

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

**Making the Difference:**  
Successful leadership  
in challenging circumstances

A practical guide to what school  
leaders can do to improve and  
energise their schools

## Eight strategies for improvement

The booklet sets out eight areas in which research suggests that leaders of schools in challenging circumstances can make a real difference. On the pages which follow, you will find practical suggestions for each of these set out in colour coded sections:

- 01** Focus on learning and teaching
- 02** Generate positive relationships
- 03** Provide a clear vision and high expectations
- 04** Improve the environment
- 05** Provide time and opportunities for collaboration
- 06** Distribute leadership: build teams
- 07** Engage the community
- 08** Evaluate and innovate

## Using the materials

These materials can be used for personal reading. Alternatively, you can adapt them for development workshops to initiate action or help you to review the work of your school, involving staff, pupils and/or governors.

You may find it useful to use the following questions for each of the areas:

- In our school, what do we do already?
- What else could we do?
- What should we stop doing?
- Why are these changes important?
- What impact will they have on learning?
- How will we know?

## The Leading Edge Series

The Leading Edge Seminar Series is designed to explore current and significant aspects of leadership, draw on best practice nationally, and bring together successful school leaders to generate new understandings.

Each seminar offers a dynamic forum for school leaders to engage in professional dialogue, discussion and debate, encouraging an active exchange of perspectives drawn from leading edge research and practice. The series provides opportunities for school leaders to learn from and with each other, to offer a degree of challenge and to bring together research and best practice.

## Leading Edge Seminars: The principles

The solutions to our problems lie within ourselves. The best practice in our schools has the potential to generate solutions to problems we all face, if only we can find ways of telling our stories of leadership and articulating what we do in a shared professional language.

*The Leading Edge Series is co-ordinated by Chris Williams, NCSL Assistant Director of Research. For further information, please contact [research@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:research@ncsl.org.uk)*

**We learn with humility** from and with the best practitioners.

**We must enrich the dialogue between school leaders and academics to**

- bring together research and practitioner perspectives
- connect theory with practice and practice with theory.

**We must recognise that nothing ends in a full stop and strive to**

- extend what we know about aspects of leadership
- identify new learning, issues and themes for further case study and research
- use innovative and energising ways of creating wider impact on schools.

## Introduction

There are words and phrases with which we can all agree, almost without thinking about them. Certainly, no school leader has ever objected to ‘promoting high expectations’, ‘learning for life’ or any number of other phrases we could list. Yet the reality is often so different – from school to school and even from class to class.

What follows here is an attempt to get beyond the rhetoric to make it real. It is an account of an NCSL Leading Edge workshop held in February 2002 with a small group of successful school leaders, who were challenged to articulate what they do and how they do it. It presents insights into how leaders act, how they feel, what drives them and what they do.

Whilst the context of the seminar was leadership in challenging circumstances, many of the approaches apply equally to any primary, secondary or special school.

This publication provides a range of practical examples of actions which have made a difference. They don’t in themselves build teams, create capacity for improvement or produce an unwavering belief in children’s potential.

They do give practical insights into how to begin the journey – in short, good ideas to share and use as a basis for reflection.

The work builds on an earlier Challenging Circumstances Leading Edge seminar in autumn 2001, a full report of which is available at [www.ncsl.org.uk/research](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/research)

The suggestions outlined here reflect the experiences of established headteachers and are organised under eight strategies for improvement, as developed in NCSL commissioned research (Harris/Chapman, 2001) available online.

Some suggestions, listed under ‘short term’, indicate immediate actions open to schools. Others, listed as ‘longer term’, may require a period of planning and building. The headings are, of course, simply for convenience; there is no suggestion that you should address these in the order given here.

The quotations in italics reflect the words and ideas of school leaders who attended the seminar.

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

## Focus on learning and teaching

**strategy**

01

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## Focus on learning and teaching

Above all, leaders need to create schools where there is a consistent focus on the core purpose of learning, for both staff and pupils. This means finding out about what makes effective learning and removing barriers to learning.



## short term

- Give learning a high profile through a staff bulletin, a reminder on every classroom table and a notice board.

### Ask-

What are you doing?  
What are you learning?  
How do you know?

- On the classroom door, put a poster which says, 'What have you learnt this lesson?'
- Ensure that every meeting agenda includes a good practice requirement. For the leadership team, this can be simply a requirement to bring along pupils' work to share. This will make it happen.
- Start talking to pupils about how they feel about learning. Encourage this in others.
- Use assemblies to focus on learning. Go beyond a celebration of success to choices, expectations, approaches to learning.

- Develop quality dialogue with pupils about their learning. Make them aware of learning styles, use classroom climate questionnaires, develop/ask a sample of pupils to keep 'learning diaries' to comment on a week's lessons, analyse and share findings.

## longer term

- Develop a commitment to reflective practice through peer observation and professional partnerships.
- Think more radically about curriculum, particularly in relation to a work-related and relevant curriculum at KS4.
- Get back to the science of learning – how the brain works, preferred learning styles. Build this into lessons, for example through PSHE in the secondary school. This knowledge is invigorating and opens up possibilities.
- Explore how the school's mission and vision impacts on learning and classrooms. Explore with staff and pupils what you should see, hear and feel when you come into a class. Think radically how teaching areas should be resourced to reflect what we know about learning.

STRATEGY ONE FOCUS ON LEARNING AND TEACHING

- Monitor rigorously through a weekly scrutiny of written work and by establishing internal quality assurance procedures. Pay particular attention to developing the work of team and subject leaders in doing this.
- Strive to become the self-evaluating school and build consensus about the meaning of quality in the classroom.
- Extend opportunities for accreditation, for example CISCO/net working.
- Encourage learning technology such as interactive whiteboards and laptops.
- Encourage critical friendship – ‘We don’t do cosy here’ – and seek honest criticism, with focus for exploration determined by teachers and teaching assistants.
- Provide laptops for staff.

*“When I arrived, we cleared off all the graffiti. But in just one place we kept it, put a frame round it, just to remind us what it had been like, the journey we had travelled.”*

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

## Generate positive relationships

strategy

02

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## Generate positive relationships

Working with people and developing quality relationships are at the heart of a school where people feel supported and want to work. To do this, successful leaders need emotional intelligence and a wide range of interpersonal qualities, including courage, integrity, honesty, trust and openness.

## short term

- Greeting people is important. Always find time to say good morning and take a personal interest. Be out and about before the start and at the end of the day. Involve all staff – make school a place they enjoy coming to.
- Remember staff birthdays!
- Smiling is compulsory. Your mood matters – it will make others feel good or otherwise. Use humour, laugh with staff. Take your job but not yourself seriously.
- If staff feel disempowered or deskilled, make them feel that they can do things. In everything you do, treat teachers as professionals.
- When you take up post, conduct an anonymous survey of all teaching and support staff, asking them to tell you what can be done to improve the school. Share and act on what they say. Find an early reason to celebrate with staff – set up some ‘Friday treats’, surprise refreshments at the end of the week!
- Be accessible and show you listen.
- Do everything you can to develop respect for pupils and staff. Model this all the time in everything you do. Be upfront about values.
- Create a ‘safe place’ for children, for example a bench where they can sit if they are upset or have a problem. You can call it a ‘buddy bench’.
- If you don’t have one, establish a school council and find ways to show you value children’s opinions. Introduce ‘circle-time’.
- Develop ‘buddy systems’ or peer mentoring, for example red hats identify children who are prepared to offer help, or develop peer support, where older children help younger ones in reading.
- Create celebratory social events for parents, children and staff. A good way is to invite parents/carers into assemblies and set up a cup of tea for them afterwards where they can talk and feel at home.
- When you set up social events for parents/carers, recognise that it isn’t easy for them to get out because many have younger children. Set up a video room for children and a crèche for younger ones.
- Family excursions and summer holiday family trips work well.
- Make good use of in-service time, for example through a staff development day to talk about and review relationships and the school mission statement. Involve both staff and governors in this – governors have an important community perspective.

STRATEGY TWO GENERATE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

- Deliberately shift the vocabulary, from my school to our school, from teaching to learning.
- Include staff as an item on the agenda of each leadership team meeting. Identify teams and people who need a pat on the back or support and act on this. Work on four pieces of praise to one piece of constructive criticism.
- Make use of 'the experience core' – older people who have energy and commitment to put something back into schools.
- Establish rights and responsibilities through dialogue. Build a charter through consensus and establish this with children.

## longer term

- Recognise that equality of opportunity for all staff really matters. Break down divisions between teachers and support staff. Value all.
- Take every opportunity to articulate your philosophy – to all staff, parents, children – by your example, by the way in which you say it and live it out. Challenge people who don't live up to it.
- Earn trust.
- Identify, value and develop people from the local community. See the potential for volunteers to become teaching assistants, encourage them to aim high and, in time, enable them to train and qualify as teachers. This is a great message for the community.
- Build an annual school review involving as many staff and governors as will come along. A good time is the weekend before holidays, from the end of school on Friday to Saturday lunchtime. Make sure you include a meal and social time.
- Build in reflection at all levels. In working with a leadership team, build into each meeting an opportunity to reflect on how the meeting felt for participants.
- Know yourself – appraisal can help you. Whatever performance management does, it needs to be honest and give non-judgemental feedback. Your relationship with the leadership team should provide this, a sort of radar system across the school. The leadership team has to 'watch your back', find out and communicate what should be known for the health of the organisation.

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

Provide a clear vision  
and high expectations

**strategy**

03

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THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

## Provide a clear vision and high expectations

Successful leaders generate belief in a culture of improvement and are not afraid to tell it as it is.



## short term

- Send an unequivocal message to pupils, staff and the community: We can do better, deserve to do better, will do better. Raise aspirations. Tell stories of success. Be upfront about school and year group targets, for example in assemblies.
- Spend a professional development day rewriting the school aims and mission. When you do this, make sure that statements about pupils and learning are upfront. Be ambitious in grouping the school for value-added purposes – resist the excuses!
- Interview all staff, talk about the school's core purpose, take advantage of the opportunity to focus on children and begin to articulate, through dialogue, the school's mission.
- Make symbolic changes that have impact to show the power of the headteacher to make change.
- Focus everything down to the classroom – look at classes and use pupil pursuits. From this, be open about challenges and issues, celebrate quality and challenge low expectations.
- When you take up post, analyse discussions you have had and from that decide what approach you will use. A staff meeting needs to introduce the new culture but the approach you use depends on the situation. You may need initially to be authoritative or alternatively, democratic and consultative.
- Use resources flexibly, for example, in paying for half term revision classes as GCSE examinations approach.
- Don't be afraid to move staff and responsibilities around to improve results.

## longer term

- Data is powerful. Spend time gathering data and analysing it. Use it to challenge expectations. Find out more about children's prior learning experiences, strengths and weaknesses.
- Be upfront about the challenges.
- Be seen to tackle the least effective teachers.
- Make a public statement of what you stand for – a values statement, a mission, something easy to remember to which all can subscribe.
- Translate your vision into things people say and carry in their heads. Display photographs of it becoming a reality. Change the culture of the pupils.
- Work to achieve consistency in teaching and a sense that we are working together to raise standards.
- Set in place systems to monitor teaching and learning.
- Appoint staff with energy who will 'fit' the school.
- People need to move on and be rewarded for their contribution, but do all you can to hold on to those you really need through flexible use of retention points.

*"You have to work hard to move from a deficit model – 'What do you do with children like these?' – to establish a culture of improvement which breaks down the idea that 'it's not cool to achieve'."*

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# Improve the environment

**strategy**

# 04

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## Improve the environment

*“When you come into a school, the environment conveys immediate and powerful messages. It makes all sorts of statements about learning, about what is important, about how the school relates to its community. First impressions are lasting.”*

*“When you arrive, it’s like the signs you see in the shops. You have to communicate, by what you do to the learning environment, that the place is ‘under new management’. Some of it’s real change, some symbolic. You can do all sorts of things, like set up big noticeboards covered in Perspex to display pupils’ work in the reception area, improve the corridors.”*

*“In our school, we did some work on how to welcome people, how to work with the community. We listed all the things that would put people off coming into school – like signs in capital letters which said, ‘All visitors must report to reception’, or visitors having to walk past the bins. The surprising thing was how many of these we actually did.”*

## short term

- Telephone your own school to hear how you're greeted and treated.
- Improve the entrance/reception area to make it welcoming, professional, bright and creative.
- Make it personal – put up photographs of key people.
- Have a book of cuttings, photographs and newsletters to celebrate the school's successes and pupils' achievements.
- Feature the school council through photographs, personal statements and achievements.
- Establish a programme of quality display work. Buy frames for children's creative work for public areas.
- Modelling matters. You pick up the litter, the teachers and pupils pick up the litter too.
- Conduct an exercise on climate setting. Ask staff to be explicit about what messages you are sending and have a real eye for detail – get people to reflect on how we answer the phone, the impact of reception and so on.
- Walk the patch with the LEA, the leadership team, governors and pupils.
- Be explicit with teams and team leaders about the impact of environment and get them to explore what can be done. If teachers have papers stacked on tables and shelves from years ago, what does that convey about personal organisation? You may need to go through a 'skip stage'.
- Think about the immediate impression/messages conveyed by the head's and/or leadership team offices. Change it if necessary.
- Make it everyone's responsibility to generate creative solutions.
- Establish and display rules and expectations. Be clear and explicit about the climate you wish to create – make it welcoming and consistent.
- Buy plants for classrooms and other areas to show you are looking after the environment.
- Open up areas where trouble may happen such as cloakrooms and toilet areas.
- Manage corridors – develop staff roles in supervising beyond their own teaching areas.

#### STRATEGY FOUR IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT

- Work to get your caretaker/site manager on board. This really matters!
- Make some key improvements, for example, in refurbishing staff and pupils' toilets. This shows you care for the people in the school.
- Put up a community notice board.
- Sort out litter. Appoint 'litter bugs', allocate areas to year groups or classes and give prizes.

## Longer term

- Build an ongoing commitment to environmental improvement into your school plan. Don't forget the importance of improving the equipment for site staff.
- Look at the classrooms and think about the messages they convey. Develop a shared understanding of 'classroom climate'.
- Agree and display the rules.
- Create green areas and where you can, remove concrete. There are organisations that will help fund environmental projects or improvement of sports facilities, or you could look to local business sponsorship or partnership with community sports groups.
- Make the place more civilised. Install a water fountain in the foyer and benches in outside areas. Let pupils use water bottles in class.
- Give pupils/the school council responsibility for identifying improvements, such as garden or benched areas, including design and fund-raising.
- Set up a 'healthy tuck-shop', with fruit rather than sweets.
- Set up an environment club led by site staff.
- Find out what the pupils want at lunchtimes and breaks and try to deliver on this, for example by establishing mini-pitches for football.
- Attend to what you can hear – provide music in rooms.
- Have spot checks.
- If graffiti appears, have it removed within 24 hours.

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

# Provide time and opportunities for collaboration

strategy

05

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## Provide time and opportunities for collaboration

Alongside building relationships, articulating vision and raising expectations, successful leaders of schools in challenging circumstances place consistent emphasis on staff learning together.



## short term

- Make continuing professional learning an expectation, not a luxury. Put up articles in the staff room to make people feel in touch with new thinking and research.
- Admit that you don't get everything right and invite others to take ownership and improve ideas. Share details of what you are reading. Show you are learning as a leader.
- Break down barriers by encouraging middle level leaders and the leadership team to be approachable.
- Work creatively to meet development needs, for example by using ancillary staff for examination invigilation to release teaching and support staff.
- Pay for 'working weekends' away.
- Recognise and value individual staff – for example through a personal development day – to give people an opportunity to relax and learn to manage stress.
- Have a white board in the staff room, up-dated each week, to list staff involvement in courses and other development activities. This will help raise levels of interest and wider impact.

- Encourage staff to embark on research projects.

- Raise self-esteem. Constantly tell people they're great. Get everybody looking at the big picture and the journey the school is travelling, rather than the obstacles along the route.

## longer term

- Articulate why professional learning matters. Be clear that high expectations for student learning have to be matched by high expectations for adult learning.

- Look at and restructure the school day. Use every spare moment and be innovative. Deal with routine administration in written notes so that quality time is available for collaborative work.

- Provide constant reinforcement and opportunities to show success.

- Focus on developing people. Go for Investors in People and build staff self-esteem.

STRATEGY FIVE PROVIDE TIME AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

- Show the importance of professional learning and develop a wide range of learning opportunities. Set up mentoring, coaching, shadowing and other initiatives. Be clear about evaluating the impact on pupil learning.
- Take part in research projects and initiatives – build responsibility into the staff to develop a wider understanding of issues. Develop the use of flexible, multiple-disciplinary teams, give a wide range of staff opportunities to lead them and encourage creativity, risk-taking and enjoyment.
- As head, make sure you are directly involved as a coach or mentor and that the leadership team develops its role as 'leading practitioners'.
- Nurture leadership at all levels within the school, and recognise that middle level leaders are the engine for change.
- Build professional partnerships, for example, by linking subject leaders with people in other schools or colleges.
- Develop professional development 'ladders' indicating progression through to leading the development of others, AST status and work in other schools. Link these with evidence gathering and portfolio building in relation to performance management.
- Make enquiry an expectation of all. Where groups lead enquiry work, listen and act on what they say.

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

Distribute leadership:  
build teams

**strategy**

06

## Distribute leadership: build teams

Teams, not individuals, change schools.  
Leaders must work to create an ethos where  
people are given responsibility and where  
groups work together to enquire and find  
shared solutions.

## short term

- If you find yourself in a difficult or crisis situation, emphasise that there is no choice – working as a team will make the difference. Responsibility has to be shared but some things are non-negotiable.
- Early professional development days are a good time to focus on building teams, principles of working together and overcoming obstacles. Explore these things explicitly.
- Bring staff together for lunch/residentials.
- Have regular morning or after school staff briefings, relaxed and humorous!
- One morning break each week, provide refreshments for staff – inexpensive but really effective in bringing people into the staff room!
- Make staff and teams an agenda item for leadership team meetings.
- Remove blame, show trust, offer a balance of challenge and support.
- Begin to explore what it is to be a team leader – support, coach, recognise and be explicit about the skills required.

## longer term

- Team building is essential, so think of creative ways to make it easier for the team to work.
- Build the principle of working in teams and learning together. Make it a signature of the school. Ask pupils to reflect on how the team/group is doing and how it can be improved, and through this nurture a vocabulary to talk about teams. Do the same with staff working together.
- Work to enable people to develop and reflect on emotional intelligence and emotional health, particularly at middle and senior levels. Ask teams routinely to reflect on how they feel about working together, how it can be improved. Build this review in at all levels.
- Build flexible teams, particularly to take forward key developments. Give a whole range of people opportunities to lead teams. Distribute leadership. You can't delegate leadership, you have to grow it.
- Develop ideas of co-leadership – in planning, two heads are better than one!

STRATEGY SIX DISTRIBUTE LEADERSHIP: BUILD TEAMS

- Give autonomy, but provide coaching, mentoring, monitoring and evaluation.
- Challenge, support and develop staff who are not pre-disposed to working in a team.

*“It’s a lonely existence. You spend all day trying to pat people on the back. It would be great if someone would pat you on the back and say, ‘Well done.’”*

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

## Engage the community

**strategy**

07

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## Engage the community

Unless children 'take the values home' and the community understands and shares the school's values, school improvement will finally founder. Strategic work with the wider community is vitally important.

*"Find that something you have in common with the community."*



## short term

- Make sure staff are out and about, particularly at the start and end of days. Engage parents and carers. Get to know them and learn to be sensitive to the nuances of different religions and cultures.
- When people come into school during the day or for consultation evenings, have someone to welcome them.
- Have an open door policy. Be fair and firm. Treat people with respect. Take your values out into the community and listen to what they say.
- Enlist help. Write to people in the community and ask what they can offer and make use of it. Make them feel valued for the skills they have. Ask them for their support in areas such as school uniforms.
- Give teachers and teaching assistants some standard questions they can ask at parents evenings and act immediately on what they say.
- Involve famous people – they'll help put you on the map.
- Be proactive about community visitors. Draw them in and make them welcome in school.

- Make a point of responding to the feedback. The community will thank and respect you for it.

## longer term

- Set up and value parental and pupil questionnaires.
- Set up pre-admission courses in primary schools to help parents develop partnerships with the school and reflect on parenting skills. Keep in touch with parents and carers by setting up consultation sessions as part of teachers' non-contact time each week.
- Network with agencies.
- Engage adults in learning through after school clubs, networking with adult providers and inviting parents into classes.
- Ask parents to help with a school shop or clubs.
- Give children swipe cards for school meals to remove the stigma of the free meal ticket.
- Make a point of employing local people in school.

STRATEGY SEVEN ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

- Be prepared to take a leap in the dark. For example, one school suddenly found community support by open discussion of their plan to apply for technology college status.
- The business community is busy but will help you by e-mentoring.
- Take opportunities to market and celebrate success. Success breeds success.

*“We have a ‘can do’ culture here.”*

*“Invest in the future with the community.”*

THE LEADING EDGE SERIES

## Evaluate and innovate

strategy

08

 NCSL National College for  
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## Evaluate and innovate

Successful leaders are positive, innovative, willing to take risks and willing to get things wrong. They create a confidence in staff but are very clear that ideas are only finally useful if they work and can be shown to make a difference.

## short term

- Set in place a whole school approach to meetings and training sessions. Make a consistent shift in all meetings to sharing innovation in learning, evaluation of progress and impact.
- As leader, admit to being on a learning curve too and invite others to criticise and improve your thinking. Develop a culture of constructive criticism.
- Have zero tolerance on excuses! There are better ways out there.
- Single out and provide opportunities for those with similar philosophies to your own.
- Create, gather and use data to challenge what people regard as established truths.
- Visit other schools and encourage schools to visit you.
- Keep asking the question, 'How will we know if this has made a difference to the children here?'

## longer term

- Build evaluation and innovation into the culture of the whole school through a CDP plan. Signal the change by renaming key posts.
- Develop a self-evaluating school and be explicit about what this means. For example, it's okay to make mistakes so long as you learn from them.
- Explore the bigger picture with staff. Create a sense of the future school and begin to build towards it.
- Develop critical friendships and professional partnerships.
- Continually raise expectations.
- Set up a whole staff forum where people can challenge and debate.
- Develop strengths, professionalism and disseminate good practice. In a secondary school, a learning fair can be a good way of encouraging teams to share their best ideas, or groups of staff can work together to look at issues around a particular class or year group.
- Recognise that the answers lie within ourselves.

*“Take what will work and then consistently apply it.”*

## With thanks

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## Next steps

For further development opportunities, including building capacity for school improvement and developing learning-centred leadership, please visit NCSL's web site at **[www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)**

Your comments on these and any other NCSL materials are always welcome. Please email us at **[research@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:research@ncsl.org.uk)**