

# How to be an effective school leader: the changing role of a head

**Martin Blair**, Hays Education's business director for leadership appointments, discusses the skills great heads need in times of change

It was US president John F Kennedy who said that leadership and learning were indispensable to each other. Nowhere is this truer than in today's fast-paced school environment. To be an effective school leader you must be able to think quickly in a complicated and ever-changing workplace, says Martin Blair, Hays Education's business director for leadership appointments.

"The role of a headteacher has changed," says Blair, who recruits headteachers, deputy headteachers and senior local authority staff for Hays Education, the leading recruiting expert.

"It's complex because of the range of responsibilities and pressures on them. Local authorities are having less and less influence over schools. Many schools are now academies, for example, so the head has less support, and has to go and broker support from different places."

However, this lack of local authority control is welcomed by many heads who feel it gives them a chance to do what they do best – lead and make decisions about the school.

Speaking at a recent leadership forum run by Hays Education, John Dunford, chair of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, said that school leaders "have never had a better opportunity to take control of the agenda than they have now".

"I think they should take the secretary of state Michael Gove at his word, and take on the autonomy and take on the responsibility, working with other schools to take the system forward," he said, suggesting that heads take the lead when it comes to curriculum development, the accountability agenda and professional development for their staff.

Blair says that there has been a shift by school leaders towards cooperation and collaboration, making the job of a school leader a more expansive, community-based one.

"For a while schools saw themselves as being in competition with each other, but I don't think that's the case now," he says. "There are many different forms of collaboration, including co-operatives, trusts and academy trusts, where schools are forming partnerships to put together their buying power or to share best practice. They are part of their local communities now and must get local buy-in."

School leaders have also had to change the way they think when it comes to educational outcomes, adds Blair. Whereas in the past, academic achievement was all, now there is a consensus that a good school leader will run a school that caters to all academic abilities, turning out well-rounded pupils.

"It's not about being an exam factory. Schools are judged not just on academic results but on other criteria like safeguarding and progress," he points out. "Heads are recognising that they have

a wide responsibility – they are more aware that there is a need for every child to achieve the best they can."

And one major characteristic of good leadership is being able to share power, says Blair. "The job is too complex now for one person to lead – there are no superheads," he says.

"More and more now it's about empowering and distributing leadership, so others lead the school with you. I think heads see others as leaders now."

But if all that sounds daunting, take heart. Blair notes that school leadership still boils down to one main thing: helping pupils achieve their very best.

"I often ask for a candidate's motivation and values, and the reason the vast majority get into the job in the first place is to improve the chances of young people. When you cut through the challenges, that is what is motivating people to do the job. It's not about your own ego, it's about working to be the best."

### **How to be an effective leader: Martin Blair's top tips**

**Be creative and innovative.** "For example, IT is always one step ahead of heads, and they need to be able to embrace change," says Blair.

**Delegate to others.** "School leaders need to empower and give up control. They should identify potential among their staff and then be willing to support and challenge them in equal measure."

**Take heart.** "Heads need courage, because there's a lot of conflicting pressures on them, including pressure from local government, central government and parents."

**Have stamina.** That doesn't necessarily mean youth, but rather energy, vision and drive, says Blair. "It's a challenging time to be a school leader. It's a high pressure job and you're under a lot of scrutiny."

**Finally, remember why you got into education in the first place.** Above all, you are there to be a champion for young people, says Blair. "It is still a vocational type of career."

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