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Great schools and leaders are collaborators: Avoiding isolation and developing leadership excellence

A recent report released by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) has shown that collaboration and leader job movement to new schools is vital in supporting high quality schools and the development and continuity of quality teaching.

Quality leaders are crucial, not least because research has shown that effective headteachers can improve students' academic results, reduce staff absenteeism, and reduce rates of teacher turnover.

The EPI followed the movement of headteachers and teachers who became heads over a ten-year period. Its work showed that "communities" develop when headteachers and future headteachers move schools. The EPI report highlighted that the movement of school leaders (or future school leaders) to new jobs often occurs across similar types of school and/or in geographical regions. This can result in some schools not falling within "communities" and becoming isolated or unable to take advantage of the movement of headteachers and future headteachers. This is especially important given that headteachers learn many of their skills over time on the job from other educators and leaders in their workplaces. Unless we actively take steps to avoid this isolation, the expertise and talent of exceptional leaders and educators may not be fully benefitting isolated schools.

EPI noted that schools in one community can differ significantly from schools in other communities, allowing school leaders to develop expertise in specific types of schools and providing them with skills that can benefit similar schools. The EPI report also highlighted that some schools are more successful than others in attracting highly skilled leaders, leading to successful networks developing in some areas and creating isolation in others.

The report considered different school characteristics and questioned if there was any correlation between these factors and the development of effective headteachers. While some areas produce and attract highly effective headteachers, the schools had varying numbers of students, levels of attainment and levels of advantage and disadvantage. Different headteachers, however, had different skillsets that responded to the needs of schools in different communities. As the research showed, there was no "particular kind of school" that "trained" the most effective headteachers. However, the report does suggest that highly effective teachers are not moving to low disadvantaged or low attaining schools.

EPI highlighted more than half the schools in the geographical community of London attract highly effective primary school headteachers, although less than half of these developed their skills in these schools. While the report indicates that this likely reflects the impact of a local pay gap and regional labour markets for educators in England, the implications remain the same: the dispersal of leadership skills and knowledge that could support a wide range of schools is not occurring outside of these "communities" that have developed.

This is why headteacher networks and the collaborative sharing of knowledge is essential to ensure different skills are developed in different schools and are shared across many schools to support educators and leaders.

Given that a clear correlation between the development of effective leaders and school characteristics was not found, the EPI suggests that specific policies and practices at schools could be helping teachers become effective leaders. The EPI has put forward some suggestions to support schools and help prevent isolation while allowing the skills of exceptional leaders to benefit broader networks of educators and schools.

Isolated schools that are not benefitting from the input of new staff and information as much as other schools can be supported with programmes and policies that focus on communicating ideas and good practice in ways that do not rely on staff movement. This could include headteachers' groups, community collaborations, schemes that support teachers to become leaders in their own local schools, and a recognition of informal learning pathways beyond the formal continuing professional development undertaken by leaders. Existing networks to which schools already belong also play an important role in the sharing of knowledge in this space. The development of targeted networks, the use of digital platforms, and cross-community programmes could also have important implications for increased collaboration and reduced isolation for schools.

This not only encourages collaboration between leaders and future leaders, but will support exceptional talent at all schools to pursue leadership pathways and share knowledge with networks of other educators and future leaders.

References

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