System Leadership for School Transformation

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Introduction

The concept of 'system leadership' is one that over the past decade has caught the educational imagination. System leaders are those Principals who are willing to shoulder system wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own. As such, system leadership is a new and emerging practice that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete State/Regional networks or programs that when taken together have the potential to contribute to system transformation.

The educational policy direction in many developed countries is changing quite dramatically at the present time.1 There is currently a rapid shift away from the government managed educational changes of the 1990s and 2000s to far more decentralised systems based on the principle of 'autonomy'. This reflects the genuine belief on the part of many politicians and policy makers that there is a need to unleash the power of the profession that has been harnessed in the recent past by too much control. It is within such a context that system leadership assumes increasing importance.

In making the case for the potential of system leadership as the key driver for systemic reform in the State of Victoria the argument in this paper is divided into two key sections:

> the first presents a model of system leadership including the internal and external aspects of the system leadership role

> second, a framework for system improvement based on the principle of 'segmentation' and driven by system leadership is discussed.

A Model for System Leadership

The first thing to say is that system leadership at its heart is imbued with moral purpose (Fullan 2003). Without that, there would not be the passion to proceed or the encouragement for others to follow. In those systems where the regularities of improvement in teaching and learning are still not well understood, where deprivation is still too good a predictor of educational success and where the goal is for every school to be a great school, the leadership challenge is surely a systemic one. This perspective gives a broader appreciation of what is meant by the moral purpose of system leadership.

In Every School a Great School (Hopkins 2007: 154), I argued that system leaders express their moral purpose through:

> measuring their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s)

> being fundamentally committed to the improvement of teaching and learning; they engage deeply with the organisation of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment in order to ensure that learning is personalised for all their students

> developing their schools as personal and professional learning communities, with relationships built across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities

> striving for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture –this is not just about eradicating poverty,

As important as that is, but also about giving communities a sense of worth and empowerment

> realising in a deep way that the classroom, school and system levels all impact on each other. Crucially they understand that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.

Although this degree of clarity is not necessarily obvious in the behaviour and practice of every Principal, these aspirations are increasingly becoming part of the conventional wisdom of our best global educational leaders. It is also clear from this discussion that system leadership has both internal as well as external aspects to the role, a point that will be developed later.

Building on these key capabilities, and combining them with the range of identified roles, it is possible to offer a model of system leadership practice that has emerged inductively from the research we have done with outstanding educational leaders (see for example: Hopkins 2007, Hopkins and Higham 2007, Higham, Hopkins and Matthews 2009).
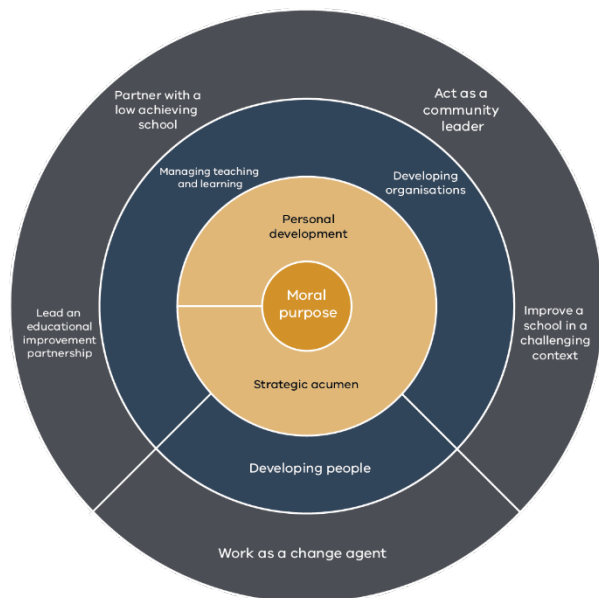

Figure 1 - A model of system leadership practice

The model exhibits a logic that flows from the 'inside-out' (Hopkins 2009).

At the centre, leaders driven by a moral purpose related to the enhancement of student learning, seek to empower teachers and others to make

schools a critical force for improving communities. This is premised on the argument that sustainable educational development requires educational leaders who are willing to shoulder broader leadership roles; who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own.

It is also clear from our research that system leaders share a characteristic set of behaviours and skills. As illustrated in the second inner ring of the diagram these are of two types. First, system leaders engage in 'personal development' usually informally through benchmarking themselves against their peers and developing their skill base in response to the context they find themselves working in. Secondly, all the system leaders we have studied have a strategic capability; they are able to translate their vision or moral purpose into operational principles that have tangible outcomes.

Taken together these two central circles of the diagram reflect the core practice of 'setting directions' as noted in Table 1 below.

As is denoted in the third ring of the model, the moral purpose, personal qualities and strategic capacity of the system leader find focus in three key foci of school leadership – managing the teaching and learning process, developing people and developing the organisation.

Finally, although there are a growing number of outstanding leaders that exemplify these qualities and determinations, they are not necessarily 'system leaders.' A system leader not only needs these aspirations and capabilities but also, in addition, as seen in the outer ring of the model, works to change other contexts by engaging with the wider system in a meaningful way. We have included in the outer ring the range of roles identified from the research and described in the taxonomy below that focuses on improving other schools, sharing curriculum innovations, empowering communities, and/or leading partnerships committed to enabling all schools to move forward.

The model represents a powerful combination of practices that give us a glimpse of leadership in a new educational landscape (Leithwood, et al., 2007). It is also clear from the model that there are both internal and external aspects to the system leadership roles.

A good way of focusing on the internal aspects of system leadership is to draw on Leithwood and Reihl's (2005) conceptualisation of the central

tenants of successful school leadership. They summarise this as four central domains of setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people and developing the organisation. Table 1 below sets out these practices (Hopkins and Higham 2007). This analysis reinforces the argument that enhancing learning and teaching is the key priority for school leadership. The critical leadership challenge here is to ensure that quality teaching and learning is underpinned by more specific and precise frameworks for learning and teaching (Hopkins and Craig 2015a, b & c)

Core Practices	Key System Leadership Components
Setting direction	Total commitment to enable every learner to reach their potential with a strategic vision that extends into the future and brings immediacy to the delivery of improvements for students.
	Ability to translate vision into whole school programs that extend the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms, departments and schools.
Managing Teaching and Learning	Ensure every child is inspired and challenged through appropriate curriculum and a repertoire of teaching styles and skills that underpin personalised learning.
	Develop a high degree of clarity about and consistency of teaching quality to both create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation.
Developing people	Enable students to become more active learners, develop thinking and learning skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning. Involve parents and the community to promote the valuing of positive attitudes to learning and minimise the impact of challenging circumstances on expectations and achievement.
	Develop schools as professional learning communities, with relationships built and fostered across and beyond schools to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities for staff.
Developing the organisation	Create an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by student data, with self-evaluation and external support used to seek out approaches to school improvement that are most appropriate to specific contextual needs.
	Managing resources, workforce reform and the environment to support learning and wellbeing; and extend an organisation's vision of learning to involve networks of schools collaborating to build curriculum diversity, professional support, extended and welfare services.

Table 1 – Key 'Internal' Capabilities of System Leaders

Key 'internal' capabilities of system leaders

Although the impact of leadership on student achievement and school effectiveness has been acknowledged for some time, it is only recently that we have begun to understand more fully the fine-grained nature of that relationship. A reasonably elegant summary of this evidence is that the leadership:

> develops a narrative for improvement.

> is highly focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning (and student welfare).

> explicitly organises the school for improvement.

> creates:

- clarity (of the systems established)

- consistency (of the systems spread across school), and

- continuity (of the systems over time).

> creates internal accountability and reciprocity.

> works to change context as a key component of their improvement strategy.

There are two relatively new features to this profile. The first is the emphasis on narrative and its impact on both strategy and culture. It is student learning that is the central focus of the narrative within a unifying story around the image of a journey. This is strategic in so far as it integrates a wide variety of initiatives, and cultural in so far as it speaks both to the moral purpose of schooling. The second is the emphasis on 'systems' and the transferability and sustainability of best practice, the external aspects of system leadership that we now turn to.

Having set out a model for system leadership and made the case for leadership having an unrelenting focus on the quality of learning and achievement, it is now instructive to look at the external aspects of the role in terms of taxonomy of the roles system leaders play.

In our original review, we identified a variety of system leader roles emerging in England and elsewhere (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews 2009). As it happens this taxonomy has received support from subsequent research. The role of the National Leader of Education has developed considerably in response to our policy suggestions (Matthews 2007); as has the concept of the system leader in a more global context (Hargreaves 2012). Our initial framework suggested the following roles:

> Developing and leading a successful educational improvement partnership between several schools, often focused on a set of specific themes that have significant and clear outcomes that reach beyond the capacity of any one single institution.

> Choosing to lead and improve a school in extremely challenging circumstances and change local contexts by building a culture of success and then sustaining once low achieving schools as high valued added institutions.

> Partnering another school facing difficulties and improve it, either as an Executive Head Principal of a Federation or as the leader of a more informal improvement arrangement.

> Acting as a community leader to broker and shape partnerships and / or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children's welfare and potential, often through multi agency work.

> Working as a change agent or expert leader within the system, identifying best classroom practice and transferring it to support improvement in others schools.

No doubt these roles will expand and mature over time. What is particularly interesting about them is how they have evolved in the recent past as a response to the adaptive challenge of system change. It is also important to note that the taxonomy includes system leaders working in either national or state programs as well as locally organised often ad hoc roles, a point that is picked up below.

A Framework for system improvement based on the principle of 'segmentation'

The underlying assumption of this article is that the real prize and potential of system leadership is the realisation of systemic improvement. It is important to appreciate however that the aspiration of system transformation needs to be facilitated by the degree of segmentation existing in the system. Segmentation implies using the natural variation in school performance within the system as a means of improvement through collaboration. This however only holds when certain conditions are in place (Hopkins 2007).

There are two crucial aspects here. First, that there is increased clarity on the nature of intervention and support for schools at each phase of the performance cycle. Second, that schools at each phase are clear as to the most productive ways in which to collaborate in order to capitalise on the diversity within the system. A summary of this 'segmentation' approach is set out in Table 2.

The 'segmentation approach' to school improvement

In the right hand column is a basic taxonomy of schools based on their phase in the performance cycle. The number of categories and the terminology will vary from setting to setting and Victoria will have to develop its own language and framework suited to its own particular purposes. The crucial point being that not all schools are the same and each requires different forms of support. It is this that is the focus of the second

Type of school	Key strategies – responsive to context and need
Leading schools	Become leading practitioners. Formal federation with lower-performing schools.
Succeeding, self-improving schools	Regular local networking for school leaders. Between-school curriculum development.
Succeeding schools with internal variation	Consistency interventions: such as Assessment for Learning Subject specialist support to particular curriculum areas.
Underperforming schools	Linked school support for underperforming departments / year groups. Underperforming pupil programs for catch-up.
Low attaining schools	Formal support in Federation structure. Consultancy in core subjects and best practice.
Failing schools	Intensive support from System Leader or Restart with new name and leadership.

Table 2 - The 'segmentation approach' to school improvement

column, where a range of strategies for supporting schools at different phases of their development is briefly described.

There are two key points to consider. The first is that one size does not fit all. The second is that these different forms of intervention and support are increasingly being provided by schools themselves, rather than being imposed and delivered by some external agency. This approach to system transformation relies fundamentally on school-to-school support as the basis of the improvement strategy.

This approach to system transformation requires a fair degree of boldness in setting system level expectations and conditions. There are four implications in particular that have to be grappled with:

1. Schools should take greater responsibility for neighbouring schools so that the move towards networking encourages groups of schools to form new collaborative arrangements. This would be on the condition that these schools provided extended services for all students within a geographic area, but equally on the acceptance that there would be incentives for doing so. Encouraging local schools to work together will build capacity for continuous improvement at local level.

2. All failing and underperforming (and potentially low achieving) schools should have a leading school that works with them in either a formal grouping Federation (where the leading school Principal assumes overall control and accountability) or in more informal partnership. Evidence from existing Federations suggests that a State system of Federations would be capable of delivering a sustainable step-change in improvement in relatively short periods of time.

3. The incentives for greater system responsibility should include significantly enhanced funding for students most at risk to counter the predictive character of poverty in relation to student achievement. Beyond incentivising local collaboratives, the potential effects for large scale long term reform include:

   > a more even distribution of 'at risk' students and associated increases in standards, due to more schools seeking to admit a larger proportion of 'at risk' students so as to increase their overall income

> a significant reduction in 'sink schools' even where 'at risk' students are concentrated, as there would be much greater potential to respond to the socio-economic challenges (for example by paying more to attract the best teachers; or by developing excellent parental involvement and outreach services).

4. A rationalisation of State and local agency functions and roles to allow the higher degree of State and Regional co-ordination for this increasingly devolved system.

In reflecting on this approach to system improvement, it is worth briefly reflecting on the distinction between system leaders working in State programs and those working in locally organised often ad hoc roles.

The majority of system leaders tend operate in State or Regional programs that have incentivised activity through organisation, funding and professional development - this is the 'enabling state' at work. It is an important strategy for encouraging Principals to lead technical and adaptive solutions in a widening professional domain of cross-school and system improvement. It is a phenomena that is increasingly being seen in those school systems that are accelerating up the PISA international benchmarking scales.

More freedom exists on the other side of the divide, in the roles that are locally developed, often ad hoc and contextually responsive. It is understandable why many conceive of these roles to be a more authentic form of system leadership. With no single framework or protocol, a range of models are developed in relation to specific needs (and times). Furthermore, from this perspective, the role of an 'enabling state' becomes focused on reducing both barriers to collaboration and wider policy disincentives at all levels. On the other hand it encourages agencies to provide specific support in networking and bespoke professional development to individual system leaders.

There are of course variations to this bottom up/top down distinction. For instance, strategic local leadership partnerships already exist between Principals and Regions in Victoria. In one such example, the Region retained legal responsibility for value for money whilst delegating, through support, decision making to a partnership of Principals who bring coherence and accountability to local collaboration. A perspective on how these (and other) possibilities may inform

current professional action and State influence will be dependent on a range of criteria. If, however, a shared criterion is to develop effective system leadership in a growing number of schools, then the following suggestions for more short-term action may prove instructive.

Suggestion one: incentivise rather than legislate.

The traditional response has been intervention and management from Regional, State and Federal Agencies. The argument here is that this leadership now needs to come more from Principals themselves or from agencies committed to working with them in authentic ways. It is clear that the more bureaucratic the response the less likely it will be to work. A more lateral approach may be to create the conditions within the system to promote system leadership and collaborative activity through for example, adjusting accountability requirements, and funding for capacity building. With the right incentives in place schools will naturally move towards these new ways of working and mould them to the context in which they operate and to the challenges they face.

Suggestion two: place the agency close to the school.

There are now in many systems, system leadership roles whose remit is specifically school improvement. The intention that must be maintained is that instead of creating a new bureaucracy their brief is increasingly focused on facilitating relationships between schools to maximise the potential of purposive collaboration. This approach to school transformation is made increasingly possible by the range of sophisticated data potentially available on school and student performance. It enables groups of schools to identify (a) issues where they shared both strengths and weaknesses i.e. their capacity for sharing and (b) common issues where they are likely to need some external input.

Suggestion three: use school 'independence' collaboratively to tackle underperformance.

The underlying assumption here is that autonomous public schools working collaboratively is a particularly appropriate organisational format for contexts where rapid transformation of standards and support for students are most needed. The key point is that the freedoms associated with increased autonomy can be used to promote collaboration and inclusion to directly address the needs of students. The crucial condition is that all schools accept responsibility for the education of all the students within their geographic area.

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that system leadership represents a powerful combination of practices that give us a glimpse of the crucial importance of leadership in the new educational landscape. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience creates much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions. Realising this landscape, however, may also require a bigger shift within the broader education system, in particular by giving school leaders more agency to take the lead – in short to light their own fires. The future is certainly theirs.

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