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## Realising the potential of System Leadership<sup>1</sup>

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Traditional leadership and management approaches are well able to accommodate technical problems. The future however is about solving problems for which there is no immediate solution, and then to build the capacity for sustaining this into David Hopkins the medium and long term. This requires leadership of a different order.

The literature on leadership has mushroomed in recent years as have leadership courses and qualifications. All seem to have a slightly different take on leadership and claims on truth which I for one find a little confusing. In this paper I will set out an approach to leadership, which I am calling 'system leadership' that accommodates the arguments for sustainable educational transformation. So, the purpose of this paper is to:

- propose a definition and elaborate the concept of system leadership;
- explore how system leaders can utilise the diversity within the system to create a new educational landscape;
- conclude by proposing a model for system leadership that incorporates 'a theory of action'.

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## Defining and Conceptualising System Leadership

'System leaders' are those Head teachers who are willing to shoulder system leadership roles: who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. In England there appears to be an emerging cadre of these head teachers who stand in contrast to the competitive ethic of headship so prevalent in the nineties. It is these educators who by their own efforts and commitment are beginning to transform the nature of leadership and educational improvement in this country. Interestingly there is also evidence of this role emerging in other leading educational systems in Europe, North America and Australia (Hopkins, forthcoming).

In terms of the argument here, this leads me to a simple proposition:

*If our goal is 'every school a great school' then policy and practice has to focus on system improvement. This means that a school head has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as he or she is about his or her own school. Sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward.*

Our recent research on system leadership began to map the system leadership landscape (Hopkins and Higham, forthcoming). It identified significant amount of system leadership activity in England, far more than previously expected. However, we are still in the process of charting the system leadership movement as we work inductively from the behaviours of the outstanding leaders we are privileged to collaborate with. From all these evidence we can provide a sketch of some of the key aspects of the role:

- The moral purpose of system leadership
- System leadership roles
- System Leadership as adaptive work
- The domains of system leadership.

The first thing to say is that system leadership as Michael Fullan (2003; 2005) has argued is imbued with **moral purpose**. Without that, there would not be

the passion to proceed or the encouragement for others to follow. In England for example, 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.

I would argue therefore that system leaders express their moral purpose through:

1. measuring their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s).
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. striving for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture. This is not just about eradicating poverty, as important as that is. It is also about giving communities a sense of worth and empowerment.
5. 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 head teacher, these aspirations are increasingly becoming part of the conventional wisdom of the best of our global educational leaders.

Second, it is also pleasing to see a variety of **system leader roles** emerging within various systems that are consistent with such a moral purpose. At present, in England, these are (Hopkins and Higham, forthcoming):

- 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. These include partnerships on: curriculum design and specialisms, including sharing curricular innovation to respond to key challenges; 14-19 consortia; behaviour and hard to place students. Whilst many such partnerships currently remain in what is commonly referred to as 'soft' organizational collaboratives, some have moved to 'harder' more formalised arrangements in the form of (co)federations (to develop stronger mechanisms for joint governance and accountability) or Education Improvement Partnerships (to formalize the devolution of certain defined delivery responsibilities and resources from their Local Authority).
- 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 of a federation or as the leader of a more informal improvement arrangement. Such system leadership is differentiated from category 1 on the basis that leaders here work from a lead school into a low achieving or underperforming school (or schools) that require intervention. As evidenced by our earlier research on Executive Heads for the NCSL, and the College's subsequent advice on complex schools to the Secretary of State, "there is a growing body of well-documented evidence from around the country that, where a school is in serious trouble, the use of an executive head teacher / partner head teacher and a paired arrangement with that head's successful school, can be a particularly effective solution, and is being increasingly widely applied' (NCSL 2005, p.3).

- 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. Such system leadership is rooted firmly within the context of the national ECM and Children agendas and responds to, as Osbourne (2000, p.1) puts it, “the acceptance [that] some ... issues are so complex and interconnected that they require the energy of a number of organizations to resolve and hence can only be tackled through organizations working together (p.1). ... The concept of [a] full-service school where a range of public and private sector services is located at or near the school is one manifestation (p.188)”.
- Working as a **change agent** or expert leader within the system, identifying best classroom practice and transferring it to support improvement in others schools. This is the widest category and includes:
  - a. heads working as mentor leaders within networks of schools, combining an aspiration and motivation for other schools to improve with the practical knowledge and guidance for them to do so;
  - b. heads who are active and effective leaders within more centrally organized system leadership programmes, for instance within the Consultant Leader Programme, School Improvement Partners (SIP) and National Leaders of Education (NLE); and
  - c. heads who with their staff purposely develop exemplary curricula and teaching programmes either for particular groups of students or to develop specific learning outcomes in a form that is transferable to other schools and settings.

These roles could be divided into formal roles that are developed through national programmes and have clear protocols set out in their guidance (for instance: Consultant Leaders; SIPs; NLEs such as curriculum and pedagogy innovators); and informal that are locally developed and are far more fluid, ad-hoc and organic. However, this flexibility is often an important part of how these system leadership roles have come about.

The formal and informal roles hold a very significant potential to effect systemic educational improvement. If a sufficient cadre of system leaders were developed and deployed, there would be:

- a wider resource for school improvement: making the most of our leaders to transfer best practice and reduce the risk of innovation and change focused on attainment and welfare;
- an authentic response to failing schools (often those least able to attract suitable leaders);
- a means to resolve the emerging challenge of, on the one hand, falling student rolls and hence increasingly non-viable schools and, on the other hand, pressures to sustain educational provision in all localities.
- a sustainable and internal strategy for retaining and developing headteachers as a response to the shortage we are currently facing. A recent survey by the General Teaching Council (2006) warned that 40% of headteacher posts will be filled with difficulty in the coming years.

No doubt these roles will expand and mature over time; but what is significant about them is that they have evolved in response to **the adaptive challenge of system change**. This is the third of the aspects we need to discuss. It was Ron Heifetz (1994) who focussed attention on the concept of an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge is a problem situation for which solutions lie outside current ways of operating. This is in stark contrast to a technical problem for which the know-how already exists. This distinction has resonance for educational reform. Put simply, resolving a technical problem is a management issue; tackling adaptive challenges however requires leadership. Often we try to solve technical problems with adaptive processes or more commonly force technical solutions onto adaptive problems. The Figure below captures this distinction and illustrates how this issue underpins the policy conundrum of making the transition from prescription to professionalism and emphasises the importance of capacity building.

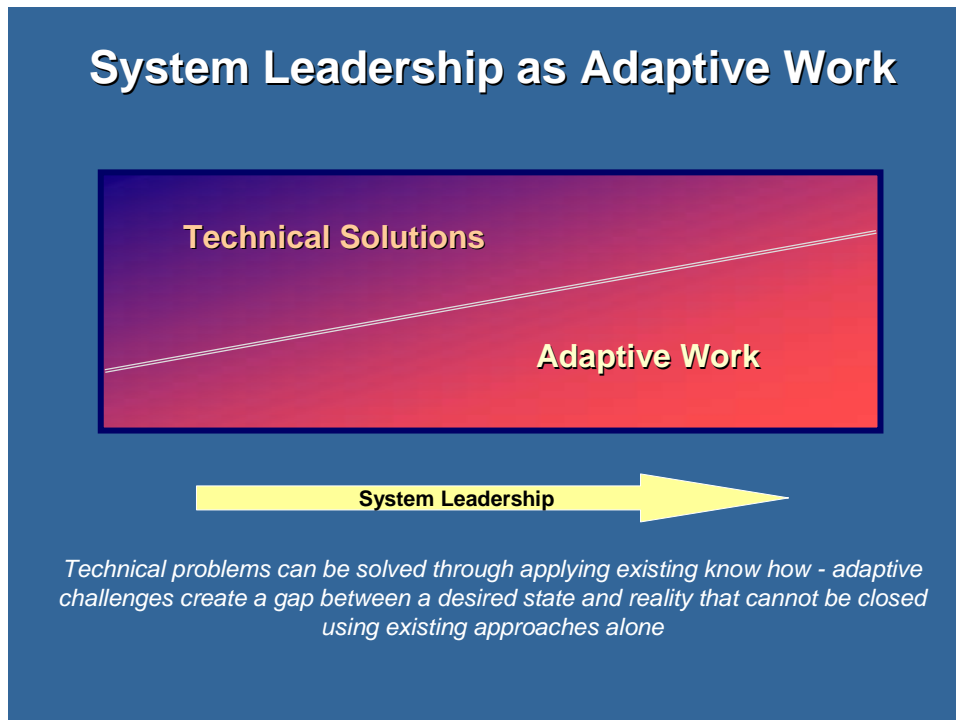


Figure 1 – System Leadership as adaptive work

Almost by definition, adaptive challenges demand learning as progress here requires new ways of thinking and operating. In these instances it is ‘people who are the problem’; because an effective response to an adaptive challenge is almost always beyond the current competence of those involved. Inevitably this is threatening, and often the prospect of adaptive work generates heat and resistance.

Mobilising people to meet adaptive challenges is at the heart of leadership practice. In the short term leadership helps people meet an immediate challenge. In the medium to long term leadership generates capacity to enable people to meet an ongoing stream of adaptive challenges. Ultimately, adaptive work requires us to reflect on the moral purpose by which we seek to thrive, and demands diagnostic enquiry into the realities we face that threaten the realisation of those purposes.

The fourth issue is what are the ‘**domains of system leadership**’, what does the task involve? One of the clearest definitions is the four core

functions proposed by Ken Leithwood and his colleagues (forthcoming).

These are:

- *Setting Direction*: to enable every learner to reach their potential, and to translate this vision into whole school curriculum, consistency and high expectations.
- *Managing Teaching and Learning*: to ensure that there is both a high degree of consistency and innovation in teaching practices to enable personalised learning for all students.
- *Developing People*: to enable students to become active learners and to create schools as professional learning communities for teachers.
- *Developing the Organisation*: to create evidence based schools and effective organisations, and to be involved in networks collaborating to build curriculum diversity, professional support, extended services.

This outline stands up well when it is tested against existing approaches to school leadership that have had a demonstrable impact on student learning. Take for instance, Richard Elmore's (2004:66) definition of the leadership purpose:

*Improvement, then, is change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don't.*

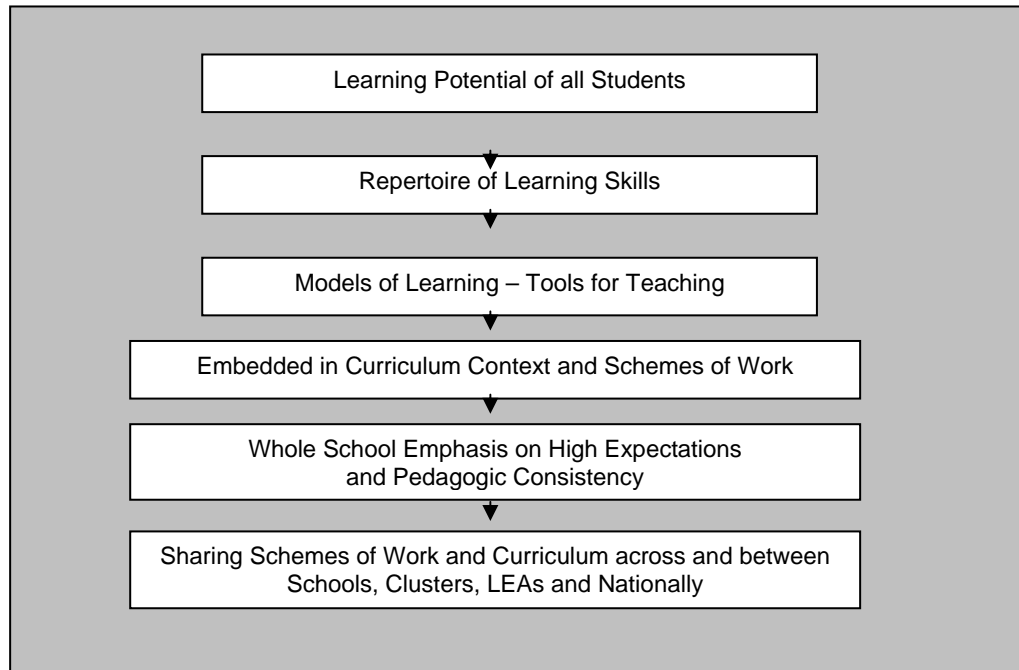
*Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. This is a deliberately de-romanticised, focussed and instrumental definition.*

This definition of leadership underpins Elmore's (2004:68) further contention that "*the purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance*" and its four dimensions:

- Instructional improvement requires continuous learning;
- Learning requires modelling;

- The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution;
- The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

My own work with schools in England represents a similar logic to school improvement and reflects the argument developed in the last few chapters. This as Elmore has proposed is the crucial domain of system leadership. Figure 2 contains an illustration of the activities that contribute to a capacity for learning within a school and that are facilitated, established and energised by system leaders. It represents an attempt to capture how schools establish a 'learning focus' and how a number of the elements of school improvement come together in practice. It begins from two assumptions. The first is that **all students** have a **potential for learning** that is not fully exploited (line 1). The second is that is that the students' learning capability refers to their ability to access that potential through **increasing their range of learning skills** (line 2). This potential is best realised and learning capability enhanced, through the range of **teaching and learning models** that the teacher uses with her/his students (line 3). It is the deliberate use of a range of teaching and learning strategies that are rich in meta-cognitive content that is one of the richest features of personalised learning. But as has already been stressed, the teaching and learning strategies are not 'free-floating', but **embedded in the schemes of work and curriculum content** that teachers use to structure the learning in their lessons (line 4). This leads to the whole school dimension through the staff development infrastructure the school has established, the **emphasis on high expectations**, the careful attention to consistency of teaching and the discussion of pedagogy that pervades the culture of the school (line 5). It is these forms of internal collaboration on personalised learning and 'professional' teaching that enable schools to **network** in order to raise standards across local areas, nationally and even globally (line 6).



*Figure 2 – The logic of school improvement*

Finally, while it is true that ‘system leadership’ is a relatively new concept, it is one that is not only fit for purpose but also finds a resonance with the outstanding school leaders of the day. It is also not an academic or theoretical idea, but has developed out of the challenges that system reform is presenting us with and the thoughtful, pragmatic and morally purposeful responses being given by our leading Principals and Heads. Ultimately, the test of system leadership is twofold – Is it having an impact where it matters? And, Can our school leaders answer the hard questions? Let us briefly answer each question in turn.

There is now growing evidence in the English secondary school system that this approach to system leadership is having a positive impact. Three examples make the point:

- Waverley School, under leadership of Sir Dexter Hutt from Ninestiles, improved from 16% 5 A-Cs at GCSE in 2001 to 62% in 2004.
- Sir Michael Wilshaw has instilled excellent behaviour, a focus on teaching and learning, and high expectations at Mossbourne Academy which is also having wider impact in the community.

- Valley Park School, under leadership of Sue Glanville, improved from 31% 5A\*-C in 2004 to 43% in 2005. The lead school, Invicta Grammar, also benefited by developing its leadership team and curriculum offer.

Although these results are very encouraging, they do not claim to be comprehensive. Our research programme however is beginning to build the evidence base more systematically (see for example Hopkins and Higham, forthcoming).

As regards to the hard questions, Michael Barber (2005) phrases them like this:

- Who are your key stakeholders in the local community? Do they understand your vision? Are they committed to it? How do you know?
- Have you established a core belief that every pupil (yes, every pupil) can achieve high standards? And then have you reorganised all the other variables (time, curriculum, teaching staff, and other resources) around the achievement of that goal? If not, why not?
- Is each pupil in your school working towards explicit, short and medium term targets in each subject?
- Does each teacher know how his/her impact in terms of results compares to every other teacher? Have you thought about whether governors or parents should have access to this data? And what do you do to make sure that teachers who perform below the top quartile are improving?
- How do you ensure that every young person has a good, trusting relationship with at least one significant adult in your school?
- What do you and your school do to contribute to the improvement of the system as a whole?

These are the types of questions that the best system leaders test themselves against and are now comfortable with. When all our school leaders can do so, then surely we are well on our way to every school being a great school.

## **Segmentation and System Leadership**

The reason why reform efforts struggle to achieve a system-wide impact is because change is complicated by the high degree of segmentation within the school system. It is here where system leadership can have its most powerful effect. In all countries there are large groups of schools at varying stages of the performance cycle between low and high performing. For every school to be great we need to move to a new trajectory through using this diversity to drive higher levels of performance throughout the system. System transformation depends on excellent practice being developed, shared, demonstrated and adopted across and between schools.

It is important to realise however that this aspiration of system transformation being facilitated by the degree of segmentation existing in the system only holds when certain conditions are in place. There are two crucial aspects to this:

- First, that there is increased clarity on the nature of intervention and support for schools at each phase of the performance cycle; and
- 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.

The following discussion reflects experience in the English secondary school system, but the analysis is designed to have a more general applicability. There are probably six clearly identifiable levels of performance within the current structure of English secondary schools that are recognised by both statisticians and those tasked with improving schools. These six school types when taken together comprise the full range of the secondary school performance cycle. They, together with their key strategies for improvement, are:

- **Leading schools** (possibly 10% of secondary schools) – these are the highest performing schools that also have the capacity to lead others. Their route to further improvement and contribution to the system comes in at least two forms: first, becoming leading practitioners through

disseminating best practice and networking; and second, through working more formally and systematically with lower performing schools through some 'federation' arrangement to improve the partner school's performance.

- ***Succeeding, self improving schools*** (possibly 20% of secondary schools) – these are schools that have consistently above average levels of value-added and that exhibit aspects of best practice that will benefit the system through further dissemination. Their route to further improvement and contribution to the system comes in networking their best practice in local networks using their leading teachers to mentor in other schools and to take students from local schools into their areas of specialism.
- ***Succeeding schools with significant areas of underperformance*** (possibly 20% of secondary schools) – these schools although successful on published criteria have unacceptable numbers of underperforming teachers or departments who are masked by the averaging out of published results. Their route to further improvement and contribution to the system comes on the one hand contributing as above to other schools from their areas of strength and being the recipients of such support in their weaker areas.
- ***Underperforming schools*** (possibly 25% of secondary schools) – defined as those secondary schools in their lowest value added quartile of their distribution, who may have adequate or good headline results, but are consistently failing to add value to the progress of their students. Their route to further improvement is to use the data discussed with the School Improvement Partner (SIP) as a basis of a whole school raising standards plan. They will need sustained consultancy in the early stages of an improvement process from a school(s) with a similar intake, but far higher value added using a modified version of the 'Federations intervention' described below.
- ***Low attaining schools*** (possibly 20% of secondary schools) – defined as those secondary schools below the 30% A\*-C GCSE floor target but with a

- **Failing schools** (possibly 5% of secondary schools) – defined as being well below the floor target and with little capacity to improve. At a minimum these schools will require intervention in the form of a ‘hard Federation’ or membership of the Intensive Support Programme. If these strategies are not successful in the short term, then closure, Academy status or a school’s competition is the only other answer in order to sustain adequate provision for the students involved.

A summary of this approach is set out in the following table. In the right hand column is a basic taxonomy of schools based on an analysis of secondary schools in England. The number of categories and the terminology will vary from setting to setting, 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 column, where a range of strategies for supporting schools at different phases of their development are briefly described. Again these descriptions are grounded in the English context, but they do have a more universal applicability. There are two key points here:

- The first is that one size does not fit all.
- The second 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.

Type of School	Key strategies – responsive to context and need
Leading Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become leading practitioners</li> <li>• Formal federation with lower-performing</li> </ul>

	schools
Succeeding, self-improving schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular local networking for school leaders</li> <li>• Between-school curriculum development</li> </ul>
Succeeding schools with internal variations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency interventions: such as Assessment for Learning</li> <li>• Subject specialist support to particular departments</li> </ul>
Underperforming schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linked school support for underperforming departments</li> <li>• Underperforming pupil programmes: catch-up</li> </ul>
Low attaining schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal support in Federation structure</li> <li>• Consultancy in core subjects and best practice</li> </ul>
Failing schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive Support Programme</li> <li>• New provider such as an Academy</li> </ul>

*Table 1* – The six school types of English secondary schools and their key strategies for improvement

However, in order to be successful the segmentation approach 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:

- 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 or Head assumes overall control and accountability) or in more informal

partnership. Evidence from existing Federations in England suggests that a national system of federations would be capable of delivering a sustainable step-change in improvement in relatively short periods of time. For example a number of 'federated schools,' as has been seen, have improved their 5 A\*-Cs at GCSE from under 20% to over 50% in two years.

- Schools should take greater responsibility for neighbouring schools so that the move towards networking encourages groups of schools to form collaborative arrangements outside of local control. 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.
- The incentives for greater system responsibility should include significantly enhanced funding for students most at risk. 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 social-economic challenges (for example by paying more to attract the best teachers; or by developing excellent parental involvement and outreach services).
- A rationalisation of national and local agency functions and roles to allow the higher degree of national and regional co-ordination for this increasingly devolved system.

These proposals have a combination of school and policy level implications. This is consistent with the phase of adaptive change the overall system is currently in. If we are to move towards a system based on informed professional judgement then capacity has to be simultaneously built at the school and system level as both schools and Government learn new ways of working, establish new norms of engagement and build more flexible and problem oriented work cultures. It is system leadership that has the power to maximise the energy latent in segmentation analyses such as this and to use it to ensure system transformation.

### **Towards a model of System Leadership**

We have seen glimpses in this article of a new educational landscape that is becoming better defined through a more systematic approach to segmentation and the power of system leadership. As the system leadership movement develops we will find a new model of leadership flowing inductively from the actions of our best educational leaders. In **Every School a Great School** (Hopkins, in press) I made an initial attempt to capture the main elements of this emerging practice in the diagram below. As such, it obviously builds on the logic of the discussion on system leadership in this paper. What is distinctive about the model is that the individual elements build on each other to present a theory of action for leadership in the new educational context.



*Figure 3 – An emerging model of System Leadership*

The model exhibits a logic that flows from the inside-out. Here 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. It is premised on the argument made in this paper, 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.

Let me briefly unpack the elements in the model. It begins in the centre with the acknowledgement that such forms of leadership are imbued with moral purpose in the way in which we defined it earlier. This though is necessary but not sufficient condition. Although I am not a great believer in attributional or heroic theories of leadership, it is clear from the practice of our best system leaders that there is a characteristic set of behaviours and skills that they share. As illustrated in the next 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.

As denoted in the third ring of the model, the moral purpose, personal qualities and strategic capacity of the system leader find focus on three domains of the school – managing the teaching and learning process, developing people and developing the organisation. These three aspects of system leadership have as we have seen a strong empirical base (Hopkins, in press). To summarise very briefly, system leaders engage deeply with the organisation of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment in order to personalise learning for all their students, reduce within school variation and support curriculum choice. In order to do this they develop 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. They also realise that all this requires a robust and reliable school organisation and work towards achieving this.

Although there is 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 in addition, as seen in the outer ring of the model, strives for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture and through giving their communities a sense of worth and empowerment. They do this by assuming one of the system leadership roles described earlier. Whatever the role, they realise as we said earlier, realise in order to change the larger system they have to engage with it in a meaningful way.

So, in concluding, the purpose of this article has been to chart the emergence of a system leadership movement that can be increasingly clearly defined in terms of concepts, capacities, roles and strategy. What is exciting about the potential of such a movement is that the practices of system leadership will

grow out of the future demands of system leaders. Consequently, moving system leadership to scale is the key driver in ensuring that every student reaches their potential and that every school becomes great. That is what school transformation is all about!

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