



System leadership: implications and considerations for school leaders

Alan Gorman, Fiona King, Romina Madrid Miranda, Michelle Jones & Alma Harris

To cite this article: Alan Gorman, Fiona King, Romina Madrid Miranda, Michelle Jones & Alma Harris (2025) System leadership: implications and considerations for school leaders, School Leadership & Management, 45:2, 149-152, DOI: [10.1080/13632434.2025.2464387](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2464387)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2464387>



Published online: 04 Mar 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2500



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

EDITORIAL



System leadership: implications and considerations for school leaders

Introduction

The idea of school leaders working beyond their school context is nothing new. In many countries, leading within and beyond schools is central to system change and renewal (Chapman 2019). The core idea is that considerable value is added to the system when experienced and effective leaders move beyond their immediate role to build relationships and forge new impactful links with others.

It has been proposed that system leadership implies a capacity-building model that encourages those leading at different levels within and across the system to generate innovation and change (Fullan 2025). Within the literature, system leadership is conceptualised as lateral or distributed leadership that is not driven or dictated from above but grows organically through various forms of partnership, collaboration, and networks. But where did the idea of system leadership come from, and what does the evidence tell us?

Origins

The rise of system leadership as an idea within education policy and research can be traced back to the early 2000s, with its roots in both systems thinking and policy-driven approaches to school improvement (Hopkins and Higham 2007). Initially, system leadership emerged as an ambitious vision of educational transformation - a new infrastructure of leadership practice that could transcend the boundaries of individual schools, positioning leaders as stewards of collective improvement across networks, communities, and different jurisdictions (Pont, Nusche, and Hopkins 2008; Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008).

Those writing about system leadership advocated a new era of dynamic collaboration, where school leaders could look beyond their immediate contexts and take responsibility for the system's broader performance by driving innovation at scale (Fullan 2005; Hopkins 2009, 2010; Hopkins and Higham 2007). The dominant narrative of system leadership at this time focused on how leaders could be empowered to break down silos, foster shared learning, and address complex challenges through collective action. Unquestionably, this narrative was compelling and encouraged many policymakers worldwide to subscribe to system leadership and embed it firmly in the policy discourse.

Nevertheless, despite an initial whirlwind of interest, the idea of system leadership waned considerably after 2010. This decline may be attributed to the rise of other leadership models or theories that gained more substantial empirical backing, such as distributed leadership and instructional leadership (Gumus et al. 2018). Alternatively, like so many other leadership concepts, system leadership may have fallen victim to shifting trends and a desire for ever-new labels for leadership (Harris, Jones, and Hashim 2021).

Most recently, however, some of the core ideas associated with system leadership have re-surfaced in contemporary writing, including ideas about leading from the

middle (Hargreaves 2023; Hargreaves and Shirley 2020) and school-to-school networking (Brown and Poortman 2018; Bryk, Gomez, and Grunow 2011; Chapman 2019). Despite a renewed interest in certain aspects or features, empirically based studies of system leadership remain rare. How far system leadership, as an idea, still resonates within education systems is questionable.

Evidence

A tri-nations team¹ is currently undertaking research into system leadership that could shed some light on this issue. The aim is to explore system leadership within and across three education systems (Wales, Scotland, and Ireland). The work will identify whether and how system leadership, as a concept, is reflected in the three education systems. It will illuminate how system leadership is represented, understood, and mobilised within different systems. Finally, it will examine the complex issue of impact by asking whether system leadership makes any positive and lasting difference.

Recent documentary analysis of key texts in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales reveals a fragmented and contextually variable understanding of the term 'system leadership' reflecting divergent policy priorities and governance structures across the three jurisdictions. Sometimes, the term 'system leadership' is explicitly referenced and framed as a lever for driving large-scale system improvement. In these instances, system leadership is often presented as a policy aspiration and/or a mechanism for fostering innovation across educational networks and communities. In other writing, the term 'system leadership' is entirely absent, but the concept is implied through references to collaboration, partnerships, and collective capacity building.

So what?

Even now, it remains unclear whether system leadership is a distinctive leadership model or simply a repackaging of existing ideas around collaboration, collective efficacy and distributed leadership. System leadership, or as some call it systems leadership, is represented in various documents as a formal, top-down responsibility assigned to designated leaders within the system, such as school leaders, associates, national leaders of education or regional coordinators. In other cases, it is more implicitly constructed as a relational, adaptive practice that emerges from collaborative engagement across networks of schools and institutions. In summary, interpretations vary, as do definitions of the term, which makes grasping the idea of system leadership like catching fog; it moves and sometimes obscures.

Contemporary documents from the three countries and the international literature (Harris 2020) also raise questions about who is included - and excluded when system leadership is formalised. If system leaders are defined as individuals occupying formal roles within the system (i.e., principals/headteachers, heads of regional bodies, or directors of multi-school initiatives), they essentially occupy another leadership layer. Consequently, it is possible that informal leaders, including teachers, middle leaders, or education and community partners, could be excluded. Conversely, should system leadership be more loosely defined as a movement, a system orientation or a groundswell of activity, there is the danger that it could become disparate, disconnected or even damaging (Harris, Jones, and Hashim 2021; Senge, Hamilton, and Kania 2015).

As Boylan (2016) suggests, system leadership is better understood as a set of practices that individuals can exercise at various system levels rather than a formal designation or a specific role. Rooted in systems thinking (Senge 1990), system leadership promulgates

a holistic perspective, urging leaders to recognise the interconnections and interdependencies across educational ecosystems and capitalise on those linkages. However, this begs the question, so what? The relationship between system leadership and system change is a central proposition in much of the writing, but exactly how this happens in practice is not well documented or understood.

What we know is that change rarely occurs in isolation. Improvement in one part of the system inevitably ripples across other areas, but system change is complex and unpredictable. System leadership as the mobilisation of new practices unquestionably holds great promise, but the real challenge is making it a practical and positive reality.

School leaders are already working with other schools, leading networks and participating in collaborative partnerships. In so many respects, they are system leaders but without the label. It is doubtful whether having the 'system leader' title is necessary or valuable to accomplish this important connective work.

If, as the evidence suggests, collaboration is the DNA of successful system-level change and improvement, then school leaders already play a pivotal role in building and maintaining this important system architecture. It could be argued that school leaders are, in fact, system leaders throughout their daily work. They engage with communities and other parts of the system, network and foster partnerships, and lead innovation and change. Their work is at the heart of any meaningful change that connects with learners.

While it could be argued that school leaders are just one part of the system, they remain critical in securing change and improvement. Right now, the challenge for those operating at the policy level must be to harness, grow, support, and nurture these 'system leaders' and their pivotal leadership practices without derailing or overpowering them.

Note

1. This project is funded by the *National Academy for Educational Leadership* in Wales, *Education Scotland* in Scotland, and *Oide* in the Republic of Ireland.

References

- Boylan, Mark. 2016. "Deepening System Leadership-Teachers Leading from Below." *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 44 (1): 57–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213501314>.
- Brown, Chris, and Cindy Poortman. 2018. "The Importance of Professional Learning Networks." In *Networks for Learning: Effective Collaboration for Teacher, School and System Improvement*, edited by Chris Brown and Cindy Poortman, 10–19. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Bryk, Anthony S., Louis M. Gomez, and Alicia Grunow. 2011. "Getting Ideas into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education." In *Frontiers in Sociology of Education*, edited by Maureen T. Hallinan, 127–162. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Chapman, Christopher. 2019. "From Hierarchies to Networks: Possibilities and Pitfalls for Educational Reform of the Middle Tier." *Journal of Educational Administration* 57 (5): 554–570. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-12-2018-0222>.
- Fullan, Michael. 2005. *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Corwin Press.
- Fullan, Michael. 2025. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. 6th ed. Columbia: Teachers College Press.
- Gumus, Sedat, Mehmet S. Bellibas, Murat Esen, and Emine Gumus. 2018. "A Systematic Review of Studies on Leadership Models in Educational Research from 1980 to 2014." *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 46 (1): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216659296>.
- Hargreaves, Andy. 2023. *Leadership from the Middle: The Beating Heart of Educational Transformation*. New York, NY, USA: Taylor & Francis.

- Hargreaves, Andy, and Dennis Shirley. 2020. "Leading from the Middle: Its Nature, Origins and Importance." *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 5 (1): 92–114. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-06-2019-0013>.
- Harris, Alma. 2020. "Leading School and System Improvement: Why Context Matters." *European Journal of Education* 55 (2): 143–145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12393>.
- Harris, Alma, Michelle Jones, and Nashwa Hashim. 2021. "System Leaders and System Leadership: Exploring the Contemporary Evidence Base." *School Leadership and Management* 41 (4–5): 387–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2021.1889492>.
- Hopkins, David. 2009. *The Emergence of System Leadership*. Nottingham: NCSL.
- Hopkins, David. 2010. *System Leaders in Wales*, Policy. Paper Prepared for the Welsh Government.
- Hopkins, David, and Rob Higham. 2007. "System Leadership: Mapping the Landscape." *School Leadership and Management* 27 (2): 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701237289>.
- Pont, Beatriz, Deborah Nusche, and David Hopkins. 2008. *Improving School Leadership*. Vol. 2. Paris, France: OECD.
- Pont, Beatriz, Deborah Nusche, and Hunter Moorman. 2008. *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*. Paris: OECD.
- Senge, Peter M. 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, NY, USA: Doubleday/Currency.
- Senge, Peter, Hal Hamilton, and John Kania. 2015. "The Dawn of System Leadership." Accessed January 2, 2025. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership.

Alan Gorman

Dublin City University

 alan.gorman@dcu.ie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5024-448X>

Fiona King

Dublin City University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5749-1435>

Romina Madrid Miranda

University of Stirling

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3624-1493>

Michelle Jones

Cardiff Metropolitan University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7098-8814>

Alma Harris

Cardiff Metropolitan University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5554-3470>