



Establishing and leading new types of school: challenges and opportunities for leaders and leadership

Executive summary

Resource

University technical colleges (UTCs), studio schools and free schools are the three new types of school whose leadership is studied in this report. Discussions to establish UTCs and studio schools had started before 2010, and the first UTC opened in September 2010, with another in 2011 and three more in 2012. Six studio schools opened in 2011 and 12 in 2012. The free school programme began in May 2010, with the first 24 free schools opening in 2011 and 55 further free schools opening in 2012.

The fieldwork for this report was carried out during late 2011 and through 2012, so the observations and conclusions relate to a specific point in the early stages of development of these new types of school. The government's approach to supporting these schools has evolved during the course of the study. Nonetheless, the results of the research are instructive.

There are useful lessons to be learned from the leadership of similar schools in other jurisdictions and from the literature on the leadership of small schools. Some of the new types of school are small by design, and many of the rest are small in practice as they tend to open one or two year groups at a time. Some of the new types of school seek to develop an innovative curriculum and it is useful to study the principles on which this can be done effectively.

The main motivations for establishing new types of school are parental demand and to fill a perceived gap in the curriculum. This is backed by a strong personal mission on the part of the promoters and principals of the schools.

Leading new types of school presents great opportunities for school leaders, but also major challenges, both in the set-up phase and in the early years after opening the school. The leaders of these new types of school have coped with these challenges in different ways, but all have stressed the opportunities that starting a new school has given them to enact their vision of the education best suited to fulfil the aims of the school and the needs of its pupils.

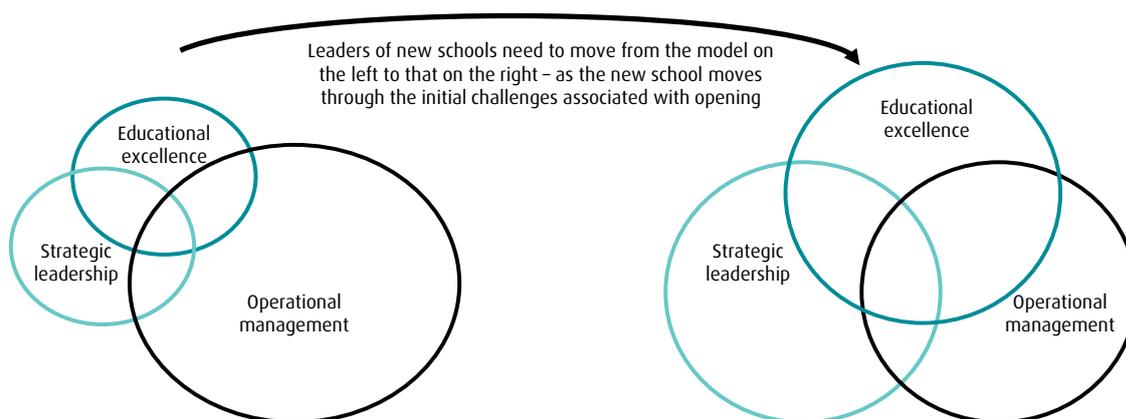
The process of establishing a new school is extremely challenging, with a restricted timescale between approval and opening and, frequently, difficulties in finding suitable premises, both to open the school and then to establish it on a permanent site. During this set-up period, promoters and principals have to deal with a myriad of other challenges, from the need to recruit pupils and appoint staff, to building relationships with a local community that may be sceptical about the arrival of a new type of school with which they are unfamiliar.

The length of negotiations between promoters and the Department for Education has been a critical factor underlying many of the pre-opening challenges. However, the Department has made some reductions to the extent of negotiations with promoters of free schools opening in 2013 and 2014, while still maintaining the government's requirement for robust accountability and best value for money.

Leaders of new schools that are part of chains or groups are supported in much of this challenging work and are more likely to be able to spend a higher proportion of their time on leading teaching and learning and addressing strategic as well as operational issues.

There are particular challenges for principals who have not previously been headteachers, who are learning the job of headship at the same time as establishing a new school. Based on responses to our survey, the proportion of principals of new schools opening in 2012 with no previous headship experience is significantly higher than the proportion for schools that opened in 2011. The level of challenge was increased in instances where other senior staff had no previous experience of school leadership, when heads were appointed as little as four months before the school was due to open, where the school had difficult premises issues to address, and was not part of a chain or group. Pupil recruitment also provided a substantial challenge, particularly as there may have been no premises to show to parents, where the normal process of school admissions had already taken place, and where other local schools were strongly opposed to the creation of the new school.

As the school moves from set-up to opening, the challenge of balancing leadership time and focus between the demands of operational, strategic and teaching and learning roles becomes more acute. Priorities are constantly being juggled. The first half-term after opening is inevitably dominated for principals by the demands of day-to-day management, with strategic discussions beginning to take place later in the term. The challenge for new school leaders is to ensure that operational habits do not become so entrenched that they are unable to move to a better balance in their roles as their school develops during its first year.



This situation is indicative of the dynamic nature of the leadership structures and methods of operation in a new school that will expand each year for several years. At the start of the second year, pupil and staff numbers may well double, requiring a clear plan to maintain the momentum, ethos and leadership cohesion of the school's first year.

Our interviews revealed that just about every challenge has its matching opportunity. Starting a school from scratch means that many practical issues, such as IT contracts and telephony, have to be sorted out; there are no established policies and practices, and every member of staff and all pupils have to be recruited. These challenges are balanced by the opportunity to implement a vision of education, and appoint staff who share that vision and who enjoy working in a climate of innovation. Leaders of new schools are also free to establish new systems to underpin their vision, including different ways of structuring the school week, organising curriculum planning and staff development time, and supporting teaching and learning in the classroom.

Most new types of school start small, which presents its own set of challenges, particularly for leaders of small secondary schools. All staff, and especially those with posts of responsibility, must wear several hats and be prepared to turn their hand to anything. At the same time, the small size enables better communication, closer working relationships and more rapid innovation and evaluation of new approaches to teaching and learning.

There is a similar range of challenges and opportunities for the promoters, as the school opens and they take on the role of governors. Many promoters will have been very hands-on during the set-up phase, putting in many hours of work on premises issues, marketing, human resources policies and the education plan required for approval by the Department for Education's advisers. This can make it harder for promoters to step back and take on a more strategic role as school governors.

Governing bodies of new types of school have a particularly important role to play, especially in standalone free schools, where the governing body is the critical line of accountability, there being no other backstop except the Department for Education. It is therefore imperative that governors are trained for this role.

Governing bodies of UTCs must have a majority of governors from business and higher education, and our research found that these governors play a significant role in the development of the school, with their employers attaching considerable importance to the reputational effect of the performance of the school.

Not all external relationships are so strong or so encouraging for the new types of school. Relationships with other schools can be difficult, often turning on the issue of admissions and the effect on pupil numbers of the arrival of the new school on the local scene. Most headteachers of the new schools are able to join the local heads' group, although sometimes not immediately.

There is a risk that some new schools could become isolated and out of touch with local developments, but many new school leaders are attending meetings of local headteachers and some are linking with a teaching school alliance. Relationships with local authorities are very variable, with some local authorities taking the initiative in establishing a free school and others being openly hostile. UTCs and studio schools have very strong relationships with employers and are taking school-business links to a new level in the impact on the curriculum for young people.

The skills and qualities required of the leaders of these schools are similar to those needed in leaders of maintained schools, although with some differences of emphasis and degree. In the set-up phase for a new school, leaders emphasise the importance of being able to exercise skills in the areas of project management, capacity to innovate, financial management, media and marketing, and political and stakeholder management. This has implications for the training offered to the leaders of new types of school by the National College and its partners.

Leaders of new schools are accessing professional and leadership development through four main routes:

- using coaches and mentors: the coaching provided by the National College to the principals is particularly welcomed, not least because of the limitations of time available to those establishing and leading a new school; the leaders' preferred style of training mirrors the flexible modes of leadership development recommended in the literature
- buying into development programmes, including from Future Leaders and other National College licensed providers of leadership development
- working with leaders of other schools, including independent schools: leaders of schools that are part of groups or chains have a core group of other leaders with whom to work on school improvement strategies, a facility not available to schools that are more isolated
- networking with leaders of other new schools; since networks between free schools are generally not as strong as those for studio schools and UTCs, this has an impact on the ability of new schools to join with other schools for professional development and school improvement support

The research team's recommendations are grouped under five headings.

Recommendations for promoters

Promoters of new schools are encouraged to identify a dedicated person to oversee project planning for the new school (including the appointment of a headteacher). They are also recommended to use the report's findings to consider the skills they need to look for when appointing a principal. As the set-up phase is ending, promoters are advised to consider their role, the optimum composition and chair of the governing body and, if the new school is part of a chain, the balance between policy-making at a group level and school autonomy. Promoters need to be aware that systems, relationships and personnel used during the set-up phase may need to be adapted as a new school opens and starts to operate in its steady-state mode.

Recommendations for leaders

Leaders of new schools may well face opposition to the establishment of their school, but they should still make every effort to explain to other local schools the reasons why the new school is being set up and should seek to work constructively with other local schools and headteachers, including participating in local heads' meetings. The operational pressures on new school leaders and their staff are intense but they are still advised to make it a priority to ensure that all staff have access to professional and leadership development opportunities, including engagement with other schools. In addition, the senior leadership team should ensure that it allocates sufficient time for strategic discussion, reflection and leading teaching and learning. Senior leaders should also ensure that they receive external support and challenge on professional issues and school standards. New school leaders who are not part of a school group should be prepared to buy in additional support from external sources during the set-up phase.

Recommendations for the National College and its licensed providers of training

The National College and its licensees should consider offering an induction training programme, in partnership with the New Schools Network and the Department for Education, for all heads of free schools. The College should also build on its well-received coaching programme by offering to pair heads of new schools with leaders who have experience of setting up new academies or opening new schools in previous cohorts. Principals of free schools should be encouraged to establish how best to facilitate networking opportunities similar to those available to studio schools and UTCs.

The National College's leadership curriculum should remain responsive to the needs of middle and senior leaders appointed to a leadership post in a new school for the first time. The College's licensees, for their part, should ensure that the curriculum is available through a combination of online, local and/or networking sessions to both prospective and new leaders of new types of school. Linking leaders and governors of new schools to teaching school alliances will help them in their leadership succession planning.

Recommendations for the Department for Education

The Department for Education should maintain the practice, as applied for the 2013 cohort of free schools, of formally approving the establishment of new schools at least a year in advance of opening in order to enable principals to take up full-time appointment at least eight months before the school opens. This should also enable new schools to carry out their admissions process at the same time as other schools, where they decide to do this. As part of the process for approving a new school, the Department for Education and the Education Funding Agency (EFA) should agree a critical path for securing and converting the premises for the school in order to inform decisions about whether the opening of a new school should be delayed when significant slippages occur.

The Department and its advisers should consider how they can be less prescriptive in the education plans that they require new schools to submit during the set-up phase. The Department should advise new schools of the importance of arranging training for all governors, especially in the role of monitoring and evaluating school performance, risk assessment and the implementation of school improvement measures.

Recommendations for others

In the interests of young people, local authorities should seek to develop productive relationships with new types of school being established in their area. Leaders of free schools, UTCs and studio schools should also be invited to attend local heads' meetings in order to promote collaboration and partnership working between different types of school serving the same area. The Studio Schools Trust and the Baker Dearing Trust should continue to facilitate and develop opportunities for studio schools and UTCs respectively to network, share skills and evaluate new practice. In its inspection of teaching and learning in studio schools and UTCs, Ofsted should take into account the different style of learning in those schools.

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- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

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