Towards a learning system: a new approach to raising standards for all in Scottish schools

A think piece from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland

Introduction

Over recent years, the public sector in the UK has experienced significant challenges resulting from public, political and professional expectations tempered by the austerity measures introduced by the Westminster government following the general election in 2010.

Despite the best efforts of local and national governments since then, public services in Scotland have not been immune from these challenges and, as a result, many of the traditional systems and structures to support school improvement are rapidly diminishing. In parallel, the increased focus by the Scottish Government on raising standards, reducing inequalities and questioning the effectiveness of the current governance arrangements for the school system conspire to create a "perfect storm" for the local leadership of education in Scotland.

Given these challenges, the task of leadership in public services in Scotland has never been more important and there can be little doubt that the Scottish education system is at a crossroads.

This think piece sets out a way forward; a means to address the storm through the development of a coherent approach to enhancing the leadership capacity across the whole system from the classroom to policy level, building upon and extending the excellent foundations which are already in place to achieve the shared ambition we all have for Scotland's children in an increasingly global world.

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The current context: legacy and shifts

Over the past two decades, the strategic planning and delivery of local authority services for children and young people in Scotland have undergone fundamental changes. The impact of legislation, advice and policy development such as: *Scotland Schools Act 2000, Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, Community and Children's service planning frameworks, An Integrated Assessment Framework for Scotland's Children, The Vision for Scotland's Children Improving Our Schools (Scottish Executive 2004), Protecting Children and Young People: The Framework for Standards (Scottish Executive 2004); Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006; Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes (2009); Early Years Framework (2009); The Equality Act (2010); Teaching Scotland's Future (2011); Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland (2014); Children and Young People's Act (2014); Developing the Young Workforce (2014); The Scottish Attainment Challenge (2015); National Improvement Framework (2016); Education (Scotland) Act (2016);* have created opportunities and challenges for all involved in the management of our public education system. Most recently, the Scottish Government has clearly articulated its commitment to addressing the achievement gap in children's school outcomes through a national approach which is questioning the current arrangements for school and system governance and, specifically, the traditional role of the local education authority in school improvement.

There is a clearly articulated vision for improving the wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland through the national approach: Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC).

Through policy and delivery at both national and local level, the GIRFEC philosophy:

*   puts the best interests of the child at the heart of decision making
*   takes a holistic approach to the wellbeing of a child
*   works with children, young people and their families on ways to improve wellbeing
*   advocates preventative work and early intervention to support children, young people and their families
*   believes professionals must work together in the best interests of the child.

Arguably, the GIRFEC practice model is unique in that it has survived successive Scottish governments and now has legislative legitimacy through the Children and Young People's Act 2014. This is a testament not only to the design of the approach but also to its values base which suggests that children's needs can best be met through integrated public sector provision within which schools have a crucial role to play at individual pupil, family and community levels. This is of course the perfect underpinning policy context within which Curriculum for Excellence can flourish as it fosters an open-ended, enquiry based and innovative approach to developing the wellbeing of children and young people with the acquisition of learning as a pre-requisite of caring and responsible citizenship.

The *National Improvement Framework* for Scottish Education sets out The Scottish Government's vision and priorities for our children's progress in learning. The Framework, which is part of the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, is key in driving work to continually improve Scottish education and close the attainment gap, delivering both excellence and equity. Under the overarching term, Scotland's Attainment Challenge, a series of national and local interventions are being introduced which are aimed at closing the attainment gap between the least and most deprived young people. This includes the Pupil Equity Fund which will direct additional resources to individual schools to support effective interventions.

This initiative from the Scottish Government reflects a shift towards a desire for more localised decision making in the context of an ambitious national vision for improved outcomes for all children and young people which has coincided with unprecedented fiscal challenges for all involved in managing public services. It is clear then, that the scale and pace of change,

combined with tough budget settlements, provide a challenging backdrop for public service leaders to act. The challenge facing us now is how to develop the leadership capacity needed to work through the significant challenges posed by the scenario described above. The one certainty is that we will not solve the leadership challenges of the future with the same kind of leadership which created them and that means that our approaches to developing leadership must also change.

Defining the task

In addition to the legacy and shifts already outlined, there are two other major drivers for change in the Scottish school system namely, the outcomes of the last two series of results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the 2015 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

PISA is the major international study of pupil performance in which Scotland participates. In the latest publication, PISA 2015 showed that performance in reading was lower than in 2012 and unchanged in science and mathematics. The gap between disadvantaged and less disadvantaged pupils was similar compared to 2012. These results suggest a system which is stuck rather than moving; a point of view hinted at in the OECD policy review which was commissioned by the Scottish Government and reported in 2015.

The agreed purpose of the Review was to inform the ongoing development of education policy, practice and leadership in Scotland, by providing an independent review of the direction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and emerging impacts seen in quality and equity in Scottish schooling. In particular, the report aimed to:

•   Highlight key impacts of the approach taken to developing the curriculum to date;

•   Analyse key aspects of education policy and practice in Scotland, and integrate insights from PISA and other evidence from different countries/regions;

•   Highlight areas where further change or development could add value to an ongoing programme of educational improvement.

The report contained a number of recommendations which the authors suggested *"..can help move the Curriculum for Excellence and the Scottish system to be among those leading the world....It needs an ambitious theory of change and a more robust evidence base, especially about learning outcomes and progress. CfE needs to be less managed from the centre and become more a dynamic, highly equitable curriculum being built constantly in schools, networks and communities with a strengthened "middle" in a vision of collective responsibility and multi-layer governance."* [1]

This call for a strengthened "middle" and a vision of collective responsibility and multi-layer governance operating through networks and collaborative practice between schools has unquestionably influenced the current Scottish government's policy in its drive to promote a sector-led school improvement system. This drive has significant implications for local government in general and local councils in particular. As the local authorities in Scotland are integral to such a development, there needs to be complementary action to address the gaps between high- and low-performing authorities if we are to achieve excellence for all.

1   OECD. (2015). *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective.* OECD.

Strengthening the middle: the leadership challenge

McKinsey's second major report on school systems, **How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better**, observed that:

"As the school systems we studied have progressed on their improvement journey, they seem to have increasingly come to rely on a 'mediating layer' that acts between the centre and the schools. This mediating layer sustains improvement by providing three things of importance to the system: targeted hands-on support to schools, a buffer between the school and the centre, and a channel to share and integrate improvements across schools." [2]

The translation of national policy aspirations into practical improvements in the lives of young people requires leadership at all levels of the system. It will require work in partnership across networks of relationships as a result of flatter management structures, driven by budget reductions and working across organisation boundaries on a shared endeavour. It will need systemic insight, reflective learning and the ability to develop leadership in others, a point argued strongly by Hallgarten et al:

"If transformation is to come from within education systems themselves, rather than left to market forces or developments in technology, then it will depend upon the emergence of a different kind of leadership. System leaders need to support schools to think more often, more deeply and more radically about their mission. Whilst systems can be far better at creating the enabling conditions and cultures for innovation, schools need to take ultimate responsibility for their own ethos. Inevitably, this points to a significant leadership challenge at all levels. We need leadership which has authentic conviction about the potential for education as humanity's best hope; and which can both assemble and communicate a compelling case for change. We need leaders who understand that this is not a quest to converge on a single solution; leaders who have the political savvy to create the legitimacy for radical change, and who draw on international networks as a source of imaginative ideas rather than prefabricated policies." [3]

So, our question is - how might we in Scotland collectively create the conditions for all stakeholders to come together to agree a collective approach which has one aim only: to develop, maintain and enhance a school system in Scotland which fosters innovation, celebrates diversity and has an unrelenting focus on ensuring the most positive life chances for all children and young people?

As part of seeking to answer this question we accept that local authorities in Scotland, as one of the major players in the middle, are fundamentally implicated in reaching a solution which is timely, effective and, above all, sustainable given the increasing move towards a sector-led model of school improvement.

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2   Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., Barber, M. (2010). *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better.* McKinsey &Co.
3   Hallgarten, T., Hannon, V., Beresford, T. (2015). *Creative Public Leadership: How School System Leaders Create the Conditions for System-wide Innovation.* WISE, Dubai.

One system, one approach: towards collaborative professionalism

"We believe that policymakers and other system leaders need to create platforms for collective agency amongst schools and teachers, incentivising them to use this agency to innovate in collaboration with others in a school community – including learners and parents, and also with the wider world of local communities, employers, and 'edupreneurs'. The aim must be to return teachers to the front and center (sic) of the innovation process, but within a context that challenges both systems and teachers to grasp how public education must change to enable learners and institutions to thrive in the new conditions which confront them." Hallgarten et al (ibid)

The statement above is a challenge to the middle in the Scottish context as surely local authorities are the very "policymakers and other system leaders" who Hallgarten et al suggest should be creating platforms for collective agency. This function of the middle resonates strongly with the proposal in the 2012 ISOS Report for the Department for Education in England[4] which outlined three distinctive roles for the local authority in an increasing autonomous school system. These were:

Figure 1.

In his seminal work on developing a school-led improvement system, *A Self-improving school system – towards maturity[5]*, David Hargeaves set out what he believes to be the cornerstones of a system led by schools for schools. Key to success is what he describes as a **collective moral purpose** or *that which motivates and sustains teachers in their professional commitment.*

A clear collective moral purpose shouldn't be confined to schools however. Surely, this is the currency of common endeavour which unites all of those working in the public sector to produce what Hargeaves (ibid) calls **collaborative capital**.

4   Parish, N., Baxter, A., Sandals, L. (2012) *Action research into the enabling role of the local authority in education.* ISOS Partnership.
5   Hargreaves, D. H. (2012). *A self-improving school system: towards maturity.* National College of School Leadership.
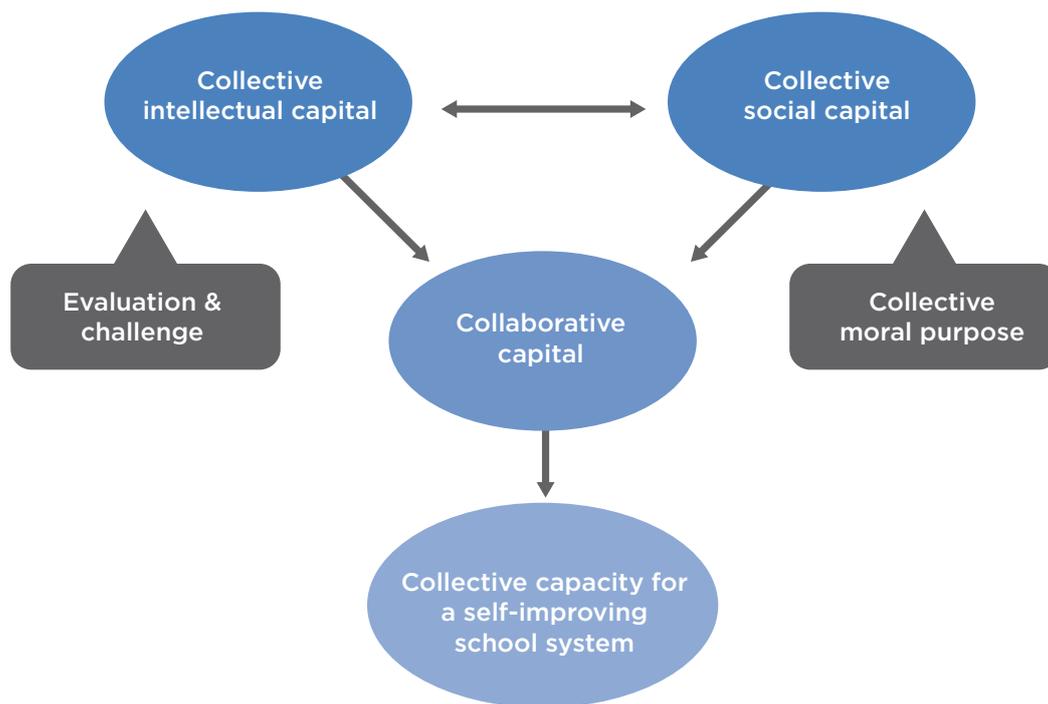
Figure 2.

This notion of collaborative capital has been refined further by Fullan and Hargreaves[6] who, when commenting on the most recent developments in the Ontario school system, use the phrase "**collaborative professionalism**" to define an approach which calls for the whole system to unite in a single focus on collaborative approaches to systemic change aimed at improving the learning outcomes for children and young people.

In the UK we have an additional element to support collaborative professionalism. Since 2010, the Staff College has been at the forefront of developing an integrated approach to public sector leadership in the UK which it has termed systems leadership. This commitment to systems leadership was strengthened by the international research project which the College commissioned in 2012 and led to the publication of "**Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times**" in 2013. This report defined systems leadership as *"leadership that extends beyond the confines of single agencies or organisations, stretching the remit and skills of leaders into places where their usual authority, derived from organisational position, may not be recognised."* [7]

The report also highlighted one of the underpinning elements of systems leadership namely, the principle of ceding power to the collective good. Systems leadership was described as being about *"willingness to give things away' as it was concerned with achievement of one's own goals or promoting of one's own agency agenda. In this respect, systems leaders were often not engaging in 'win/win' transactions (in the sense of 'you win, I win') but in a situation where an individual, whether an organisation or a person, might have to cede ground in order that the wider collective might benefit: "to gain more, you have to give away" (and thus, in a sense, 'we win, even if I lose')".*

Since the publication of this report the construct of systems leadership has become a significant feature of many national programmes for public sector leadership in the UK as it reflects the reality of how change happens on the ground. Given this, we believe that it is a pre-requite for the development of collaborative professionalism and should therefore become part of the DNA of the Scottish school system.

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6   Fullen, M., Hargreaves, A. (2016). *Bringing the professional back in: Call to action.* Oxford, OH. Learning Forward.
7   Ghate, D., Lewis, J., Welbourn, D. (2013). *Systems Leadership: Exceptional Leadership for Exceptional times.* Virtual Staff College.

Our proposal

"Public services face unprecedented challenges. Rising demand, changing demographics and increasingly stretched finances mean that the choice for local authorities and public service providers is stark: change the way they work, or face the possibility of service retrenchment, increasing irrelevance and perpetual crisis management." [8]

In the years following the general election of 2010, UK public services have undergone accelerated change, as cost and reform initiatives have redefined what is 'business as usual'. Creating a sustainable asset-based public service model that builds capacity and resilience within citizens, families and communities has become the primary concern of public sector leaders. Achieving this will take brave, collective and sustained acts of leadership across systems and throughout organisational structures which are responding to new locality arrangements for the provision of public services.

To achieve this will require an increasingly agile, flexible, multidisciplinary workforce, better equipped to respond to the social, technological, structural and financial drivers for change.

Furthermore, recent research, undertaken by the Staff College together with the RSA[9] highlights the leadership challenges involved in creating the context within which citizens, businesses, social networks and social sector organisations can play a larger role in producing public welfare outcomes. To achieve such transformational change towards what the research terms **New Public Governance**, public service leaders and their partners need to be agile and creative, have the resilience to ride out the uncertainty and messiness that inevitably will follow and the confidence that, by blending participatory approaches, they will be able to create effective, efficient and impactful public service provision.

We are therefore proposing a new "**one system: one approach**" to the development of leadership capacity in the middle (which we define as including Directors, Heads of Service, QIOs, Education Managers and Headteachers) based on systems leadership through an alliance of ADES, Education Scotland and the Learning Directorate together with other key players in the middle tier. This approach should be an alliance of common endeavour: a collaboration for purpose which is:

- Intellectual
- Underpinned by systems leadership
- Focused on culture and ethos rather than solely on specific skills
- Child rather than system centred
- Aimed at developing personal and organisational improvement as a habit and not a goal

8   Randle, A., Kippin, H. (2014) *Managing Demand: Building Future Public Services.* RSA.
9   Buddery,P., Parsfield, M., Shafique, A & Florek, A. (Ed) (2016) *Changing the Narrative: A new relationship between the citizen and the state.* The Staff College/RSA.

Outline content: the what

Given the challenges outlined above, we believe that we must enhance the leadership capacity of all levels of staff in the middle tier in order to bring about effective and sustained systemic improvement.

This must be Scotland-wide so the delivery approach must be flexible and responsive, taking account of local circumstances and drawing on a range of major stakeholders who are supportive of Scottish education. It should be an uncomplicated model but one that has sufficient sophistication to be able to flex to meet differing needs and have the capacity to respond to the rapidly changing context of public service delivery in Scotland.

At the heart of this endeavour is to our desire to have a confident, reflective, self-improving school system where the responsibility for improvement is increasingly set at school rather than local authority level. This will require a dedicated and focussed effort to enhance and extend the maturity of leadership in our schools and local authorities in preparation for the time when the current support structures provided by local authorities may not be available or required. This is a prime purpose of what we are calling a **whole system** approach to building leadership capacity where local authorities play their part in creating the optimum conditions for the system change called for in the OECD report (ibid) and the WISE Report[10].

Our experience in leadership development suggests that sustainable change comes about when groups or teams of people work together to bring about the desired change. By creating a flexible, blended approach to learning our intention is to encourage a social approach to learning that, we believe will increase the potential for real change and improvement. Our proposed systemic leadership programme will aim to:

- introduce participants to a number of core constructs of public sector leadership - including adaptive leadership, public value, and systems leadership
- provide a challenging, yet safe, environment within which participants can explore their personal agency and leadership potential
- offer participants opportunities to extend and deepen their learning through a combination of remote learning and group interaction
- help participants to deepen their understanding of and ability to work within an increasingly complex and challenging corporate, political and financial context
- enable participants to work with others to explore new and innovative solutions to a "complex and possibly intractable" leadership challenge

More specifically, the programme would have the following elements within its content:

1. Having strong personal values, a clear moral purpose and an ethical stance:

- have a sense of clarity regarding personal values and the ability to act on them
- hold to these values even when under pressure
- champion the values on behalf of the service and its users
- have a clear sense of purpose that derives from their values
- be able to articulate these personal values and this purpose in a compelling and authentic narrative that has relevance for service users and stakeholders.

2. Thinking beyond the service and the short-term:

- have a strong appreciation of the broader social, political and cultural context for public services
- understand the impact of this context on services and users
- have the ability to translate this into a broad range of future scenarios and possibilities
- work collaboratively with a broad range of partners to develop possibilities, work across disciplines and plan for the future
- effectively manage the complex political and corporate environment of public services e.g. the relationships between elected members and local government officers

10   Leadbeater, C. (2014) *Learning to make a difference: Schools as a Creative Community.* WISE, Dubai.

3. Having a singular focus on performance:

- lead services effectively in order to deliver high standards
- hold others clearly to account in a consistent manner
- focus rigorously on quality with an emphasis on continuous improvement and innovation
- create a performance culture through modelling behaviours that support improvement
- challenge poor quality, standards and performance.

4. Supporting and developing individuals and teams:

- provide systematic opportunities to develop people and teams in line with service requirements and building longer-term capability
- recognise individual aspirations and needs and build these into formal and informal development processes
- have an effective coaching style of leadership that can facilitate developmental conversations
- balance supportive and challenging interventions in order to construct an organisational learning culture.

5. Communicating clearly, openly and effectively

- communicate clearly with individuals, teams and wider stakeholder groups in ways that build trust and influence outcomes
- articulate a compelling public narrative that inspires confidence and commitment amongst staff and stakeholders
- analyse, prioritise and summarise key messages from often complex and varied sources
- have access to a wide repertoire of influencing behaviours that balance assertiveness (push skills) with (pull skills) building common ground
- have a personal communication style that fits with their other leadership behaviours and is seen as congruent.

6. Acting as a positive role model:

- model personal leadership behaviours that affirm important values and principles
- facilitate the creation of an effective and supportive organisational culture
- act with fairness and integrity to develop high levels of trust and respect even whilst making difficult decisions
- be a clear advocate and champion for service users and the need for improvement and innovation
- demonstrate resilience often in situations of high pressure, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

7. Building broad networks, partnerships and solid working relationships:

- develop effective working relationships with a broad range of stakeholders and partner organisations
- steer a course through competing agendas and differing positions using political intelligence and effective communication
- recognise and work with diversity to capitalise on the power of difference
- practice and encourage 'constructive awkwardness' and challenge to combat complacency and group-think.

8. Using Systems Leadership approaches:

- use emergent system leadership approaches to build productive and effective relationships beyond organisational, sector and system boundaries
- have the ability to use influencing skills as opposed to positional power as a means to achieving goals
- be comfortable working with horizontal (i.e. matrix) as opposed to vertical governance structures.
- act in the interests of the wider system (the collective) as opposed to narrow organisational interests, putting children and young people at the centre of their attention.

9. Setting a clear vision and direction:

- have the capability to develop and implement clear and coherent strategies
- embed and sustain strategic direction across and beyond services
- be flexible and adaptive in the face of changing policy and context whilst maintaining a clear focus and direction
- use collaborative methods where appropriate to develop shared purpose, strategic direction and improvement (e.g. co-design and co-production).

Delivery model: the how

Since its inception in 2004, our Staff College has designed and delivered many leadership programmes for those in senior and middle leadership roles in local authorities in Scotland. Over these years we have learnt that the most effective programme model is one which consists of a blend of approaches including 24/ 48 hour intensive workshops where the additional networking time made available through a residential setting can significantly enhance the depth of individual and group learning.

Our suggested approach will be through a social learning model which Jane Hart, in her book The Social Learning Handbook[11] describes as:

- **social**: learning not simply **with** others but **from** the shared experiences and ideas of others
- **continuous**: providing a constant drip-feed or flow of information or resources, or conversations with colleagues, building up to a large amount of knowledge and shared experiences
- **happens in short bursts**: enabling short interactions with others and providing access to bite-sized pieces of content.

Given these features, we are proposing a cohort based model with no more than 20 participants in a cohort. To maximise the learning and ensure coherence, each cohort should include balance of membership in order to ensure an accurate representation of the major agencies currently involved in the planning and delivery of education services to children and young people.

With this in mind, the exact make up of a cohort will need to be carefully managed although there are lessons from the Austrian Leadership Academy programme[12] which has been successfully running for a number of years and brings together participants from across the whole education system to work together in order to develop a whole system approach to school improvement.

A key feature of the delivery model should be the linking of theory to practice i.e. all content must have applicability to the respective workplace of participants. With this in mind, we are suggesting that the programme or, more accurately, our leadership development initiative, is based on a number of distinct elements which provide a pathway to achieving a coherent approach to building systemic leadership capacity whilst also providing succession planning for the future.

To achieve this, Staff College Scotland, on behalf of ADES will seek to work in partnership with the principal stakeholders in the Scottish Education system to design a national leadership programme which will be delivered over the next three years at a local level by a team of trained facilitators possibly utilising the emerging inter-authority partnership arrangements.

Conclusion

We believe that the Scottish school system has many strengths, a number of which were celebrated in the 2015 OECD report. However, our optimistic view is tempered by our belief that despite these strengths it lacks two fundamental features without which it is unlikely to move from good to great. Namely, a culture of innovation throughout the system and diversity of provision though local solutions to local needs.

We suggest that by investing in the development of a systemic culture where improvement is a habit and not a goal, we will create the Scottish equivalent of the underpinning feature

11   Hart, J. (2014). *Social Learning Handbook.* Centre for Learning and Performance Technology.
12   Stoll, L., Moorman, H., Sibylle, R. (2007) *School leadership development strategies: The Austrian Leadership Academy.* OECD.

of the highly successful Finnish system namely, teachers at the heart of improvement but augmented by an effective, supportive and intelligent middle tier which drives and nurtures creativity and innovation from policy to classroom.

In this new world, we believe that we should celebrate diversity and local solutions as a truly school led system must surely reflect local context, local communities and local aspirations. This will require insightful and liberating local authorities which are at the centre of seeking and developing creative local solutions and are increasingly comfortable to step back from the front line of school improvement and focus on acting as champions for high standards, innovative pedagogy with a singular determination to achieve excellence through equity for all learners.

This will require mature as well as systemic leadership which we believe can only be achieved by new and different leadership behaviour from local authorities and the development of new constellations of practice aimed at systemic change through creative pedagogy and collaborative leadership rather than policy dictat.

Commentating on systemic change in Ontario, Hargreaves and Ainscow writing in 2015 suggest that *"Large-scale success cannot be achieved if districts continue to act independently of one another. Leading from the middle, not just in the middle, can use the power of local solutions to diverse problems in an environment where schools work with schools and districts work with districts as they exercise collective initiative and responsibility for all students' success. This kind of leadership needn't be confined to districts and can encompass networks and other kinds of partnerships as well (Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, in press). But collective responsibility is not just something districts should ask others to undertake. It is something that districts now have to take on themselves."* [13]

We suggest that this is a call to arms for the whole Scottish system to come together and collectively address the challenge so eloquently put in 1979 by Ron Edmonds the black Superintendent who became known as the leader of the effective schools movement when posing this challenge in his now famous article in "Educational Leadership[14]":

"It seems to me, therefore, that what is left of this discussion are three declarative statements:

(a)   We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us;

(b)   We already know more than we need to do that; and

(c)   Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

Achieving this will require leadership across the whole Scottish education system which we believe is best achieved by a single approach to developing that capacity from central government, local government and schools.

This think piece is our contribution from the middle; our means by which we can jointly support the Scottish Government's desire to create a sector-led school improvement system by including those who are charged with leading schools in our collective endeavour to increase the leadership capacity of our school system and, through this, enhance the current and future lives of children and young people.

Anton Florek. Staff College Scotland. April 2017.

13   Hargreaves, H., Ainscow, M. (2015) *The top and bottom of leadership change.* Sage Journals. Phi Delta Kappa.
14   Edmunds, R. (1979). *Effective Schools for The Urban Poor*, in Educational Leadership Vol 37 No1. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.