

Research Briefing N°7

Review of the school leadership landscape: school leaders' perceptions and response to change

This research is a review of school leadership in England – how school leaders are responding to change across the education system, and the challenges (and opportunities) this presents for leadership and leadership development.

Key words: school leadership; change; accountability; governance; leadership development; demography



Key findings

The key findings relate to leadership demography, leadership models, challenges faced, the balance between operational and strategic leadership, leadership skills and capabilities, and support and leadership development. Several key findings are:

- There was a high level of confidence in managing current change. However, there was a range of opinions on the aims and the potential impact of policy with school leaders being most positive where policy focused on schools working collaboratively.
- The research identified four approaches (categories) to managing policy change which it labelled Category 1: the confident (22%), Category 2: the cautious (34%), Category 3: the concerned (32%), and Category 4: the constrained (12%) (See Table 1). While there was a relatively even spread of headteachers (by school type, phase, Ofsted category and context/Free School Meals [FSM] band) across the four categories, there were more academy principals and headteachers of 'outstanding' secondary schools in the first: they were most positive about and actively engaged in the new opportunities created by policy. 'Good' schools were often located in categories 2 and 3, with primary schools more likely found in category 4.

What we did

At a time of numerous new policies for schools in England, the research, funded by the then National College for School Leadership (now the National College of Teaching and Leadership [NCTL]) and conducted between October 2011 and July 2012, wished to explore key issues concerning the developing leadership landscape. These included:

- the state of school and academy leadership in England, including its key demographic features;
- the way in which leaders are responding to change across phases and contexts and across a range of policy areas;
- the extent to which leaders are successfully maintaining a strategic and operational focus;
- the identification of key challenges, opportunities faced by leaders and their responses to change;
- an exploration of new leadership models and trends with the potential to address current and future challenges;
- emergent and effective behaviours, skills, knowledge and capabilities of leaders in the new landscape; and
- implications for the work of the National College.

Table 1: Four categories or classes

Classes	N	%	Thematic definition	Categorization
Class 1	183	22%	Positive about school autonomy and confident about actively pursuing new policy opportunities	Confident
Class 2	286	34%	Moderately positive about school autonomy, but cautious about engaging with policy	Cautious
Class 3	264	32%	Apprehensive about school autonomy and concerned about the potential impacts of policy	Concerned
Class 4	100	12%	Neutral on school autonomy, but sceptical about the aims and constraints of policy and negative about the potential impacts	Constrained

How we did it

The research project consisted of four overlapping phases:

- an analysis of the leadership labour market/demographics using existing data sets, especially the School Workforce Census;
- a literature review of recent school leadership studies;
- a national survey of school leaders – 834 headteachers, 769 middle and senior leaders and 347 chairs of governors; and
- the collection of qualitative data from eight case studies and interviews with stakeholders, 20 telephone interviews with headteachers, and three focus groups with school leaders.

Further information

The research resulted in a report which can be found on the NCTL and the Institute of Education's London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL) websites:

Earley, P. and Higham, R. et al, (2012). Review of the Leadership Landscape. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

<https://www.nationalcollege.org.uk>
<http://www.lcll.org.uk/research.html>

An article for an academic journal (to be published):

Higham, R. and Earley, P. (2013). School autonomy and central control in England: school leaders' views on a changing policy landscape. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*

The project director used the findings of the research along with those of earlier research projects he led to write a book on how school leadership has changed over the last decade.

[Earley, P. \(2013\). Exploring the School Leadership Landscape: Changing demands, changing realities. London: Bloomsbury.](#)

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