

# Research summary: Effective leadership at all levels

Ambition School Leadership's mission is to develop exceptional leadership at all levels to transform the lives of the children who need it most.

As the importance of middle leadership grows and new levels of executive leadership emerge, it is all the more important that school leaders know which actions drive the greatest impact. Here, we have collated the latest research on what the best leaders do at each level.

Our research has found that the best middle leaders build strong teaching teams, inform themselves professionally with the latest evidence and research, and manage their resources to get the best out of their team. The best heads have a clear vision of what they want to achieve in a school, understand it will take time to deliver and work systematically to transform the school step by step.

Executive leadership roles are evolving and vary widely depending on context. Executive heads typically focus on strategic leadership across more than one school, spend time mentoring or coaching heads of school, and try to foster collaboration across the schools so all benefit. Multi-academy trust (MAT) chief executives, who lead groups of schools, must translate their vision into reality through developing and implementing a clear operating model.

Through knowing which actions taken by leaders at different levels drive better outcomes for pupils, more school leaders can prioritise those which have the greatest impact, transforming their schools and pupils' life chances.

We run development programmes for leaders at all levels, which are informed by current research like that outlined in this report. If you lead in a school in a challenging context and want to find out more, visit [ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk](https://ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk)

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# What makes an effective middle leader?

LKMco's 2016<sup>1</sup> report, commissioned by Teaching Leaders, investigates which behaviours, characteristics, enabling factors and barriers contribute to or hinder a middle leader's success.

### **The strengths of a great middle leader**

Effective middle leaders are particularly good at management, especially building and managing their teams. They see team competencies and dynamics as important factors in underpinning their effectiveness as well as attaching importance to planning and resource management.

Three key characteristics seen in an effective middle leader are:

1. Strong teamwork and interpersonal skills.
2. Assured organisation, planning and resource management ability.
3. Being professionally informed.

### **Enabling/limiting factors for middle leaders**

The report's literature review identifies five main enabling/limiting factors for middle leaders.

1. **Quality of senior management:** some characteristics of senior management teams are particularly important to cultivating effective middle leadership, including a collaborative culture and the extent to which expectations are clear.

2. **Institutional culture:** good leadership at all levels is more likely where the culture is collegial rather than strongly hierarchical.
3. **Team members:** departmental effectiveness depends crucially on the cohesiveness of the team, in part because middle leaders find their affirmation as leaders more often from team members rather than from their formal title or position, or from senior management.
4. **Professional development:** development, either as part of a professional leadership network or through mentoring and coaching from senior management in the school, is critical to helping middle leaders gain confidence and knowledge in their leadership role.
5. **Time pressures:** middle leaders often cite lack of time as the biggest constraint on their effectiveness due to the number and diversity of tasks they are expected to handle, in addition to policy pressures to perform.

<sup>1</sup> Baars, S., Parameshwaran, M., Menzies, L. and Chiong, C. (2016) 'Firing on all cylinders: what makes an effective middle leader?' LKMCo and Teaching Leaders.



# School leadership: Why isn't educational reform working?

A recent study by the Centre for High Performance<sup>2</sup> found that there are five different types of headteacher, but that only one is truly effective. The **architect leader** is the least well-known and rewarded, yet most successful leadership approach.

Architect headteachers' schools offer a model of long-term, sustainable improvement; while their results tend to improve more slowly, their impact is deeply embedded and lasts even after they leave.

### What does an architect headteacher do?

Architects quietly redesign their schools and transform the communities they serve. They look at long-term goals to achieve the greatest benefit for all children. Importantly, they also support their teaching staff, offering coaching, mentoring and development programmes.

### Who are architect headteachers?

Typically architects are more likely to have experience in industry outside of education. They consider a child's whole educational journey, and so look to work with or expand into other phases. For example, secondary heads often set up primary or sixth form provision.

They believe in the benefits of holistic support, and invest in engaging with the local community to bring students' attention to the opportunities around them.

### Why isn't the architect headteacher celebrated?

Architects' examination results do not start improving until their third year, and so they do not deliver immediate, dramatic results. Unlike surgeon headteachers, they exclude very few pupils but instead put them on a separate pathway offering tailored support.

Adjusting how we measure success for schools would be one way of recognising the value of these leaders. Instead of looking just at exam results and spend per child, we should also consider how leaders achieve these results and their added value and investment in society.

Our programmes encourage leaders to develop and implement a long-term vision for their school which delivers the best outcomes for every child. They give headteachers the skills to use a range of leadership styles to deliver this, including many of those seen in architect headteachers.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, A., Mellon, L., Laker, B., and Goddard, J. (2016) 'School Leadership: Why isn't educational reform working? How can we fix it?' Centre for High Performance.



# Executive headteachers: What's in a name?

An executive headteacher (EHT) “directly leads two or more schools in a federation or other partnership arrangement”.<sup>3</sup> In a 2016 report, ‘Executive headteachers: What’s in a name?’<sup>4</sup> the National Governors Association, National Foundation for Educational Research and The Future Leaders Trust looked into the new, evolving and variable role.

The report found that, broadly, an EHT post will have one of three priorities:

- 1. Improvement:** turning around ‘failing’ schools by filling temporary posts for rapid turn around; expanding headteachers’ roles to take on failing school(s); absorbing schools into federations and MATs through new EHT posts.
- 2. School/site expansion:** overseeing large (sometimes multi-school) sites.
- 3. Partnership leader/partnership growth:** building and growing new partnerships between schools, to a greater degree than school/site expansion above.

### Characteristics of the executive headteacher role

Unlike the role of the traditional headteacher, that of the EHT is more strategic. Many EHTs take responsibility for coaching and mentoring the staff (particularly senior staff) in their schools. In training and mentoring staff EHTs can empower headteachers to better fulfil their roles, allowing the EHTs to withdraw from the operational side of running schools.

Ensuring consistency across a group of schools demands sharing best practice, and collaboration between staff on different sites. EHTs take on a wide outward-facing remit, dealing with ‘politics’ and external meetings.

### Enabling/limiting factors for executive headteachers

Having an effective EHT in place with clear lines of responsibility can help with establishing good governance and accountability. They must ensure that each role in the group of schools is clearly defined and communicated.

Centralised practices and processes across schools aid consistency, efficiencies and improvements. Other group-wide roles, such as executive business manager or leader of teaching and learning, ensure consistency of these areas across a number of schools, sites or phases.

The role is new and evolving, and requires very different skills to those of standalone headteachers. Executive headteachers must find ways to develop these skills in order to have the greatest impact.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (2015). School Workforce Census 2015: Guide for School-employed Staff. London: DfE [online]. Available: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/448625/School\\_Workforce\\_Guide\\_2015\\_v1\\_school\\_return.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/448625/School_Workforce_Guide_2015_v1_school_return.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Lord, P., Wespieser, K., Harland, J., Fellows, T. and Theobald, K. (2016). ‘Executive Headteachers: What’s in a Name? A Full Report of the Findings’. Slough, Birmingham and London: National Governors Association, National Foundation for Educational Research and The Future Leaders Trust.



# Successful multi-academy trusts

The MAT chief executive (CEO) role is so new that there is no formal research on their impact. We have collated the most common practice-led examples of great MAT CEOs from the Executive Educators MAT Success Framework and the National Schools Commissioner's model of the nine characteristics of successful trusts.<sup>5</sup>

### Characteristics of a successful MAT CEO

The strongest MAT CEOs keep pupil outcomes and school improvement at the core of their approach. They underpin this with a focus on:

1. Setting a clear vision and unifying purpose for the trust.
2. Translating their vision into reality through a clear operating model with a defined role for the trust's central office, supported by quality assurance, governance and risk processes.
3. Building leadership capacity, retaining talent and succession planning.

### Building on success

Growth is a key priority for successful MAT CEOs. The highest performing CEOs are encouraged to grow their trusts, whether from starter, established, national or system MATs. Knowing how to lead change and manage through growth transitions and key turning points is a vital skill for successful CEOs to master.

### Challenges of the CEO role

While many of the responsibilities of a MAT CEO appear similar to those of a headteacher, leadership as a CEO looks very different. Successful CEOs realise this and are able to let go of behaviours which made them successful as headteachers but hinder their performance as CEOs. This includes: shifting from school-level governance to understanding 'corporate' governance; creating the conditions and resources to enable others to lead school improvement rather than doing it themselves; and leading across multiple schools and communities where it is impossible to know everyone personally.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education (2015) 'Characteristics of successful Multi-Academy Trusts'. Available: <http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org/academy-resource-hub/resources/characteristics-of-successful-multi-academy-trusts>



Every child. Every school.  
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School leaders at every level need development in order to have the greatest impact on their pupils and communities. Our programmes are proven to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students, and we can work in partnership with you to deliver improvement where your school most needs it.



## Flagship programmes

### Teaching Leaders

Teaching Leaders is our one- or two-year leadership development programme for high-potential middle leaders in schools in challenging contexts with tailored primary and secondary pathways. Blending intensive coaching, face-to-face training and online learning, Teaching Leaders retains and develops staff and improves pupil outcomes. Participants to form a powerful peer group of like-minded, optimistic and collaborative leaders.

### Future Leaders

Future Leaders is a selective two-year programme for leaders who are close to headship. The programme incorporates intensive leadership development training with ongoing mentoring and coaching to fast track participants with the talent and commitment to make an impact and reach headship. *This programme is subject to confirmation of government funding.*

### Executive Educators

Our flagship executive leadership offer, with tailored programmes for aspiring or serving executive headteachers and chief executives of multi-academy trusts. Training enables executive leaders to implement sustainable improvement across a group of schools. Participants will learn from education and business experts, as well as like-minded peers.

Visit [ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk](https://ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk) to find the right programmes for you and your staff.

## Other programmes

### Aspiring Leadership Programme

For groups of teachers preparing for their first leadership roles.

### Middle Leadership Programme (with NPQML)

Tailored leadership development for a school's whole middle leadership team.

### Senior Leadership Programme (with NPQSL)

For senior leaders ready for whole-school responsibility.

### Headship Programme (with NPQH)

For senior leaders preparing to reach headship in 12-18 months or headteachers looking for further development.