

# Support for heads: never walk alone



Support networks are a leadership must-have, whether you're an aspiring head, still fresh to the post or an established system leader. Nick Bannister reports.



Chris Wheatley has been on something of an odyssey since he became a headteacher in 2001. Just four years after starting his first headship at Manvers Junior School in Cotgrave near Nottingham, Chris had taken the school to outstanding status. A year later he joined his current school, Cotgrave Candleby Lane primary, and had taken that school to outstanding by 2008 – the same year he won a headteacher of the year award at the Teaching Awards.

Nowadays he has a number of strings to his bow, including [national leader of education \(NLE\)](#), chief executive of a growing trust of schools, running a teaching school alliance and playing a leading role in Inspiring Leaders, a partnership of schools delivering NCTL leadership development programmes, including the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), across the East Midlands.

“The role of head is unrecognisable from how it was when I started,” he says. “The key thing that has changed is that the job has become much more business savvy. Nowadays you need to be a business planner or a project manager.”

He says that although such changes have created opportunities for the school system, the ongoing transformation has inevitably brought with it insecurity: leaders like him are taking risks, he says.

“We are ploughing new furrows and there is a lot of risk and bravery associated with this. You have to give your school up to a degree so that you can grow capacity beyond your school. It's daunting and although my school is in good hands you do need to be brave.”

Chris says that although there is risk, trailblazing system leadership like his is “becoming part of the continuation of leadership development”.

“The reason you leave the classroom is because you want to spread your ethos as wide as possible,” he says. “That's why you go from key stage leader to head of year to deputy, to head, executive head and to, in my case, a trust CEO.”

Chris Wheatley's talk of spreading an ethos far and wide chimes with aspiring headteacher Esther Brooks, who has just become head of school at Hillcroft Primary in Caterham, Surrey.

“When I started my PGCE I just wanted to be the very best teacher I could be,” she says. “Then as a deputy I realised that I could make a difference to many more children. That was when my interest in the role started. I knew that if I went for headship I could make a real difference to hundreds of children.”

It is still very early days but Esther seems confident about her position and her ability to make a success of it. She puts this down to professional support, experience and completing NPQH in July this year.

“Before I started NPQH in November 2012 I was fortunate to have had a lot of significant leadership experience at a senior management level through deputy headship,” she says. “NPQH was significant in my development in that it

gave me frameworks and models that I could use to think about change, leadership and school improvement at different stages of a school's development.

"Halfway through NPQH our school received a 'good' Ofsted judgement. I could start thinking then about how to get the school to outstanding and my NPQH work has helped me to set that direction, for example helping me to think about distributing leadership across the school."

Esther says that although a really strong work ethic is a vital component of modern headship, leaders need to guard against over work – and seek support from fellow leaders.

"You need to make sure you have recovery time and that you look after yourself as a headteacher," she says. "You can feel so alone but there are people you can talk to. It's a time of considerable change. There is a great sense of accountability in terms of our role as headteachers. You are always concerned about that but you should recognise that there are other headteachers out there."

For Kerry Hill, who has just started her second headship, the support and advice of other leaders has been crucial in her first years of headship. She is coming to the end of the two-year period of support provided through [Head Start](#) – a programme designed to support aspiring and new heads from the moment they graduate from NPQH and throughout the first two years of headship.

"It's been invaluable," says Kerry, who is now headteacher of Eyres Monsell Primary in Leicester after 18 months as head of a small rural primary near Melton Mowbray. "I receive face-to-face contact with my mentor, Liz Moore of Thrusington Primary. We meet every half term and constantly email."

The advice Kerry receives from Liz is often focused on the hard practical realities of headship, she says. "As a new head starting in a new school you will get a sense of what is working well and what is not working. In my last primary it was data and accountability. Our tracking, self evaluation framework (SEF) and school development plan (SDP) weren't robust. To be able to get tips from her on the SDP and SEF were very useful. She helped me very quickly put in processes and procedures."

Kerry stresses that new heads shouldn't see networking as just part of a programme they must tick off – it needs to be regarded as a crucial part of the job.

"Within one week of starting my headship at Eyres Monsell I'd spoken to four or five different heads in the area, asking for their advice and support.

"Headship can still be a lonely and stressful job. There are parts that you can't share with family, friends or some colleagues, such as issues like performance management of staff or safeguarding issues with children. The more networks you build yourself the less lonely the job is."

Tash Moriarty is deputy headteacher at Nower Hill High School in Pinner. She's a recent graduate of NPQH and holds networking and practical hands-on leadership experience as the two of the most important ingredients for a headteacher's career.

Her former head, the recently retired Howard Freed, was her mentor. "Mentoring was the most crucial aspect of the entire NPQH programme," she says.

"He was an outstanding mentor and was able to talk me through my strengths and areas for development knowing me and knowing where I was in my career. That was the true value for me of the programme."

Practical hands-on experience of senior leadership roles is the other vital part of the development path to headship, she believes. Deputy headship is certainly providing that. "You need practical opportunities to use your judgement and test your ability to work under pressure and make decisions," she says.

The support of others to help you in a daunting new role is as important to an experienced system leader like Chris Wheatley as it is to aspiring heads like Tash Moriarty and Esther Brooks, and new heads like Kerry Hill.

"If you are doing things for the first time it is going to make you feel insecure," says Chris Wheatley. "There also needs to be some strategic CPD support for these leaders. So far I have been lucky in my career: I have had good role models and I have been in the right place at the right time, but we need to make sure that there is that support available in the future."

For the aspiring headteachers doing NPQH with Inspiring Leaders – Chris’ school is part of the six-school partnership licensed to provide this and other programmes in the East Midlands – the mentoring support they have received from working leaders as they complete the course has been valuable. That, you sense, is a big part of the satisfaction of being a leader for Chris.

“I am proud to say that I’ve had several new headteachers who’ve done the programme with us phone me up and ask me to be their mentor,” he says. “It’s something I’m happy to do because I benefitted from being surrounded by people who helped and advised me. No-one can do this job alone.”

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