

# If we adopt a Schools-Led System, what opportunities present themselves for improving education?



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For all people dedicated to the support, development and enhancement of the world of education, the principle challenge is to find the rare opportunity to implement the improvements years of practice and peer debate tell us will make a meaningful difference to future generations. Yet every so often such an opportunity presents itself to us all. Unfortunately, we are usually so busy doing what we always need to do that just such an opportunity languishes without recognition and eventually fades away.

We can't, after all, always give time to something new or different no matter how brilliant or exciting or life-enhancing it may be, when our main focus is devoted to maintaining and extracting the best we can from the vast output of the mundane and inadequate systems, policies and processes we are all used to working with as a matter of routine.

In education people working within the schools and at the point of delivery will often feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are forever running to the dictates of the distant educational authorities, the Local Authority or Department for Education with their tiers of administration and statistically perceived wisdom. Even the new Academies have, in the main, assumed a hierarchical structure because it's something we all know. This proves that even when the opportunity is presented the fear of change outweighs the challenge of enhancement. The trouble with habits is that they are habitual. They save having to debate, implement, refine or progress anything for which we haven't the time.

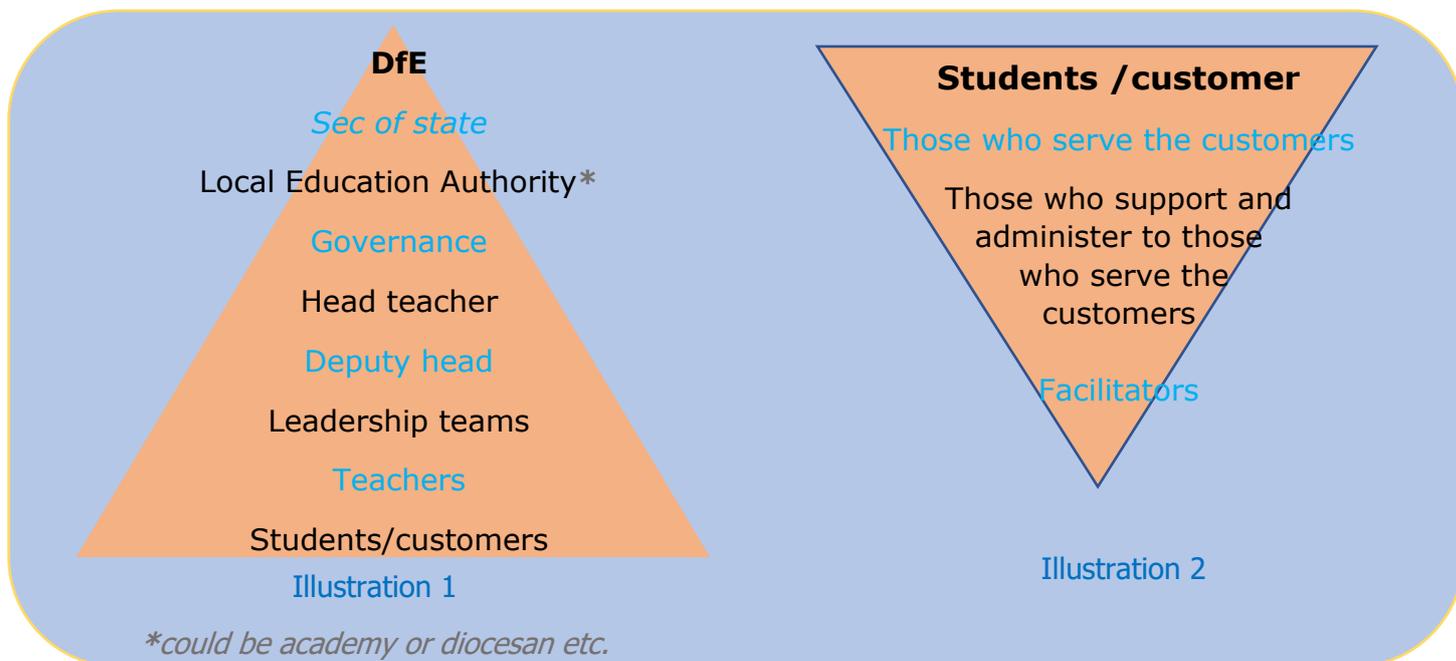
For years we have continued to complain about the stultifying drip of initiatives from on high, responding with phrases like "Tried this before", "This won't work in our school", "This is not ideal

for our cohort", "This ignores the talented, the needy, the future" and a cry from the heart, "If only they would listen to us". For years Teachers, Headteachers, Educational Leaders, Special Needs Professionals and Governors in every tier from pre-school to post 16 have said, "If only they would listen to us, education would be so much better".

For those reading the signs during the last twelve months it has slowly become obvious that a new mood is forming. The number of policies and initiatives from the DfE has slowed and programmes in Surrey like 'Education in Partnership', 'Collaborative Partnerships', funding changes, School Improvement all culminated at the Autumn SGA Conference with the launch of a 'Schools-Led System'. This is an initiative being promoted not only by the Local Authority but also the office of the Regional Schools Commissioners and, as far as we know, the DfE nationally. Here was the chance to create the efficient education system desired by so many.

It was as close as it gets to being 'official' that the opportunity for all of us at the 'coalface' to be listened to was here at last. Yet, strange to say, not twenty percent of the delegates realised that the opportunity had presented itself. Why, when what we've yearned for during the last twenty years - to be listened to - was here now and waiting for our voice? Why, to all the battle-torn educational practitioners present was it all but missed? How could those who have craved something for years not believe it or miss it when it was finally presented? It is just like the prisoner who, one morning, finds the cell door open but is afraid to leave in case it's a trap. Sadly, for all those who have worked in a hierarchy all their lives, the concept of a Schools-Led System is difficult to get one's head round, just as it was for the commercial business who underwent similar process in the 1980's & 90's. If you change the focus of lead who do you grumble about when things go wrong? The key is that if you're properly customer-focused there are no losers; **it is a true win-win situation.**

Allow me to suggest what we might be looking to achieve in a 'Schools-Led System' if it is going to work to reform and develop educational excellence. This management principle comes from the commercial world's *customer led system* or *customer focused business*. The main tool in establishing this type of business system is known as the inverted pyramid or the flattened structure. ([illustrations page 2](#)) The tool is designed to both flatten out institutional hierarchy and put the customer, not the management, at the focal point of the business process. ([as illustrated 1 below](#)).



The inverted version's aim is to gather intelligence from the customer, meet their needs and effectively supply them whilst removing many tiers of management in the process. As in the new order of a Schools-Led System, the management would now facilitate, through the customer-facing personnel, the desires and needs of the customer.

*(as illustration 2 above)*

This is fairly simple to draw up but very difficult to put into practice.

Before you read any further, there is an important element of the culture behind inverted pyramids that is essential for you to grasp. It is a difficult idea to evaluate quickly but it is as essential to a Schools-Led System as it is to any commercial or not-for-profit business. The Chief Executive is no longer designated as the most important person in the organisation. It's a function, a title not a person. It is not the title, the status, the function, that matters but the quality of knowledge, skill and ability of the person filling the role, those who create the added value or improvement for the benefit of others that truly matter.

The person who is valuable to everyone in the organisation be they individuals, groups or an organisation is **the customer**.

Just how valuable is the customer? Well, totally.

If there is no person to do something for or to, then there is no need to do it. Without the customer there is no perceivable need for any organisation, business, service or learning to exist.

Fortunately, that does not prevent invention, creation, or doing anything at all but if no one else wants it then the only customer is you.

Entrenched dictatorial management practice has to go. Those who ordered or managed others now have to resource each other's needs; the customer becomes the **King**.

Before you panic over your loss of authority or status or even your freedoms and comforts, you need to analyse who the customer is and who is their supplier in any given situation. When you have completed the process as it applies to education you may be pleasantly surprised. When you've the customer at the focal point, in other words, at the centre of the learning process, practice you will be amazed.

This restructuring is not the beginning of anarchy - the revolution is not here yet - nor will it ever be. So put the gun back in its holster and the sword back in its sheath, the revolution - should you wish to have one - is about finding, establishing and then meeting the needs of your customers present and future. To serve them well and effectively you will need all the functions of the organization including the skills and responsibilities of the that the current managers, directors and executives but with a customer focus. They will be collaboratively facilitating and organising a successful dynamic team not a dilatory hierarchy.

Turning the pyramid upside down, while it feels liberating, gives us some difficult challenges such as defining, 'the customer' then developing and providing a system that will positively and accurately meet their needs and expectations. This

process will give you some exciting surprises and problems but it is not the only challenge to be faced. One is convincing all the departments of the organisation to work with each other to meet the customers' needs. Education is a very divided business, with ideological entrenched camps that create big divides.

The first essential if you truly are going to serve the interests of the customer is recognising the divides; pre-school, nursery, infant, junior, primary, secondary, college, university, SEN, speech & language units, high needs, etc. In this context, administrative conveniences and such have potential difficulties in a Schools-Led System. They must be made to operate as one cohesive seamless provision, no-one in silos protecting their self-interest but everyone joining in to play a full and equal part in serving the customer from beginning to end. Given the entrenched divides and the history of protected vested interest within education there could be a long road to harmonising the groups into comprehensive teams. They need to understand the processes that we are all here to provide for all customers with the best service possible, while remembering that the customer buys education not departments.

#### *Learning starts me having to think*

Only when the departmental mindset is circumvented and all units/agencies are able to work like a single body can the customer be truly defined. It is essential that the systems and especially the knowledge should be in place to understand the customer's identity in a Schools-Led System. I am sure that if I ask anyone in education today who is the customer they will tell me 'the children'. The way education is setup at present, it's possibly the best we can hope for but it's not that simple. There are far more options in deciding who the customer might be.

Ask any caring parent who the customer is. They want the best for their child, insisting that they are paying through taxes and/or fees and donations to the school and as such *they* are the customer. The truth is there are many customers for education, far more than we give consideration to at present, and if you are going to deliver the best education establishing the importance and position of the customer is essential. Here are a few more 'customers' of education that you may or may not have considered but they are consumers of education with an interest in its performance. They are;

- a) local employees who want employable people with a variety of skills
- b) local government that requires a sustainable social society keeping cost down and income up.
- c) National government who want creative, talented high earners paying taxes that provide for the country's services as they are in turn accountable to their customers the tax payers.
- d) The people who work in education may also be considered its customers for they rely on it for a living.
- e) Ambitious aspirational people, equal opportunity and positive discrimination enthusiasts will all want a say in the Schools-Led System to deliver the service which will fulfill their needs.

All of education's customers need to be embraced for if we fail to engage with all our customers then a Schools-Led System will finish with as many problems and potential disadvantages to all our future generations as the present system.

*Being a satisfied customer gives us a fantastic feeling*

It is essential that we all learn the vital skills and abilities for a customer focused environment to engage in some extensive consultations and start comprehensive debates on the opportunities aims and shape of a Schools-Led System. Simply putting the concept into the current multi-faceted mix of education will change little. Only when the drivers and champions of change engage all in debate will a successful Schools-Led System be brought about.

*Being the person, they thank for it even more so.*

The opportunity is here. Can you seize it and build an inclusive, balanced system with the capacity and opportunity for all children and young people to excel? Do you want a system led by the schools or do you feel it's just another platitude from the old regime who won't adopt or adapt?

**The choice of the customer as ever...is yours.**