

www.ncsl.org.uk



System leadership in action:

System leaders in profile





System leaders in profile

Perrie Ballantyne, David Jackson and Julie Temperley
with Ann Lieberman

Graham Tyrer in profile...



Graham Tyrer, Acting Headteacher, Ash Green School, Coventry and Co-leader, Warwickshire Inclusion Network

Graham Tyrer was Deputy Headteacher at Nicholas Chamberlaine Technical College in Bedworth when he became Co-leader of the Warwickshire Inclusion Network. He credits the network with giving him an unique opportunity for leadership development and the confidence to take on a new position as acting head of a failing school. Though the challenges he faces at Ash Green School are considerable, Graham feels ready to meet them: *"Sometimes I think: How am I going to make this work? I have learnt, though, that to improve this school I will need to get the leadership right at all levels, and work towards allowing strong leadership to become self-replicating. One of the most compelling leadership lessons I have learned is to try to engage the negative people, rather than ignore them or dismiss them. I think: How can I persuade you of the moral purpose of this mission? This is quite different from the old Ofsted model which says: Do it – or you're out!"*

Graham believes that – as they open up lines of communication and allow the good practice to flow through the system – networks are *"changing the DNA of schools"*. He explains: *"Schools in difficulty have to take a risk that enquiry is one of the key steps forward. I visited Ninestyles, Dexter Hutt's school in Birmingham, and said: 'Some things aren't working in my school' and he said: 'Try this! It works!' Sometimes there are easy fixes and you can bring back practices that work in your school."* Graham also believes that *"networks breed networks"*. He tells a compelling story to illustrate the point. When his office manager saw what he was doing, she asked him if she could create a network for office managers across schools. *"Helping to manage our own network she just thought: I can do that! Our motto is, 'JDI – just do it!'. And she just did it. She invented her own leadership skills needed to create and run this network and the network has gone from strength-to-strength."*

John Baumber in profile...

"I think if you were to ask people in Bolton what I do" John Baumber tells us, "it would have to be that I am a system leader more than a leader of an organisation. I'm in all sorts of strange places doing all sorts of things, and I guess I'm driven by the feeling of wanting to radically alter the way we work to the benefit of all young people, not just those in one school."

John was Headteacher at Rivington and Blackrod High School in Bolton, an ever-growing school with a strong and successful record. But this is only one part of his leadership story. John's school recently formed a partnership with a neighbouring high school that was deemed to be failing its students and ultimately was closed. Under John's executive headship, the school was re-opened as Ladybridge High and has since had two outstanding inspections. The Brook Learning Partnership is committed to working with the broader community. In particular, Rivington's lower school site has joined physically and organisationally with the neighbouring Lord Street Primary School, with both schools working together to provide a full range of community services.

John suggests that young people in some parts of Bolton do not have high educational aspirations. This is what moves him to "constantly look for ways to do something" towards fuelling the drive to achieve. John believes, *"It's much easier to move things forward if you're doing it in partnership with others. If, as a result of you being successful, you're damaging opportunities for other communities of learners around you, that's not really sustainable. But if you can engage the whole community in moving things forward, then I think you can get a cultural shift in expectations and achievement. I'm really proud of what we have achieved at Ladybridge and Rivington and Blackrod. I think that's just a phenomenal thing to have achieved so quickly – people tell me about that all the time. It's such a lovely feeling to be able to walk into those schools and feel the difference. What's more, the two new principals are doing a great job with their own teams which has allowed us to be able to support a third school over the course of this year. We've really developed some resilience."*

John Baumber, Executive Principal, The Brook Learning Partnership (Rivington and Blackrod High School and Ladybridge High School), Acting Headteacher, Sharples School, Bolton and Co-leader, Transforming North Networked Learning Community



Louise Raymond in profile...



Louise Raymond, Director, Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership, Bedford

Louise Raymond is the Director of the Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership (BSIP); a school improvement network that embraces all 227 schools from all phases of education in Bedfordshire. Overseeing a compulsory, county-wide school network referred to as 'Learning Communities', Louise knows a significant amount about establishing a context and a climate for collaborative working. "Strong leadership from the local authority has been hugely important" she says. "In Bedfordshire it became a question of going to schools and saying: 'we all agree that we want to make things better for learners and this is the way we need to do it – by working together'. It's no good going to stakeholders with a blank page. You need to go there with a well-worked-out vision that's simple and compelling. If it's complicated; you lose people."

In putting together a vision for a learning community that is county-wide and compulsory, Louise and her colleagues began by asking schools – including headteachers, teachers and students – what they wanted. This became their bedrock

for creative ideas. Louise is nationally and internationally renowned as a champion of student involvement in school improvement. "Nothing" she says, "is more important than student voice. Nothing is more important than involving people in their own education. Students are the biggest untapped capacity in our schools. People complain about what they lack – time and resources or whatever – but they need to learn to unleash the potential of students to engage in school improvement." Louise feels that having been an acting headteacher and deputy headteacher in Bedfordshire (at Sharnbrook Upper School), and having employed students as assessors in her own classrooms, has enabled her to work effectively across schools in the local authority. "I wouldn't like to advise teachers do things that I haven't tried myself, but I know what it's like to have students observing you and assessing you in classrooms. It can be more nerve-wracking than an Ofsted inspection, but I advocate it because it works. It keeps students engaged in their own learning; it enriches the culture of the school and makes students want to be there."

Hilary Craik in profile...

When Hilary Craik took on her first headteacher's post at Stevenson Junior School in Nottingham in 2000, she faced challenges beyond adapting to a new school and a new level of responsibility. At Stevenson results were poor, staff morale was extremely low and a recent inspection had judged the school to have 'serious weaknesses' in the areas of leadership and management. Hilary's first step in transforming the fate of her school was to make contact with neighbouring schools and their leaders, who quickly became trusted colleagues. "The schools were within a mile of each other" Hilary explains, "and four of us were new to our positions. We just gelled very quickly because we needed each other. There was always something that we didn't know and I think we all felt it was wonderful to have someone to phone in that circumstance." Hilary and her colleagues soon formalised their relationship, establishing a network of seven schools in the immediate vicinity. The network was bonded by the challenges they shared. As Hilary explains, "Ours is an area with falling rolls and we could very easily have been in competition with each other. But we didn't feel that was the way we wanted to go:

fighting each other for the same children when what we really ought to be doing is what is best for all of them."

Hilary and her colleagues applied to become an NCSL networked learning community. Their story is particularly inspiring because, though their efforts to secure funding were unsuccessful, the group remained committed to their action plan. As Hilary explains, "We just believed that networking was the right way forward. We all felt we should be collaborating: sharing what we know; pooling our resources; putting everything together. The money in the end did not matter because the idea was so important – that we all work together for the benefit of all these children." Hilary's approach has proved successful. Stevenson is now a happy and stimulating learning environment, and a recent inspection praised Hilary's leadership of the school as 'outstanding'. Hilary has continued to seek out new leadership challenges and has since worked to support two other schools with leadership and management issues.

Hilary Craik, Headteacher, Stevenson Junior School, Nottingham



Martine Sinker in profile...



Martine Sinker, Headteacher Co-ordinator, Rochdale Education and Learning Trust, Rochdale County Council

Martine Sinker had been a headteacher for 10 years when she was seconded to the Rochdale County Council to co-ordinate their Rochdale Education and Learning (REAL) Trust. The Trust aims to implement a structured and collaborative approach to sharing good practice across schools within the authority and to provide professional development opportunities to all staff in schools. *“I was quite nervous at first”* Martine tells us, in reflection on first taking on this new leadership challenge. *“I was voicing my concerns to one of the other heads, and he said: ‘well, you’ll just have to think now of the other schools and the LEA as your classroom, this is your school now.’”* Any fears Martine had were allayed by her belief in the importance of the kind of work that lay before her. *“I believe in schools learning together”* she asserts. *“I really, really, really think they do better if they just even join with one other school, and the staff talk to each other.”*

On her consultative visits to schools, Martine explains: *“I go in there with no agenda whatsoever, other than what I can do for them, which the schools think is just brilliant. I just tell people what we offer through the REAL Trust professional*

development programme, and through the Treasury. I just listen and make suggestions.” Martine is currently leading a pilot programme called the Expert Trail – an initiative that often makes her feel as though she is *“a spider at the centre of a web.”* The Trail is a network of educational leaders who work closely together on the implementation of a coherent framework for professional learning and performance development for all their staff. *“The whole idea”* Martine explains, *“is that if people have a problem with the staffing structures, or they’ve got difficult members of staff who aren’t performing adequately, or they’re struggling to write the teaching assistant roles, then I can put them in touch with people who can help them. Every one of the heads in that pilot group have said, I don’t mind if you give anyone my number, I don’t mind anyone coming to school, I’ll talk to anybody for however long, because I really believe in this Expert Trail. And that’s how it’s spread; from me just saying to people, oh, ring Pat, or ring Dave. And they ring, and then they go and have a look at what they’re doing, and then they come back and say, I want to join, I want to join!”*

Nikki Thomas in profile...

As a teacher and later as a headteacher, Nikki always sought opportunities to stick her head up out of her school and look around the system at what others were doing. It is not surprising, then, that during her years as Headteacher at Bosham Primary School in West Sussex, she became passionate about networking and a Co-leader of the Think First Networked Learning Community (NLC). Some years into the life of her network, West Sussex County Council asked her to do a presentation to the Leadership Forum, speaking to the question: 'What is Networked Learning?' *"It was a really significant moment for me"* Nikki recalls. *"I had an hour and 15 minutes to work with what I believed would be an indifferent audience. I had to synthesise everything that I believed about 'networked learning', and to deliver it with passion and enthusiasm to an audience, half of whom couldn't give two hoots about it and wouldn't even know why I'd been asked to do it. And so I did it. And I got some very challenging questions back. People's response to the presentation made me realise that I actually did know an awful lot about this stuff.*

And it wasn't just a practical form of knowing about it and being able to do it, it was an, I know enough about this stuff to be able to lead other people in doing this it."

Nikki's presentation bore all kinds of unexpected fruit. Later, as she was trying to get her local authority to understand what Primary National Strategy Learning Networks were all about, she effectively talked a new role into existence. Nikki now works full-time as an educational consultant in the area of networked learning in West Sussex and neighbouring counties. Reflecting on her new position she says, *"It really is a direct result of my work within our NLC that I'm now doing what I'm doing. And in a way I'm trying to use some of the skills and the knowledge and the experience that I've gained from working in an NLC and within the wider network of NLCs at national conferences. It's quite frustrating trying to bring those methods to a system that isn't actually working like that at all. Sometimes I think I'm speaking a completely different language, but I quite like the challenge."*

Nikki Thomas, Consultant, West Sussex County Council and Co-leader, Think First Networked Learning Community



Ray Tarleton in profile...



Ray Tarleton, Principal, South Dartmoor Community College, Devon, Co-leader, South Dartmoor Networked Learning Community and National Co-ordinator, NCSL Leadership Network

Well before networked learning communities were born, Ray Tarleton had sought his own opportunities for school-to-school collaboration. As a head of an English department in the 1980s, Ray attended monthly, structured best practice discussion sessions in the evening, over dinner at the home of a university lecturer who facilitated a network of six colleagues. When Ray became a headteacher he missed the stimulation of close engagement with professional peers. This was during *“the wilderness years of competition”* and it was difficult for him to imagine the circumstances under which he might find himself having frank discussions with other headteachers about how to lead a school. *“When the NLCs started up”* Ray recalls, *“it was such an obvious and important idea that I thought, why hasn’t this been done before?”*

Ray has been Headteacher at South Dartmoor College in Devon for 17 years. Under his leadership the school has been

transformed from a small and struggling secondary school, into a large award-winning sports college, but Ray maintains that learning to be a headteacher is a process that should never be seen as complete. *“I am still always challenging myself by posing the question: what is a headteacher? I am still learning what it is to be one. As heads, we are not always that good at our own educational learning – sometimes people need to tell you what you could do differently.”* Ray is a passionate advocate for the role that networks can play in professional learning. In addition to belonging to a network of sports colleges and networks of headteachers, Ray has also been seconded to NCSL’s national Leadership Network. *“Networks”* he explains, *“provide you with all kinds of things. You build strong relationships with people and then you get access to ideas and information – about organisation and leadership, or whatever you need to know – and the things that you want to do can happen much more quickly.”*

Robin Casson in profile...

In 1987 Robin Casson went for a job interview and became the successful candidate for his next teaching position. He left his post-interview debrief with the feeling that something significant had shifted within him. It was the first time that an employer had identified him as someone with leadership potential; the first time any of his headteachers had said: *"You know, you're going to be a headteacher yourself one day. And this is how we're going to develop your leadership skills."* It would be 12 years before Robin became a headteacher, but the power of that moment has resonated throughout his career. *"I can remember as a young teacher being desperate for opportunities to do things, and opportunities were distributed pretty meanly at the time"* Robin recalls. *"I learned to lead by knowing that people had confidence in me and by having been given the opportunity and the permission."*

As a deputy headteacher in Derbyshire and later as Headteacher at Prudhoe High School in Northumberland (a post he held until January 2006), Robin focused strongly on nurturing the leadership skills of his staff. When he became a Co-leader of the North of England Networked Learning Community, and was introduced to the idea of 'distributed leadership', he realised he'd been practising

it intuitively for years. *"I have never been someone who felt comfortable with that concept of the hero leader. I see from my own experience that headteachers who retain a tight control over leadership within the school, well ... when they leave, the whole structure can fall apart."* By building leadership capacity within his school, Robin has been able to focus more of his attention on leading beyond his own institution and nurturing collaborative relationships between schools and other services – a passion fuelled by the 12 years he spent as a community education worker before becoming a school teacher. Robin is now well-placed to continue this work, and in January 2006 he was appointed to the new post of Director of Schools and Family Support for Northumberland County Council. *"In a year's time I'll be a different leader from the one I am now"* Robin told us in anticipation of his new role. *"I think my learning curve is going to shoot up. I'll be learning from people in other contexts, social services and health. But I hope at the same time that they will be learning from me."*

Robin Casson, Director of Schools and Family Support, Northumberland County Council and Co-leader, North of England Networked Learning Community



Robin Cowen in profile...



Robin Cowen, Headteacher, Penryn Junior School, Cornwall, Co-leader, Penryn Networked Learning Community and Primary National Strategy Consultant Leader

Robin Cowen, Headteacher at Penryn Junior School in Cornwall, practises the belief that every child in every school matters equally. It's a view he shares explicitly with the other school leaders in the Penryn Partnership Network, which comprises an infant and nursery school, junior school and college (housed on a single site), as well as seven further primary schools. The schools have been working closely for more than 10 years now, collaborating in a developmental way and increasingly dovetailing their activities. The network originally came together, Robin explains, because "we realised that we could do more things – and we could do them more effectively – by pooling our resources. And by resources, I mean resources in the physical sense, but also much more broadly. For example, if there's a job to be done that requires expertise, it's nearly always the case that someone within the partnership has the skills that you're looking for and the vision to drive it. If you've got people working in isolation you just don't get that, you've got to build up teams in order to achieve these ends."

Robin believes that vision – clearly articulated and mutually shared – is absolutely essential to leadership in collaborative partnerships. A few years ago, he and his colleagues stopped talking about 'school improvement' and began to articulate their vision differently. "We stopped thinking, okay, this is where we are, we've got another year coming up, what do we need to do next? What we've done instead is to look at all the different aspects of school life and say: never mind what we do next year, what would excellence look like? What's our ultimate vision? If we got everything right in this area – special needs, pupil welfare, learning, whatever it might be – what would it actually look like? To somebody coming in through the door, what would it actually feel like? So, instead of five year plans, we've set out a range of visions for excellence across each aspect of school life. Now that we've mapped out our vision, our core moral purpose and what that looks like, we're single-minded in moving towards that vision."

Sallyanne Stanton in profile...

Sallyanne Stanton has noticed significant changes in the experience of being a headteacher through the last five years she's been one. "People will say that a head's role has always been a very lonely one" she says, "but I don't think it is any more. You used to be by yourself and you didn't always feel comfortable to pick the phone up to call somebody if there was a problem." Since becoming a Co-leader of Southampton Networked Learning Community, the Headteacher of Kanes Hill Primary School in Southampton has been much more energised. "I have found it really invigorating" she explains, "actually I think the word is liberating – to meet heads across the whole country who felt exactly the same way as me. The liberating bit was realising that there really was a powerful voice. We all felt really strongly about different issues and had such strong opinions. It felt that there was a way to actually influence the system, and that really interested me."

Sallyanne is now doing things differently as a result of what she's learned as a network co-leader and much has changed since the early days of her headship. "The school was not doing particularly well and the problems kept piling up at my door. It was quite overwhelming," Sallyanne recalls. "I remember going

into a meeting and saying to my staff: 'I can't carry on like this. We need to work together, and you all need to be leaders yourselves sometimes. I can be the goose flying out there ahead, but sometimes I need to drop back and you need to be out at the front.' It was quite an emotional moment for all of us." Sallyanne began to encourage her staff to assume a greater responsibility for leadership in different areas of the school. "They really appreciated the trust and freedom to develop as leaders. The trust aspect was vital to their confidence and to them being able to take risks without fear of blame or failure. And from there we've really developed as a team." Sallyanne is proud to reflect on some of the changes she sees at Kanes Hill. "I've seen where the school has come from, and I love seeing the difference in the children. I say that every year. But when you see children coming in at the age of four – some of them monosyllabic, some of them with such low self-esteem, some with very poor social skills – and becoming so confident by the time they leave, it's always wonderful."

Sallyanne Stanton, Headteacher, Kanes Hill Primary School, Southampton, Co-leader, Southampton Networked Learning Community and Primary National Strategy Consultant Leader



Stefani Shedden in profile...



Stefani Shedden, Co-ordinator for Gifted and Talented Pupils, Hounslow and Co-leader, South West London Networked Learning Community

After 10 years as a teacher, Stefani took on the different challenge of working across schools as the Excellence in Cities (EiC) Gifted & Talented (G&T) Strand Coordinator in Hounslow, a role she has fulfilled since 2001. When she first began to move around the system and work with different schools, she was struck by a culture of insularity. *“I learnt quickly”* she explains, *“that schools can be very inward-looking. They can be fabulous worlds, full of wonderful people and great kids, but they tend to be very consumed by their own needs.”*

Stefani is Co-leader of the South West London Network Learning Community, which has action research as its central focus for improving teaching and learning, and is now also leading a primary learning network project (Mathsnet) developing pupils as action researchers. If these roles have afforded her a different perspective on the education system, they have also required her to develop new ways of working. *“When you’ve been used to working in one school”* Stefani

suggests, *“you make huge assumptions about common values, beliefs and methods of working. In the beginning I did make mistakes and found difficulties with some colleagues with a very different perspective to mine.”*

These days, Stefani has a strong sense of what it takes to work effectively across schools. *“I think it’s my role to make it as easy as possible for people to do what they need to do. You have to be able to understand the challenges that schools face. Until you actually go into someone’s school you can’t always understand how they operate – why they don’t make meetings and why they don’t manage to send replies to urgent emails. Then you go in and you realise just how hard it can be. You have to start from where people are and not from where you’d like them to be. I suppose I’ve learned that my role when I go into schools is to try to make it as easy as possible for teachers and managers to contribute and move further along their own journey.”*

Alan Steer in profile...

Sir Alan Steer has been Headteacher at Seven Kings High School in Redbridge for 20 years and is struck by the changes he has seen. He recalls a time when other headteachers were seen as “*the enemy*” and it would have been “*unthinkable*” for schools to share with other schools the nature of what went on within their walls. Alan is now Co-leader of the Redbridge Networked Learning Community which – with 52 collaborating schools in Redbridge – is probably one of the largest school networks in the country. Like many other headteachers, Alan began to collaborate with his headteacher colleagues in response to an urgent sense of need. In 2000, Redbridge received a difficult assessment and the authority was almost on the brink of being dismantled. Headteachers in Redbridge began to rally together towards the creation of a new local educational agenda. “*It arose very much in that context,*” Alan says of Redbridge NLC, “*with a sort of wave of determination to do something about what people saw as a very frustrating scenario. Headteachers didn’t like what they’d seen of external commercial people coming in*

and running the local authority. There was also the feeling that if you didn’t get up and do something yourself, then there’s no point sitting there waiting for somebody else to do something for you.”

When asked how his networking activities have fed back into his school, Alan suggests that such things are very difficult to measure. Within the greater wheel of Redbridge NLC, a mini-network has focused on Assessment for Learning and Alan is certain that, though results may not be markedly different, the quality of his students’ experience has been enhanced tremendously. Alan can see it in the language used by students and the concepts with which they will now engage. “*Last week we had a Professor of Education visiting from Taiwan*” he explains. “*She was talking to a Year 9 boy and asked him, ‘What do you like about the school?’ And the student said, ‘I like the learning’...Yes, I thought, I’ll settle for that.*”

Alan Steer, Headteacher, Seven Kings High School, Ilford, Co-leader, Redbridge Networked Learning Community and Chair of the Behaviour Management Advisory Group, DfES



Sue Egersdorff in profile



Sue Egersdorff, SureStart Manager, Cheshire County Council and Co-leader, Organic Networked Learning Community

Sue Egersdorff began her career as a teacher but her current role as SureStart Manager sees her charged with the responsibility of bringing together multiple services into a Children's Services Department. She is leading a significant change programme which will ultimately see health, social care and education services co-located in one building. As a network co-leader, Sue learnt important lessons about how to broker relationships between the different groups who come to bear on children's education and development. "I've learnt by shutting up and listening" she explains. "You do learn an enormous amount by observing. I think it's underrated as a leadership skill." It is only by listening, Sue adds, and by getting the human relationships right, that leaders working in multi-agency environments discover how they might build bridges across the cultural gulfs that separate organisations: "We've done a lot of talking about basic relationship-building and ideas of openness, trust and reciprocity. We've found that the language we use is critical in terms of sharing basic understandings. When we've brought health colleagues and social care colleagues and education together, we have to go back to the drawing board and find

out what simple terms like 'diversity', 'inclusion', or 'additional needs' mean for other professional colleagues. It takes time and patience to understand where others are coming from."

Facing the challenge of implementing a multi-agency agenda, Sue has learnt that it is important to develop a leadership style that is highly adaptable. "How you might inform and work alongside parents could be very different from how you would work alongside chief executives of primary care trusts. One has to learn to wear different kinds of hats. It is important to think about the message that you're trying to get across and the information that particular group of people in that network need to enable them to have ownership and control of the situation." System leaders, Sue reflects, need to be sure of their moral purpose and be able to enlist a shared commitment to it across contexts: "Certainly the power of our network has been that people have always believed that emotional well-being is central to children's development. People have a real belief that what we're doing can make a difference."

To order a copy of this publication please email nlc@ncsl.org.uk quoting the reference NR/SystemLeadership, or download directly from www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

**National College for
School Leadership**
Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: nlc@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

Networked Learning Communities

Learning from each other Learning with each other Learning on behalf of each other