

MA Educational Leadership in Practice

Don't press pause on
leadership development

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“For teachers, there has been a whirlwind of upheaval and uncertainty. And for many, particularly those in the early stages of their career, the chaos interrupted their professional development plans.

But experts in educational leadership are urging teachers not to pause their plans for further training and career advancement.

“If coronavirus has shown us anything, it’s that we need great leaders in education more than ever,” says Jill Berry, a former headteacher and author of *Making The Leap: Moving from Deputy to Head*.

Berry is full of praise for the way many schools responded to the Covid-19 crisis, particularly those taking the initiative to act ahead of last-minute government advice.

“The teams that coped best have demonstrated principled, timely leadership rather than waiting for permission,” she says.

“For example, distributing food to families affected by the delay of free school meal vouchers. Taking account of your community and context, realising that one blanket rule doesn’t necessarily apply and acting accordingly: that’s real leadership. And this crisis highlighted that we need more leaders in education who can do just that.”

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL

Sue Woodroffe is principal at the Grammar School at Leeds (GSAL) and agrees that when it comes to school leadership, context is crucial.

“With 2,100 students aged 3 to 18, we erred on the side of caution and introduced measures to minimise risk that felt appropriate for our setting. As a result, we feel like we managed to stay ahead of the curve. But I look at my colleagues and at social media: so many brilliant teachers are on their knees. Frankly, it’s heartbreaking.”

But keeping the big picture in mind is vital, she insists. “Like Jill, I feel this has shown us just how important it is to have strong and empathic leaders in education. We need to support our staff and focus their sights on what school will look like beyond the pandemic, and how their personal and professional development can feed into that.”

STRATEGIC THINKERS

Alex Gardner-McTaggart is a senior lecturer on the Educational Leadership in Practice MA at the University of Manchester and says that enquiries about the course rose during the lockdown period.

“Aspiring leaders tend to be strategic thinkers. They know this will end,” he says. “It’s encouraging to see that many teachers in the early stages of their career are thinking about their next step, despite the current pressure,” he says.

The course is blended, he continues, with the majority of learning taking place online, and in-person conferences twice a year (which have also moved online during Covid-19). This enables participants to fit their study in around work, while receiving exactly the same award (and recognition) as from an on-campus course.

Paul Armstrong, the course director, says it's all about building up confidence. "Since we launched, we've attracted candidates who have great instincts for leadership but feel like they need more knowledge and terminology to be fully empowered.

"I think lots of teachers are realising that now is a good time to be empowered, and to use that power for good."

There are common misconceptions around the idea of educational leadership development, however, such as the idea that leadership is something you're born with, or that it asks school leaders to slavishly adhere to one model or school of thought.

"We're a research-led department, so, of course, we cover all of the major schools of thought on leadership: transformational, distributive, instructional, functional and so on," Gardner-McTaggart says.

"But theory shouldn't be a straitjacket. Rather, it's all about broadening our knowledge base. If you don't know all of the theories, you can't weigh up their pros and cons, their relevance to you and your specific school context. If you don't know the rules, you can't break them."

Armstrong agrees. "We don't want to destroy someone's innate leadership potential by applying a template. We're all about opening up the knowledge base and sharing it – it's up to you how you use it," he says.

And there are plenty of opportunities for leadership that don't involve becoming a senior leader, says Berry. For example, getting involved with your exam board, exploring Chartered Teacher Status or becoming an in-school expert on a topic like effective feedback.

"The question you should be asking yourself is not necessarily 'How do I get that job?' but rather 'How do I stop myself from becoming jaded?'" she says.

TEACHERS'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

"As teachers, we're impacting lives every day," says Woodroffe. "We need great leaders in schools to focus on the really important things – the human stuff, as Geoff Barton [general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders] puts it."

And if formal CPD feels out of reach at the moment, Berry advises getting involved in more informal opportunities; for example, engaging with #SLTChat on Twitter and the webinars from the Teacher Development Trust, such as #CPDConnectUp.

"So many organisations had to pivot to online learning – and it works. The Education Endowment Foundation released a rapid evidence assessment which highlights that remote professional learning is easy to access, cost-effective and time-efficient," she says.

"We had to put so many things on hold. Let's not add our professional learning to that list."

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