System Leadership

This paper by the NSW School Leadership Institute (SLI) examines the meaning and importance of system leadership within NSW public education. It provides a cohesive, thorough definition of the concept of system leadership and brings together the research and evidence to support its effectiveness in lifting student achievement. This paper can be used to help develop future programs aimed at developing and embedding system leadership in our school system.

The NSW public education system

Education has the power to transform lives[i]. It equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to live rewarding, productive and fulfilling lives. As our schools, educational leaders and systems seek to improve the educational outcomes for all children and young people effective school leadership is the key to school improvement[ii].

Who we are and who we serve

NSW DoE is the world's largest educational system in terms of schools and leaders

Highly diverse population and school type with a united policy framework

CONTEXT FOR NSW

8.1 million of our nation's 25.5 million people live in NSW

5.3 million in Sydney

33.6% born overseas

34% of ATSI people live in NSW

SOURCE: McIntyre, A. & Burns, D. (2017) *Empowered Educators in Australia: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The NSW Department of Education is the largest provider of public education in the southern hemisphere and the second largest public education system in the world[iii]. It is a unique system that services a diverse range of communities across the state, enabling all children and young people to have access to quality education. In 2020, more than 815,000 students were enrolled from preschool to Year 12 in 2,216 public schools. This represents about two-thirds of all NSW school students, many of whom have come from diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In 2020 there were more than 90,000 teachers and staff working to facilitate the learning of these students[iv]. A 'systems' approach to leadership development at every stage of a school leader's career presents an opportunity for large scale improvement in NSW public education. Leadership development is central to whole system improvement[v] and pivotal to

growing the capabilities of leaders and of the system itself[vi]. The provision of world-class education to NSW students is dependent on effective leadership programs and the embedding of effective school leadership across the system[vii].

System leadership

System leadership refers to a shared commitment to improving teaching and learning within and across the system[viii]. This collective commitment to lift system wide achievement through improvement in teaching and learning requires careful attention to the creation of conditions for purposeful and meaningful collaboration between school leaders. It requires an authentic approach to encourage and enable the most successful leaders to identify and transfer best practice and "mobilise leadership capacity in pursuit of whole school improvement"[ix]

The ability to generate change across a system[x] with particular attention to the importance of system leadership, working in conjunction with school leadership, will ultimately drive school improvement[xi].

System leadership is considered a "wider resource for school improvement"[xii]. Successful leaders identify and transfer best practice and support leadership of improvement across the system. The result is an improvement in teaching quality and educational outcomes for all students in all schools. System leadership requires a collective understanding of the actions needed[xiii] and an explicit moral purpose that every school can improve.

System leadership and school leadership must work in synergy[xiv]. This reciprocal interaction enables effective school leadership to influence system leadership and in turn enables the system to grow and support school leaders. In this way, the contributions school leaders make to system leadership can be understood, harnessed and deliberately planned[xv].

What is system leadership?

System leadership is a shared commitment to foster collaborative networks within and across the system to generate improvement.

It is characterised by being outward looking, connected and forward thinking, driving sustained improvement and shared responsibility at a local and system level.

System leadership is important to developing the capabilities of leaders in a strategic way to impact leader, teacher and student learning.

System leaders

System leaders are leaders who are committed and willing to "work for the success of other schools as well as their own"[xvi].

They are leaders who have the capability and willingness to support other school leaders in order to enhance their leadership and school improvement[xvii]. A system leader is able to "bring forth collective leadership"[xviii]. They develop the capability of others and develop the organisation. System leaders learn, develop and share their expertise and experiences with other leaders to contribute and work beyond their own school, whilst bringing back their new learnings to support school improvement in their own context. They create the conditions for collaboration and influence learning beyond their own settings by enacting their commitment to improving the learning outcomes for all students.

Who are system leaders?

System leaders have the broadest sphere of influence through their commitment to sharing their expertise to improve teaching and learning in other schools as well as their own. They engage, learn and influence across schools to impact learning within their own context. They are researchers of their own and others' practice as they identify, generate and share new thinking and understanding of pedagogy and leadership practices. High levels of trust and positive relationships enable them to cultivate growth and expertise across the system. System leaders enact a moral purpose that every school can improve every year so that all children and young people live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.

System leaders are researchers of their own and others' practice. They have a broader sphere of impact and maintain a moral purpose that guides their goal that every school can improve[xix] so that all children and young people can live rewarding, fulfilling and productive lives.

System leadership and the role of leadership development

The education reform agenda has enabled an increasing focus on leadership development at all career stages as a key component of system leadership[xx]. A focus on leadership development in the context of system leadership has become the preferred approach to improving systemic and sustained educational outcomes across the system[xxi].

System leadership 'wraps around' school leadership in a complex adaptive process where the 'right' system leaders operate with influence. The reciprocal nature of school and system leadership working in synergy highlights that "without effective school leadership, the level of impact of system leadership is likely to be limited"[xxii].

What is emerging in our understanding is that taking a system leadership approach leads to positive impacts[xxiii]. Knowledge and understanding gained from research in the United Kingdom suggests that system leadership emerged as a result of education reform efforts and demonstrates that underperforming schools improved as a result of system leadership[xxiv]. There is a deeper focus on teaching and learning and a greater emphasis on leadership development[xxv].

NSW public education through the work of the School Leadership Institute can harness the learnings from the United Kingdom and build a stronger pathway by proactively generating opportunities for system leadership. Opportunities to facilitate collaborative networks and the provision of facilitator roles in many of the School Leadership Institute offerings will systemically engage and grow system leaders resulting in significant benefits for school and system improvement.

As the evidence of impact for system leadership grows both locally and internationally, system leadership and leadership development will become an approach more broadly adopted by education systems committed to ensuring that every school can continually improve.

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