

How to... develop within a self-improving school system

The focus is on schools working together to bring about improvement across the whole education system. **Graham Handscomb** explores the features of a self-improving school system and its implications.



In a wide range of cultures across the world there has been a movement towards the decentralisation of control of education towards the school (Day and Sachs, 2004), accompanied by an expectation that schools will use this increased autonomy to work together in bringing about improvement across the school system.

As a leading exponent in this development, Hargreaves has produced a series of thinkpieces for the National College (Hargreaves 2010, 2011, and 2012). He argues that in an era of diminishing centralisation, coupled with an increasing demand for school improvement and reducing the number of underperforming schools, there is a need for a new radical vision. He maintains that “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” (Hargreaves, 2010). Building on this expertise and experience, he says the time is now ripe, with the opportunities provided from increased decentralisation, for the school system to become self-improving, for “a new era in which the school system becomes the major agent of its own improvement”

(Hargreaves, 2010). This self-improving school system has four building blocks:

- Structure: establishment of clusters of schools working together
- Culture: moving to a local solutions approach and co-construction
- Key People: development of system leaders. (Hargreaves, 2010)

Throughout each of his three publications on developing a self-improving school system, Hargreaves identifies particular implications for and demands on school leaders. So for instance, in the context of alliances between schools (such as the recently developed Teaching School Alliances) he specifies the need to realise that such alliances depend on three critical components. These are characterised as “magnets”, “glue” and “drivers” (Hargreaves, 2011). Elsewhere (Hargreaves, 2012) emphasises the importance of leaders constantly reinforcing the self-improving collaboration through a narrative which persuades, and explains the work of the alliance to a range of groups like staff, parents and governors.

Professional learning task: Magnets, glue, drivers, and telling the story

Read the following two extracts. To what extent do you feel the images of magnets, glue, drivers and narrators capture the kinds of demands likely to be made of school leaders working together to bring about improvement across all schools. What other images would you add? Consider whether there are potential conflicts between headteachers' role in reinforcing and convincing others of partnership working, and the demands of managing their own schools.

Extract 1:

"An Alliance (requires) three critical components: magnets, glue and drivers.

Magnets refer to the forces, intentions and expected benefits that attract the members into the alliance. Success is more likely if the partnership is entered voluntarily with the determination to gain mutual benefits. The importance of personal chemistry between leaders should not be overlooked. Start with people who are enthusiastic about partnership, who get on with one another and who are determined to deliver results.

Glue consists of the factors that keep the partnership together and prevent it from falling apart. When the partnership begins, the glue is strongest at the top. To sustain the partnership over a long period with its inevitable ups and downs, glue is needed lower down. If people are empowered to make decisions with as little bureaucracy as possible, they will learn fast. Much of the glue is about developing a culture in which people enjoy the work of partnership as well as make gains from it. The need for fun in work should not be underestimated.

Drivers are the factors that leaders insert into the partnership as it evolves to ensure that the focus of collaboration is on learning and the promised benefits of partnership, to support and encourage those who are working on partnership activities, to make mid-course corrections and adaptations, and to propel the partnership forward by introducing new opportunities and challenges. Without drivers, alliances lose focus, drift apart or become complacent.

All three need the active work of leaders, who need to ask themselves, as the partnership develops, whether its state of health needs attention to be given to the magnets, the glue or the drivers".

(Hargreaves, 2011, pages 6 to 7)

Extract 2:

"If school leaders are the people who will ultimately drive the system to the level of collaborative capital, they will need a narrative that captures the why and the how of a self-improving system... Headteachers have always had a narrative about what they do with their schools. They need it as a sales pitch to attract parental choice, as a means of accountability, and as a way of celebrating the school's achievements. Hitherto such a narrative has been largely confined to the story of the individual school, not schools in partnership. A self-improving system based on inter-school partnership requires an extended narrative to explain and justify the partnership...

The new narrative will also need to incorporate:

- *collective reporting, to tell the story of the partnership and the benefits it brings*
- *collective accountability, to report on the responsibilities and achievements of the partnership*
- *collective celebrating, to honour those who have contributed to the partnership's collective outcomes*

This new narrative is, in my view, more important for headteachers than it is for politicians and policymakers, because school leaders have to inspire and inform their staff, their governing bodies, and their students and their parents. Achieving a self-improving school system entails a radical shift in our notion of a school system, and school leaders will constantly have to persuade and explain what is happening and why".

(Hargreaves, 2012, page 33)