Learning to Lead
NCSL’s Strategy for Leadership Learning
Foreword

This document sets out the National College for School Leadership’s (NCSL’s) strategy for leadership learning. It reaffirms what NCSL believes about school leadership development. It is aimed at all those who take on a leadership role in schools, those who participate in NCSL activities and those who wish to enhance school leadership development.

This document, prepared by two directors at NCSL, Dame Patricia Collarbone and Professor Geoff Southworth, considers current leadership development activity and how NCSL is developing its perspective on school leadership learning. The heart of the report defines six key areas of leadership learning and the range of learning pathways used by the College to support and enhance school leadership learning. It builds on the work of NCSL’s first think tank report and is informed and stimulated by the second.

Since NCSL was launched in 2000, considerable thinking and development has taken place in order to establish a coherent and valuable range of learning experiences for headteachers and other school leaders in England.

This has happened within a context of rapidly changing demands in relation to roles and responsibilities, working practices and expectations from the public sector, particularly education. In less than three years NCSL has generated new thinking, developed new programmes and activities and changed perceptions on school leadership learning, not just in England but on a global scale.

The first think tank report, published in 2001, under the leadership of Professor David Hopkins, set out 10 school leadership propositions and laid the foundations for the development of the Leadership Development Framework and the work of the College.

Possible Futures (2003), a publication commissioned by the second think tank and written by Tom Bentley of Demos and Riel Miller of the OECD, is a futures paper designed to stimulate debate about future school scenarios and the required nature of school leadership.

This current document draws heavily on the commissioned research and writing undertaken for the third think tank by Professor Louise Stoll, on the experience of the College to date, and the deliberations of the NCSL governing council and think tank.

I believe this document contributes to the reader’s understanding of NCSL’s strategy for leadership learning and will make a valuable contribution to future developments of the Leadership Development Framework and NCSL’s leadership learning activities.

Tony Mackay

Chair of the second and third NCSL think tank and a member of the NCSL governing council
The purpose of writing this document is to provide school leaders and those working in the school leadership field with a concise, informative, strategic overview of leadership learning and NCSL’s role within this.

NCSL recognises that most leadership learning takes place in school, while doing the job, through engaging actively in leadership practice. The College’s role is to support, extend and enrich this leadership development through activities, reflection and collaborative working.

Using as many different and complementary ways as possible to facilitate learning, the College helps improve school leadership in order to improve the learning opportunities for every child.

The six key areas of leadership learning outlined in the document formed the basis of thinking on the new National Standards for Headteachers, while the Leadership Learning Pathways demonstrate the diverse and exciting range of opportunities available to school leaders in England.

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2 Designing the Learning Experience

Leaders learn most about their roles on the job and from other contextual learning experiences. However, not everyone learns from their experiences all of the time, particularly when on-the-job experiences and time pressures are intense.

NCSL programmes and activities incorporate the opportunity to reflect on and conceptualise experiences. Reflective and conceptual learning are social as well as individual, and therefore time is devoted during programmes and other activities to social learning.

NCSL’s programmes, activities and learning events are guided by the moral purpose set out in NCSL’s key goal – every child in a well-led school, every leader a learner. They are based upon knowledge and understanding of how adults learn, underpinned by Kolb’s learning cycle. This can be summarised as: learning from concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The learning model is one of a spiral of learning, whereby learners return to issues from time to time, on each occasion gaining a new understanding based on this learning cycle.

Learning, practices and behaviours are constantly re-evaluated and re-assessed, leading to new ways of working as individuals, as organisations and ultimately across the system. Continuity and progression should be seen in terms of questioning and challenging underlying assumptions in order to improve the learning experience and the outcomes for young people. It is also vital to give attention to cognitive, metacognitive and emotional learning.

The learning design for NCSL programmes, activities and events is underwritten by national standards developed and reviewed through consultation with professionals and their associations.

The NCSL learning experience is one of blended learning, which means that development activities are underpinned by a mix of private study, e-learning and face-to-face interaction.
Characteristics defining the experience include:

- **self-directed and learner-driven**  
The design allows learners to make intelligent and informed choices about the what, how and where of learning.

- **interpersonal and collaborative, team and organisational learning**  
For many, learning is a social activity and benefits from collaboration and collective enquiry. The opportunity to display new knowledge and test it out with others is important.

- **learning networks (creating and sharing knowledge)**  
Participants are encouraged to work in networks in order to share and interpret the issues they are facing. Together they find ways of bringing the learning from the network into their own contexts, thereby accelerating innovation and creating new knowledge across the system.

- **support and challenge**  
The learning environment and learning processes need to balance high challenge with quality support. Coaching, mentoring and assessment help provide a supportive environment enabling deep learning to take place. Challenge for adults is uncomfortable. The deeper and more profound the challenge, the greater the discomfort. Adults can be reluctant learners in these situations and need to understand that managing their discomfort and that of others is a key part of learning.

- **needs assessed**  
Effective learning draws on the learner’s knowledge about themselves, their skills, qualities and what they do well. Learners are able to make sense of new learning when they know which needs are being met and why.

- **problem-shaping and problem-solving**  
Problem-solving and active engagement in new experiences are particularly effective sources of learning. This features in a number of NCSL programmes and is extended through international visits, research opportunities and business placements.

- **e-learning**  
E-learning is critical. It provides exciting opportunities to enrich learning in the workplace and network with distant colleagues. E-learning can support a personalised approach to learning and provide a ‘just in time’, anywhere, anytime engagement in learning.

- **celebration and acknowledgement, accreditation and graduation**  
Celebrating and acknowledging learners’ achievement is both highly motivating and a key part of the assessment process.

Leaders learn from experiences that are of high quality and model effective learning processes. Therefore continuous quality improvement (CQI) is an integral part of designing and facilitating learning experiences. This includes client involvement at the design stage, client feedback at each further stage of the process, formative and summative evaluation of the impact of the learning experience and regular review.
4 Areas of Leadership Learning

The six areas of leadership learning are based on what is known about the needs of school leaders and leadership teams. They draw on existing leadership literature and research from education and elsewhere. Each consists of themes that are likely to evolve over time to reflect changes that impact on leadership. They interrelate and are influenced and shaped by the perspectives of individuals and groups with unique values, experiences and contexts.

Learning is the core business of schools and leading learning at all levels is fundamental to this purpose. Leadership for learning is now given high priority in many countries. In England, learning-centred leadership is gaining currency, challenging leaders at all levels to think in new ways about how leaders influence what happens in classrooms, through an unwavering focus on pupil learning.

To ensure effective learning, and support others’ learning, leaders need to have a deep, current and critical understanding of the learning process and what this means for enhancing learning and teaching in schools and ensuring that learning is personalised.
This area includes:

**Learning and teaching**

- understanding the principles and practices of effective learning and the nature and goals of the learning process
- understanding characteristics of individual learners, learning models and learning styles and their relationship to the learning process
- ensuring high expectations of learning and behaviour
- combating underachievement
- ensuring a safe environment for learning and teaching
- developing conditions for effective learning and teaching
- developing learning and teaching policies
- understanding effective teaching for diverse groups and in different contexts
- promoting curriculum development and innovation
- leading ICT as a learning strategy
- developing assessment for learning
- observing others giving feedback and monitoring learning and teaching
- reviewing curriculum breadth, balance and match to core values

**Continuing professional development and professional learning communities**

- understanding organisational learning principles
- understanding principles of effective professional learning communities and strategies to create and sustain them
- promoting team learning
- developing a strategy to support continuous professional learning of adults
- modelling effective leadership development
- leading the learning of others
- mentoring, coaching and providing feedback
- sustaining leaders’ own learning
Leadership is about getting the best out of people. Relationships underpin all interactions and good relationships create conditions that motivate pupils and staff and secure the support of parents and governors. To build positive relationships, leaders must try to understand themselves and the impact they have on others. This means being clear about values and moral purpose and basing actions on them.

This area includes:

**Values and ethics**
- understanding the ethical basis and framework of leadership
- understanding the nature of moral leadership
- understanding values

**Personal awareness**
- developing personal values
- exploring personal motivation for leadership
- being emotionally self-aware
- developing accurate self-assessment
- developing self-confidence

**Managing self**
- developing strategies to enhance personal effectiveness
- developing trustworthiness
- prioritising
- managing personal professional tensions

**Social awareness**
- understanding the nature of relationships with a range of stakeholders
- understanding the impact that leadership styles have on interpersonal relationships
- examining role and role conflicts to recognise how you are seen by others in relation to how you see yourself/yourselves
- developing empathy
- promoting stewardship
- developing organisational awareness
Leading and managing others

- developing knowledge and skills to further enhance relationships
- developing trust to build a learning- and performance-based culture
- being a change catalyst
- developing effective communication
- developing motivational leadership
- using influence and negotiation
- challenging others
- dealing effectively with conflict, power issues and internal politics
- developing coaches and learning how to be a critical friend
Being a 'change leader' is critical to 21st century educational leadership and crucial to building system and school capacity. Successful leaders promote a shared vision of the future, underpinned by common purposes and values, which will secure the commitment of a wide range of stakeholders. Successful leadership captures hearts and minds.
This area includes:

**Vision building and implementation**
- developing and sustaining a strategic, shared vision
- articulating how the vision will make an impact
- learning strategies to secure engagement and alignment of stakeholders
- communicating the vision to a range of audiences and engaging them in consensus building

**Futures and innovation**
- exploring futures thinking
- understanding possible scenarios and developing strategies for focusing on ‘preferred futures’
- understanding the nature of and using processes associated with innovation, creativity and risk

**Dealing with change**
- focusing on ‘the big picture’
- resolving tensions arising from different perspectives
- understanding personal responses to change
- resolving complex change problems, paradoxes and ambiguities
- understanding how the past influences change
- developing differentiated strategies for dealing with change
- understanding the influence of culture on change and the relationship between school culture, organisational effectiveness and performance
- exploring cultural change and helping others understand that change is the norm
- finding coherence among a range of initiatives

**Planning and strategic school improvement**
- understanding strategy, including strategic planning and strategic intent
- understanding the place of mission in school management structures and processes
- planning, setting objectives and monitoring and evaluating progress towards vision, mission and values
For leaders to realise the shared vision it is necessary to build effective and efficient organisational systems and processes. Successful organisational management complements leadership in that it ensures that things get done. Staff and pupils have to feel confident that everything is running smoothly in their daily working environment.
Structures and systems also must support distributed leadership. Therefore managing the organisation needs to include practical steps taken on a daily basis to move the school along the path of implementing the vision.

Managing the organisation also includes interdependencies between the organisation and the external environment and its pressures and expectations. This is one of the greatest challenges currently facing leaders in many systems.

This area includes:

**Policies, structures and systems**
- organising the day, term and year to optimise all resources
- employing effective and efficient administrative structures and systems
- developing coherent and integrated policies, linked to vision and aims
- understanding the relationship between structures and school culture

**Managing the effective deployment and use of resources**
- deploying and managing human resources
- implementing effective and efficient performance management systems
- managing the building and environment
- managing continuing professional development
- managing ICT systems
- managing information and knowledge
- managing finances
- managing time
Improving pupil learning in all schools depends not only on intellectual capital, that is, the knowledge we bring and create together, but also on social capital. This describes the productive relationships and trust between members of organisations, the quality of the networks between them and the way they work together. Strengthening community through collaboration is critical to capacity-building in schools.

This area includes:

**Team working**
- developing effective team working – principles, processes and strategies

**Stakeholder involvement**
- involving pupils
- providing leadership opportunities for staff and pupils
- understanding governance and working effectively with governing bodies
- involving parents
- building partnerships with professional associations and unions
- working effectively with the LEA and diocesan board where appropriate

**Local community**
- understanding the school’s role in developing learning in the community
- analysing the local community context
- understanding the school’s role in community regeneration and civic leadership
Networks and partnerships

- appreciating the role of networked learning communities and other collaborative relationships with different schools
- understanding the potential of online networking
- working productively with a range of agencies including social services and health authorities
- developing and sustaining multi-agency relationships
- linking beyond the school with business, LEAs, higher education and other external partners
- collaborating and networking internationally
- creating and disseminating knowledge
There is a formal accountability relationship between school leaders, the system and the public which is determined by statute and reflected in the relationship between the headteacher and the governing body. Formal accountability to stakeholders is vested in the governing body.
However, school leaders’ accountability extends beyond formal accountability to the governing body. Schools have to make a positive difference to their pupils’ progress, achievement and development.

Professional accountability plays a key role in this. It is driven by a desire to know how one is doing and what one could do to improve. Professional accountability represents leaders’ deep commitment and moral responsibility to their schools and to ensuring that everyone in the school community is engaged in the highest quality learning.

This area includes:

**Continuous quality improvement**
- understanding cultures of continuous improvement
- taking an ‘inquiry minded’, evidence-informed approach to change
- developing and using strategies for self-assessment and school self-evaluation
- using data for effective decision-making
- understanding the relationship between planning, monitoring and evaluation
- understanding the relationship between self-evaluation and inspection

**Accountability**
- understanding the relationship between autonomy and responsibility
- dealing positively with system expectations
- reporting to internal and external stakeholders
- communicating with others and managing public relations
Leads is contingent on the school’s context and so is learning to lead. Leaders learn some skills in one context and different things in other contexts. Any single context limits leadership learning. Therefore, it is important to recognise the need to develop awareness of other schools and contexts. NCSL supports these goals through a range of experiences.

Leaders are learning pathways

There are many different ways to learn to lead. Just as schools today face the challenge of matching learning to pupils’ individual needs, so too do leaders learn in personalised ways.

Rich and diverse learning experiences

Leaders learn from their on-the-job experiences. It is important to recognise and build on this and NCSL uses a number of strategies to support and strengthen school-based learning.

Yet it is also necessary to ensure that leaders learn in other settings. These could be other schools, organisations outside education, professional development programmes or activities and new roles which extend and stretch individuals.

The purpose of these activities is to:

- encourage individuals to take on new challenges
- work in different locations and contexts
- work alongside a number of leaders to broaden repertoires and role models
- learn collaboratively
- reflect on professional values and practices
- rethink personal and organisational frames of reference
- practice skills in other settings and with different colleagues
- contribute to the development of other colleagues and schools
- contribute to individual, institutional and system-wide learning
NCSL provides rich and diverse learning experiences in a number of ways. The programmes it offers aim to develop leaders at all levels and stages of their leadership careers.

NCSL’s programmes provide a blend of learning strategies so that participants can develop whilst:

- working in school
- accessing online activities which can be used during the working day or at other times
- learning with and from peers as part of online learning communities
- engaging in professional development activities in workshops and seminars

Several of the programmes also provide opportunities for participants directly to support the learning of their colleagues or less experienced leaders.

NCSL seminars, such as the Leading Edge events, provide the chance to look at practices which are successful in some schools, to test latest thinking and findings from research and to look at ideas from outside education. These seminars bring practitioners together to share and to learn with and from one another. They also foster strong connections and interaction between practitioners, researchers and policy-makers.

They create the opportunity not only to look at new ideas, but to develop guidance and advice for colleagues in schools which is rooted in practice. Learning about what works is a key aspect of these seminars and of the learning outcomes which flow from them.
Programmes, seminars and conferences are familiar strategies to school leaders. However, they are only a part of the array of learning opportunities. Other experiences that NCSL is working towards include:

- **Internships**
  The chance to take on a new role in another school is a powerful learning experience. Presently NCSL offers internships to deputies who are committed to taking on headships in secondary schools in challenging circumstances. NCSL also supports many other forms of internships so that leaders can move to another school for a period of time, work alongside another leader, or team of leaders, and take on new roles and responsibilities.

- **Secondments**
  NCSL already supports individuals who wish to undertake a research project as part of its Research Associate Programme. These associates are seconded from their schools for up to 30 days to conduct enquiries, usually into leadership and aspects of school improvement.

  NCSL is interested in extending secondments to a variety of organisations. For example, headteachers and other leaders could be seconded to work in LEA school improvement teams to support specific schools, to widen individual knowledge and awareness and to practice particular skills, such as consultancy or coaching. Alternatively, leaders might be seconded to work at NCSL or other educational organisations to broaden and deepen their knowledge and to share their expertise.
Placements
Similar to secondments, placements enable school leaders to be attached to business and public sector organisations to learn first-hand how they work. Those who have been involved in such placements say that they can be very productive experiences. NCSL therefore wants to see many more of them.

However, NCSL also wants these to be more than extended visits. There are opportunities for leaders to take on specific assignments so that they contribute to the work of the host organisation. If leaders learn on-the-job, such learning should be part of these placements. There may also be opportunities for reciprocal arrangements so that business leaders are placed in schools.

Sabbaticals
Time out of school to work on a major project, studying or researching, is a valuable form of professional refreshment, rejuvenation and development. There are too few opportunities for experienced and successful leaders to take stock of what they know. Sabbaticals could be designed so that school leaders develop new ways of sharing their craft knowledge with their peers.

International visits
NCSL strongly supports the British Council scheme of international visits by groups of school leaders. Over time NCSL would like to see as many leaders as possible have the opportunity to go on at least one such visit during their career.

Evaluation data shows that those who participate in these visits learn a great deal. Indeed, three sets of learning experiences are common. First, the visitors learn about the schools and systems they travel to. Second, being a member of a group of leaders facilitates peer learning. Third, looking at a foreign location helps to make the familiar – their own schools – strange. Taken-for-granted ways of doing things are apprehended in new ways. Participants begin to challenge their own customs and practices because they can see anew.

Taken as a whole, the experiences listed above ensure that leadership learning becomes more widespread in two senses:

- Many more leaders are explicitly and systematically learning to lead.
- Individuals are developing from their experience of a wider range of settings, organisations and leadership in action.
Creating the conditions for leadership learning in schools

Increasing and enriching the pathways by which leaders learn is only one part of the challenge of developing school leaders. Another is ensuring every school has a positive leadership learning environment.

To create the conditions whereby leadership capacity is built into every school, senior leaders need to examine whether and how they:

- identify future leaders
- provide leadership opportunities for colleagues
- ensure leaders’ learning and development is supported
- improve leadership practice for all

NCSL commissioned research shows that headteachers can identify future leaders in their own schools, often within two or three years of them beginning teaching. Such teachers are motivated, hard-working, empathetic and have an awareness which extends beyond their classroom perspectives.

The heads in the study took very seriously their responsibility to train and develop these teachers within their own schools. Most of the heads had programmes of development for leadership in place. They were openly preparing their most talented teachers for future vacancies in their own schools.

Although it is clear that many heads do identify and manage leadership talent in their schools, it is also clear that there is a case for many more heads, leadership teams and governors to do this. Moreover, such a move needs to be done in a systematic way.

Identifying future leaders is one thing, developing them over time is another. Research conducted for NCSL shows that in order to ensure schools have a planned approach to building leadership capacity and leadership succession, schools should:

- create a culture for growth
- benchmark current practice
- define the leadership qualities the school wants
- identify the leadership talent pool
- assess individual talent
- grow leadership talent
The first thing future leaders need is the opportunity to lead. Creating roles and tasks for emerging leaders is vital. As they undertake these, supporting them becomes increasingly important. Mentoring is often a highly relevant part of nurturing leadership talent. And since mentoring is mutually beneficial to the mentee and the mentor, it provides leadership development for both parties.

Other strategies to support leadership development in schools include:

- using action and experiential learning to make the learning process real
- encouraging leaders to take responsibility for planning and implementing their own learning
- encouraging development at three levels: self, team and organisation
- using experiences that involve innovation, creativity, strategising and thinking outside the box
- building a culture that is supportive of leadership development at all levels

Leadership development activities that are especially effective are work-based assignments, working with others, coaching and internal training.

Coaching is particularly efficient as it directly relates to particular tasks in the workplace. Like mentoring, coaching develops the experienced leader – the coach – as well as the beginning leader. Expressed another way, mentoring and coaching improve leadership practice for all leaders at all stages of their careers.

Performance management also plays a part in developing established and advanced leaders.

The idea that NCSL wants every leader to be a learner implies that every leader should be a life-long learner. There is never a time when a school leader can say they know it all. Therefore, all leaders require support and development opportunities throughout their careers.

The idea of leadership careers is reflected in NCSL’s Leadership Development Framework.
Leadership development framework

NCSL’s leadership development framework is constructed around five stages:

- **Emergent leadership** when a teacher is beginning to take on management and leadership responsibilities and perhaps begins to form an aspiration to become a headteacher.
- **Established leadership** when assistant and deputy heads are experienced leaders who have chosen not to pursue headship.
- **Entry to headship** is the time when an experienced leader prepares for and is inducted into headship in a school.
- **Advanced leadership** is the stage at which school leaders mature in their role, look to widen their experience, refresh themselves and update their skills.
- **Consultant leadership** is the point at which an able and experienced leader is ready to put something back into the profession by taking on training, mentoring or other responsibilities.

As NCSL increases its knowledge about how leaders grow in and out of schools, it will develop a more detailed framework. This will describe the different pathways leaders take in their careers.

These descriptions might also show how taking on a second or third headship contributes to individual and institutional growth, how consultant leaders contribute to school and system-wide development, how they and advanced leaders support leadership in other schools and how secondments and sabbaticals strengthen leadership at all levels.

There also is much to learn about how leadership teams grow and take on responsibility for leadership identification and development inside their schools.
**Building leadership capacity**

The ideas presented in the previous sections illustrate how NCSL is aware that leadership learning takes place in a variety of ways and settings.

Learning to lead is not simply about training and developing individuals to perform their roles better. Leadership development is also about ensuring that schools are improving and benefiting from effective leadership and that they are settings in which leaders grow and flourish.

Moreover, leadership learning is a system-wide issue. If the education service as a whole values leadership, then across the system opportunities should be created for leaders to work in other schools and other areas.

In other words, leadership development involves building leadership capacity at three levels, as Figure 1 below shows:

Figure 1: NCSL's Model for Building Capacity
Leadership Learning – Making a Difference

NCSL’s overall task is to build leadership capacity within and across the three levels shown in Figure 1. Leadership learning should make a difference to individuals, their schools and the school system.

Making a difference for individuals involves increased knowledge and understanding, learning new skills, increased enthusiasm for current tasks and roles, increased confidence, better preparation for the next career step, greater awareness of latest thinking about leadership and school improvement, increased use of ICT and more and stronger connections with peers and other schools, including those in similar circumstances. These learning outcomes also need to be applied and put into practice in the schools where leaders work.

Improvements in schools will include many more skilled and distributed leaders and increased leadership learning opportunities within and among schools. These improvements should, at the same time, enhance curricular developments and provision, school self-evaluation processes, improvement planning and the action steps which flow from it, the quality of teaching and pupils’ learning and standards in the school. Leadership learning is not an end in itself, merely the means towards other ends, which are improvements in the exercise of leadership for school improvement and strengthening leadership across the whole school system.

When leadership learning makes a difference at all three levels – the individual, the school and the system – then all leaders will have enabled NCSL to attain its mission:

Every child in a well-led school; every leader a learner

Stemming from powerful forms of leadership learning are system-wide changes that include: all schools being well-led by their headteachers and leadership teams, many more effective middle leaders, much more networking among schools, and more fluid arrangements between schools, LEAs and organisations outside education so that there is professional interaction and interchange.

These are just some examples of how NCSL will contribute to developing a leadership learning system. Others include all schools and networks creating new, potent and collaborative leadership learning environments, new forms and patterns of leadership emerging from schools themselves and current assumptions about leadership and schools being challenged.
Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the considerable input from many within NCSL and from school leaders and leadership learning providers who have shaped both the content and the layout.

In particular we wish to thank NCSL’s Chief Executive Heather Du Quesnay, the College’s leadership group, the think tank and Professor Louise Stoll.