both the concept itself and the set of associated practices and outcomes, before the potential of system leadership as a school improvement mechanism is fully realized."

The Donaldson Report on the future of teacher education in Scotland (Donaldson 2010),[2] had a number of key recommendations. Recommendation 49, of this report argued that a scheme for national leaders of education should be developed to enable experienced, high-performing head teachers to contribute to system-level leadership of education in Scotland.

This significant report goes on to further recommend the setting up of a virtual college which eventually materialised as the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL).

SCEL (2016) [3] in developing the concept argued for by Donaldson, defined system leadership in the following way:

"System leaders lead in their own organisations and are able to share their expertise and work jointly with leaders from other areas of the system in order to drive improvement and successful outcomes. System leader's care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. They have a key role in working with senior colleagues; empowering them in their leadership through dialogue, coaching and mentoring and planning, as part of their organisation's performance review processes."

David Hargreaves (2014)[4] has written about a professional-led model of school improvement referred to as a 'self-improving school system'. The assumption underpinning this professional model is that professionals, that is school leaders including principals and teachers, are more likely to be influenced by fellow professionals than they are by policy makers, or civil servants. Hargreaves sees these principals as those who are involved in leading school improvement initiatives.

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[1]Dimnock, Clive (2016) System leadership for school improvement: A developing concept and set of practices, Scottish Educational Review 48(2), 60-79.

[2]Donaldson Report (2010) Teaching Scotland's Future. Report of a Review of Teacher Education in Scotland, Online at: www.gov.scot/resource/doc/337626/0110852.pdf

[3] Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) System Leadership, Online at: http://www.scelscotland.org.uk/what-we-offer/system-leadership/

[4]Hargreaves, D. H. (2014) David H Hargreaves' Think-pieces on the Self-Improving School System, National College for Teaching and Leadership. Online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/david-h-hargreaves-thinkpieces-on-theself-improving-school-system

Hopkins (2012)[5] recognizes three levels of system leadership, claiming that all three are necessary and need to operate interdependently for whole system transformation. The three levels are:

1. **System leadership at the school level** where principals take ownership and work to improve performance in other schools as well as their own
2. **System leadership at the local/regional level** where practising principals involve themselves in local/regional programmes in order to secure alignment of practice in schools in an area
3. **System leadership at the national level** – with "social justice, moral purpose and a commitment to every learner" providing the focus for transformation and collaboration system-wide

In this model, Hopkins sees principals as fulfilling a role in their own right at level one, but also collaborating with other system leaders at levels two and three.

There is therefore, quite a range of system leadership roles emerging in many jurisdictions and a variance in the interpretations of what actually system leadership involves.

Research tells us that significant change in practice is not effective if the impetus for the change originates at the top of the system i.e. from policy makers alone. Neither is change effective if it is solely dependent on individual initiatives lacking co-ordination. The idea of **'Leading from the Middle (LftM)'** has emerged as a strategy for system reform where the middle tier is recognised as being particularly important. In many jurisdictions, this middle tier consists of school leaders collaborating together for the greater good of all the schools involved with a view to strengthening system practice. Fullan (2015)[6] defines this type of system leadership "as a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance. The goal of LftM is to develop greater overall system coherence by strengthening the focus of the middle in relation to system goals and local needs.

In their work, Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015)[7] propose that 'Leadership from the Middle' involves districts working collaboratively. They note:

"One way to reduce bad variation among school districts is to promote collaboration among them so they share resources, ideas, and expertise and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In this leading from the middle approach, districts don't just mediate and

[5]Hopkins, D. (2012) What We have Learned from School Improvement about taking Educational Reform to Scale. In C. Chapman, P. Armstrong, A. Harris, D. Muijs, D. Reynolds, & P. Sammons (eds.) School Effectiveness and Improvement Research, Policy and Practice, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
[6]Fullan, M. 2015. "Leadership from the Middle." Education Canada 55 (4).
[7]Hargreaves, A., and M. Ainscow. 2015. "The Top and Bottom of Leadership and Change." Phi Delta Kappan 97 (3): 42–48.in Harris.A, and Jones M., SCHOOL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT, 2017 VOL. 37, NO. 3, 213–216
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manage other people's reforms individually; they become the collective drivers of change and improvement together."