



Leadership succession: An overview

Securing the next generation of school leaders



Leadership succession: an overview is part of a suite of materials produced by NCSL to support the development of school leaders. Other titles in the series include:

Turning Heads - a guide to marketing your school for prospective headteacher applicants

Career Moves - practical guidance to support aspirant heads succeed in the headship application process

Greenhouse schools - practitioner research reports into developing leaders

Recruiting headteachers and senior leaders

What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances

All publications are free to download from www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday, together with further information on succession planning.

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1. Securing the next generation of school leaders

We have better headteachers than ever before in this country but they are in increasingly short supply. Almost one-third of primary and secondary headships are re-advertised because no suitable candidate comes forward.

Nearly a quarter of heads are aged over 55, and as they retire over the next 5 years, the profession will be deprived of a great swathe of experienced leaders. At the same time, too few new candidates are putting themselves forward for the role.

Some are discouraged by what they see as the overwhelming demands of modern headship, but that is not the only deterrent. It takes a long time to become a head – around 20 years on average – and that can be off-putting to the young and ambitious.

On top of this, schools have traditionally waited for talent to emerge of its own accord, rather than seeking out leaders. It's another brake on the system and is a barrier that hinders more teachers setting their sights on the top jobs.

We must plan for succession

Effective succession means having a plan and making plans to create positive and coordinated flows of leadership, across many years and numerous people.

(Sustainable Leadership 2006, p.92)

Contrary to the ad-hoc approach that prevailed in the past, succession planning is a systematic approach to leadership recruitment and development that is crucial to tackling the shortage of headteachers now looming. In this document, we explain in detail the key issues for leadership succession and look at ways of addressing the challenges that are now emerging.

One point that should be stressed from the beginning is that this is not a problem that can be handled by government or any single agency acting alone. It is a system-wide challenge and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), heads, governors, schools, local authorities, diocesan bodies, professional associations, Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and other national agencies all have a part to play in addressing it.

2. Succession challenges

There are several inter-related challenges at work.

The retirement boom

A key factor in the declining number of headteachers is the age profile of the profession.

More than half of the country's headteachers are now aged over 50 and will be hitting the normal retirement age of 60 at the same time. In recent years, the number of people taking early retirement after 55 has also increased. At the same time, not enough new leaders are emerging to replace those departing.

Given these trends, it is estimated that the number of school leaders retiring is likely to rise from 2,250 in 2004 to nearly 3,500 in 2009, dropping back to 2,500 in 2016.

This means that we need to increase the number of school leaders coming through by around 15 to 20 per cent over the next two or three years in order to maintain a healthy supply of good-quality candidates for headship.

Perceptions of the job

Few would dispute that the role of the headteacher is a demanding one. Heads today have responsibilities way beyond anything their predecessors experienced. They face a rigorous regime of accountability, being accountable to more bodies – government, Ofsted, local authority, parents – and in more ways than ever before. On top of this, they are managing radical changes in the way schools interact with other services.

In one study 43 per cent of deputies said they had no desire to move up to the next rung on the career ladder. The impression of an overwhelming workload and level of responsibility are clearly acting as a deterrent to deputies, assistant heads and others with the potential for headship. Teachers and middle leaders say stress and the loss of pupil contact are also major deterrents.

Headteachers themselves take a different view of the job. Notwithstanding the heavy workload and responsibilities, 9 out of 10 of heads say they find the role rewarding.

Thus there is a mismatch between how teachers perceive the job of headteacher and the reality as seen from the point of view of its incumbents. Whilst changes to the reality of headship are desirable, the image of the role also needs to change and a much more positive one communicated if more teachers are to be persuaded to take it on.

A drawn-out 'apprenticeship'

It takes a long time to become a headteacher, longer than it takes to achieve an equivalent level of seniority in most other professions. The standard 'apprenticeship' lasts 20 years, comprising 15 as a classroom teacher and 5 as a deputy. Making the route to the top swifter would render it more appealing to younger teachers who feel that the system as it stands stifles their ambition.

National and regional variations

The problems that succession planning raises are not the same everywhere. In some inner London boroughs for example, headteacher vacancies are running at approximately 5 per cent compared with a national average of around 1 per cent.

Nationally, more than 30 per cent of primary and secondary schools have to re-advertise for headteachers; 10 years ago, fewer than 20 per cent had that problem. In Inner London and in the Catholic sector, re-advertisement rates can be higher than 50 per cent – in other words, for every school that fills a vacancy, there's at least one other that cannot find a suitable candidate to lead it at the first time of asking.

And re-advertising does not come cheaply: in 2005, it cost education around £1 million.

It is not only a question of geography. Faith schools, small schools, schools in areas of expensive housing and those in areas of high deprivation, all face their own recruitment challenges.

But whether the variations are geographical, socio-economic, cultural or religious, imposing centrally devised and implemented initiatives is not the solution. Local issues need solutions that are tailored to their context, and the best people to identify these solutions are those who know the context well. Nevertheless, this does not mean each school or area must work in isolation. NCSL and other public bodies have an important supporting role, providing impetus and a national overview to help schools and local authorities rise to the challenge.

3. Meeting the challenge

Successful succession demands that we set aside our yearning for heroic and everlasting leadership and that we treat leadership instead as something that stretches far beyond any one leader's professional and even physical lifetime.

(Sustainable Leadership 2006, p.93)

There are already several opportunities to respond positively to the challenges of headteacher recruitment.

Expanding opportunities

To foster greater interest in leadership and create a sense of possibility, potential heads need to be given more opportunities to lead and at earlier stages in their careers. Being able to try out the leadership role for size – whether on a strategic project or by assuming responsibility for a key area of school activity – will give them a taste of what leadership means in its day-to-day reality.

Research indicates that those who have tried headship, or aspects of it (for example, in an acting capacity) are more likely to believe that they have the ability to do it, and to want to do it. By trying out the role, they also become more confident.

There is a key opportunity here for senior leaders to create more opportunities for staff to act up and experience a more senior role.

Widening the talent pool

The need to encourage more women and members of minority ethnic groups into senior leadership roles has been an concern for some years. Both are still under-represented at senior level in proportion to their numbers in the teaching workforce as a whole.

The case for increasing their numbers has generally been couched in terms of equal opportunity but there are strategic reasons for widening the talent pool.

If more women and people from an minority ethnic background were encouraged to put themselves forward for leadership, it would uncover a rich new seam of talent and help to alleviate the looming headteacher shortage. It would also mean that school leadership would better reflect the wider workforce.

Talent-spotting

Giving would-be heads opportunities earlier on in their careers is fine but we need to go further. Rather than simply waiting for it to emerge of its own accord, a more proactive approach to spotting talent is required.

Talent-spotting is something other sectors – particularly the commercial world – see as essential but it is rarely prioritised in education. The Fast Track programme is one attempt to address this (see below), but it is not enough to simply rely on centrally administered programmes. We need to become much better at identifying potential leaders and finding ways to accelerate their development at the school and local system levels.

It means not only giving them opportunities within school but also, for example, offering them the chance to work in a range of different contexts – urban, rural, multi-ethnic, large, small – so that they emerge as leaders with a breadth of expertise and experience.

Leading beyond the school

Developing leaders who lead and influence not only their own but also other schools, the community and education policy has become a dominant theme in recent years. It reflects the view that one of the keys to driving school improvement is to capitalise on the practice and experience of schools in their different contexts and to share that knowledge within, between and beyond schools. Rather than relying on a top-down, centralised approach to resolving problems, it positions headteachers and their schools as key sources of knowledge, support and good practice.

These system leadership roles include school improvement partnerships (SIPs), executive heads, consultant leaders, leaders of federations and collaborations and the new role of national leaders of education.

Working beyond the school in this way can be invigorating for headteachers and it therefore has implications for recruitment and retention. It can encourage successful heads to stay on at a school rather than moving to seek out fresh challenges in another school or organisation. As well as presenting opportunities for heads, leading beyond the school has a knock-on effect in terms of leadership development elsewhere in the school. When a head takes on a SIP or other system leadership role, it gives deputies, assistant heads and others the chance to act up, take on more responsibilities and try out leadership roles for size, thereby preparing potential leaders and boosting their confidence and motivation.

Knowing that there is an opportunity to develop a career as a headteacher beyond a single school also makes the role of headteacher potentially more appealing to young, ambitious teachers. Previously, they would have perceived headship of a single school as the final rung on the career ladder. There are now a much wider range of challenges that maintain a direct link with children, staff and schools.

Local authorities and governing bodies can be wary of allowing their headteachers to devote less time to their school in order to work with others, especially in a period when good heads are in short supply. In fact, rather than undermining a school's stability, system leadership can actually support it.

Viewed this way, system leadership and succession planning, far from being in opposition, are actually mutually beneficial.

Opportunities presented by new models of headship

New models of headship are emerging to cope with the demands of modern school leadership. Sometimes they have evolved expressly to cope with the headteacher shortage, but schools also see these new models of headship as ways to open up career development opportunities and pathways for other staff to respond to the challenges of modern school leadership.

NCSL has carried out research into three new models that have particular relevance to leadership succession: federations, co-headship and executive headship. These are described briefly below.

Federations

A federation is a group of two or more schools that formally agree to work together to raise standards. One headteacher may oversee a number of schools within the federation, again challenging the tradition of every school having its own headteacher.

NCSL research into federations in the Netherlands suggests that, among other advantages, they can provide a positive option for schools facing long-standing headteacher recruitment issues, such as those presented in small and remote rural schools.

Co-headship

In co-headship, two headteachers either job-share a single headship or work as full-time, joint headteachers. Co-headship offers heads both a better work-life balance and the time to work in roles outside the school. By making the headteacher role less demanding in day-to-day terms and more varied, it can aid recruitment and retention.

Executive headship

In this case, one head who is already leading a successful school adds the leadership of another to their remit. Executive headship is often deployed in schools where leadership needs to be strongly supported because the school is not performing well.

Executive headship can be a powerful school development mechanism because it creates opportunities for middle and other leaders. In the head's absence, deputies and assistant heads can take on new responsibilities and benefit from career development opportunities. For other staff, the chance to work across more than one school presents new openings to hone their leadership and development skills.

Besides helping to plug gaps in the provision of headteachers, these new models of headship can help with retention by offering experienced heads the chance to refresh their careers. It's another way of encouraging them to stay in the role longer, rather than seek a new challenge elsewhere.

For more information on NCSL's work on new models of headship, see www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship.

Leadership development opportunities

For those en route to senior posts, leadership preparation is more important than ever. This is particularly the case now that career paths have widened and the profession is attracting more mature entrants. Schools should be active in planning leadership development opportunities for staff and accessing national provision such as the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), Fast Track and Future Leaders.

NPQH

NPQH is the mandatory qualification for headteachers and prepares candidates for headship in accordance with the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004). Anyone with a body of experience of leadership at the whole-school level can apply for a place on the 15-month programme. NPQH combines independent study and online learning with attendance at events and visits to schools. NCSL oversees the programme, which is delivered by several providers nationwide and is currently being reviewed.

Currently, approximately 28 per cent of middle leaders plan to take NPQH. Encouraging another five per cent of middle leaders to take NPQH would make a huge contribution to solving the headteacher shortage. See www.ncsl.org.uk/npqh for more information.

Fast Track

As mentioned overleaf, the length of time it takes to acquire sufficient experience to qualify for headship – 20 years or more – can be a significant deterrent to new and ambitious teachers.

The Fast Track programme focuses on the most talented teachers early in their careers, developing their classroom expertise and their leadership skills. Their careers are centrally managed. They have access to mentoring and support, a tailored professional development programme and are assessed on their abilities in analysis and problem-solving, communication, team-working and building relationships, as well as achieving results.

Evidence so far suggests that the Fast Track programme is having an impact in helping to speed up the rate at which leadership candidates emerge. One participant was appointed to her first headship at 29, demonstrating that rapid progression is possible if the will is there to embrace it and the opportunities are made available. For more information see www.ncsl.org.uk/fasttrack

Future Leaders

This pilot programme aims to develop more leaders to work in the most challenging schools in urban areas.

An intensive programme of mentoring, coaching and on-the-job training prepares participants to become senior leaders after a year and a headteacher within four years. It is open to serving teachers, people returning to the profession and qualified teachers currently working in other areas of education.

Currently under review, the Future Leaders initiative is supported by a partnership between NCSL, Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). For more information see www.ncsl.org.uk/futureleaders.

NCSL has several other programmes to support schools in addressing their leadership development needs. A sample of these are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: NCSL programmes to support schools' leadership development needs

Name of programme	Description	Website address
Leading from the Middle	LftM is a 10-month professional development programme for up to 4 middle leaders in a single or group of schools. Groups work with a coach and focus on key areas of leadership.	www.ncsl.org.uk/lftm
Leadership Pathways	This modular programme provides personalised leadership learning with an emphasis on work-based learning and application. It is aimed at established leaders, and provides a foundation for those looking to move to senior roles.	www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershippathways
Developing Capacity for Sustained Improvement	This programme focuses on strategic thinking and building capacity in schools. It is aimed at senior leadership teams but can also incorporate middle-level leaders.	www.ncsl.org.uk/dcsi
Working Together for Success	Working Together for Success helps senior leadership teams to develop their team-working skills for use within and across schools.	www.ncsl.org.uk/wtfs

Other national initiatives with a focus on coaching and mentoring for would-be heads are offered by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE). Some local authorities, such as Hampshire, Lincolnshire, Rochdale and Sandwell have devised strategies aimed at expanding the leadership pool and improving the calibre of candidates, while some schools have developed ways to grow their own leaders from within.

A real opportunity

Succession planning – tackling the headteacher shortage and securing not only the necessary numbers to sustain the success of England’s schools in the future but also the quality – undoubtedly presents a major challenge. NCSL, heads, governors, schools, local authorities, diocesan bodies, professional associations, DfES and other national agencies all have a part to play in addressing it.

It will not be resolved quickly and although work may have to continue for a decade, we have to move quickly in areas where the problems are acute.

It is important to remember however that this is not just about filling vacancies. Succession planning offers us all a real opportunity to increase both the quantity and quality of school leaders and develop a generation of leaders who can advance education in the 21st century.

4. What does this mean for governors and appointing authorities?

We have already argued that the school leadership shortage is not a problem for government, NCSL, local authorities or the professional bodies alone. Nor can it be solved by any centrally imposed strategy. Schools themselves have a major part to play in finding solutions to the challenges. And that means there is a crucial role for governors.

Appointing a headteacher is probably the most important task the governing body will ever have to face but – as the growing number of re-advertisements shows – it is one that more and more are finding difficult.

In addition, the cost of a prolonged recruitment process is expensive, and that's without factoring in the cost to the school in terms of momentum lost while operating without a permanent head.

Thus it is in schools' interest to see an increase in the numbers of candidates presenting themselves for headship if for no other reason than it would make recruitment less time-consuming and therefore less costly, and would achieve a higher success rate. More candidates also means that governors are more likely to be able to choose a high-quality leader whose qualities and skills match the needs of their school.

In fact, fewer than half of all school governors have ever had any recruitment training and consequently many feel ill-equipped for the job. Recruitment practice also varies widely between schools and local authorities.

This is something NCSL addresses in its new advice for governors by offering a guide to running effective recruitment processes.
www.ncsl.org.uk/recruitingleaders

However, the question of how to create a pool of good-quality school leaders has implications for school governors that go beyond recruitment.

Some may feel that nurturing leaders and leadership potential is a job best left to the school management team and professional bodies, but this is manifestly not so for several reasons.

Schools that offer talented staff opportunities to develop leadership skills have found that staff turnover decreases and that it creates a ready-made pool of potential leaders from which the school can draw when a senior vacancy arises.

Any changes that a head intends to make in order to create leadership opportunities for staff, such as devolving responsibility for key strategic

areas, secondments to other schools or international visits, need the support of governors, even though the direct benefit to their own school is not immediately obvious and it may mean taking some risks.

The creation of a school succession plan within the context of a school leadership development strategy therefore makes a great deal of sense. Schools also find collaborating with other schools in producing and supporting these plans extremely beneficial. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink suggest that good succession plans:

- are prepared long before the leader's anticipated departure or even from the outset of their appointment
- give other people proper time to prepare
- are incorporated in all school improvement plans
- are the responsibility of many, rather than the prerogative of lone leaders who tend to want to clone themselves
- are based on a clear diagnosis of the school's existing stage of development and future needs for improvement
- are transparently linked to clearly defined leadership standards and competencies that are needed for the next phase of improvement

(Sustainable Leadership 2006, p.72)

The Every Child Matters agenda also has specific implications for leadership development. It is expanding the role and responsibilities of the head in entirely new ways outside the school and creating opportunities for other members of staff to assume leadership roles within and beyond the school. These are changes that some governors have already found challenging but **which are inevitable** and for which the support of the governing body is essential.

As more and more power is devolved to schools, governors will increasingly be drawn into and be able to influence system-wide issues such as leadership succession. Their role in school improvement is not peripheral, as the 2005 Education White Paper makes clear:

Good leadership is at the heart of every good school. A strong headteacher, backed by an able leadership team and governing body, is vital for success.

(Higher Standards, Better Schools for All 2005, p.99)

Governors have a pivotal part to play in securing the best possible leadership for our schools and opportunities for our children. By sharing our knowledge on recruitment and retention issues, and by providing advice and support to address the challenges, NCSL seeks to help governors and other appointing authorities in fulfilling this vital role.

For more information and practical support, visit www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday.

References

Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (2005), DfES

National Standards for Headteachers (2004), DfES

Sustainable Leadership (2006), Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, Jossey-Bass

