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Leadership for 21st Century Learning

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Executive summary

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Leadership is critical because it is strongly determinant of direction and outcomes, whether at the micro level of schools or of broader systems. As learning is the core business of education, it provides the paramount form and purpose of leadership focused on creating and sustaining environments that are conducive to good learning. Innovation is an integral part of the exercise of learning leadership in setting new directions.

Learning leadership is thus about setting direction and taking responsibility for making learning happen. It is exercised through distributed, connected activity and relationships. It extends beyond formal players to include different partners, and may be exercised at different levels of the overall learning system. It includes "learning management" in the commitment to transform, persevere and make change happen.

Learning leadership

The OECD Secretariat overview is a substantial and freestanding analysis, while drawing fully on the different contributions of the report. It is organised around the "5Ws and 1H" framework – Why? What? How? Who? Where? and When?

The chapter by James Spillane focuses on leading and managing teaching, for him "the core technology of schooling". He argues that too many analyses dwell on "leading the schoolhouse rather than leading the core work of the schoolhouse" and as a result are only weakly related to teaching, learning and their improvement. He frames and reviews research evidence to inform leadership for that core business.

John MacBeath presents leadership principles – the focus on learning, creating conducive conditions, dialogue, shared leadership responsibility and a shared sense of accountability – and underlines the importance of creating communities of learning. He widens the focus to incorporate non-formal learning arrangements, thereby significantly extending the leadership challenges of design and for practice.

Clive Dimmock, Dennis Twek and Yancy Toh describe an approach that starts with the nature of learning needed for the 21st century and relate that to appropriate teaching and learning arrangements, before delineating corresponding leadership arrangements – a "backward mapping" approach that defines the "learning design model". The model is applied to two Singapore schools.

Chapter 5 presents a selection of the leadership initiatives and analyses gathered through the Innovative Learning Environments project:

- Tanja Westfall-Greiter describes the strategy of creating teacher learning leaders (*Lerndesigners*) in the current Austrian Neue Mittelschule (NMS) reform.

- Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser discuss a leadership programme in British Columbia, Canada that engages the leaders together in a "spiral of inquiry" about learning in their own school and in networked activity.

- The New York City examples described by Roser Salavert cover professional learning communities, leadership coaching, teacher teams, and student "voice".

- Lone Christiansen and Per Tronsmo present Norwegian approaches to leadership and two national programmes, one for school leadership professional development and the other for mentoring principals and local providers.

- The South Australian and Israeli examples offered by Susanne Owen and Dorit Tubin feature the work of particular sections of the respective education ministries looking to drive innovative learning and provide conditions to support it.

Chapter by Anna Jolonch, Màrius Martínez and Joan Badia analyses the origins, methods and impact of collaboration between the OECD and the Jaume Bofill Foundation on learning leadership designed to bring benefits to Catalonia and to the broader international community. This initiative has involved an important research component, with researchers and practitioners looking in detail at six exemplary sites of learning leadership.

Concluding orientations

Learning leadership puts creating the conditions for 21st century learning and teaching at the core of leadership practice. Students' learning is at the heart of the enterprise: the core work is to ensure deep 21st century learning, whatever the environment. Designing and developing innovative learning environments to meet such ambitions requires highly demanding teaching repertoires and for everyone to keep learning, unlearning and relearning.

Continuous learning of all players and partners is a condition of successful implementation and sustainability.

Learning leadership demonstrates creativity and often courage. Innovating, designing, bringing others on board and redesigning all call on the exercise of creativity, and often courage. Deep shifts in mindset and practice and the capacity to keep the long-term vision in view are needed when the aim is transformation, even if the starting point may be incremental. The leadership focus is on deep changes to practice, structures and cultures.

Learning leadership models and nurtures 21st century professionalism. It is exercised through professional learning, inquiry and self-evaluation, and learning leaders are themselves high-level knowledge workers. By engaging in appropriate professional learning and creating the conditions for others to do the same, they model such professionalism throughout their wider communities.

Learning leadership is social and connected. Learning leadership is fundamentally social in nature and interaction is the essence of leadership practice. Learning leadership develops, grows and is sustained through participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) and networks. This means that the "meso" level of networks (rather than as an administrative layer) is critical.

As learning environments innovate, leadership becomes more complex, often involving diverse non-formal partners. The educational leadership literature has been dominated by the "place called school". Increasingly, innovative learning design incorporates non-formal sites and approaches in ways that make growing pedagogical and organisational demands on leadership. The distribution of leadership and the professional learning communities must extend to a range of different professionals, partners, and communities.

Transformative learning leadership involves complex multi-level chemistry. Systemic innovation and sustainability of powerful 21st century learning environments depends on learning leadership at different levels. Initial impetus might come from any level, from within the formal system and from other partners but for this impetus to be sustained at scale it needs corresponding decision-making and action at the other levels.

Learning leadership is needed at the system level. System-level learning leadership may serve to create the initial space for innovation or it may be exercised in response to micro-level innovation. A key policy role lies in creating conditions for facilitating networked professional learning. Governance and accountability systems should align with the ambition of creating powerful, innovative learning environments, or at least should not be pulling in the opposite direction.