

If you're not developing good leaders, and letting them move on, you're not doing your job

Melanie Williams

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Melanie Williams, executive headteacher at Royds Hall Community School, a 3-16 through school and a member of the Aspire Cooperative Learning Trust, has taken part in four SSAT leadership programmes, and is a regular presenter on its Next Generation Headteachers programme.

She embarked on her first SSAT leadership course “way back, when I was just beginning to look at leadership,” she says. “The SSAT programmes had their eyes above the horizon, rather than focusing inwards. I had been involved since the earlier specialist school programmes, so I knew how they operated.”

The Next Generation Headteachers programme was a chance to meet other school leaders, to get out and see other schools. “The helicopter rather than the rabbit warren! It was very much cutting-edge stuff. Future thinking, looking at what education might be like in 20, 30, 40 years’ time. No-one else was doing it at that time.

“I was an assistant head, very much wanting to find out where things were going in other organisations. It was inspirational, and independent as well. That was, and is, very important to me – not being led by government thinking. And these courses were not just day events. They involved working with others over a period of months, seeing different schools and meeting colleagues doing similar jobs to yours. It gave us the opportunity to observe new initiatives in practice rather than just the theory and principles.

“I always say when I deliver a programme that I wouldn’t be doing the job I am today if not for those early experiences on SSAT programmes.

“One particular thing I picked up directly was about vertical tutoring being developed into vertical teaching, for options, lasting one year. I found it ground-breaking. More broadly, the programme helped me gain the moral courage to work with other schools and move things forward – to do what’s right for us, in our school and for our students. We became an SSAT Learning and Innovation Hub, which gave us very broad links with teachers from all over the country.

“Developing my team was the most important thing. All my team have been on senior SSAT programmes. We often send them in twos if we can. Two people on the course at the same time gain more because they can share ideas, which is more likely to be truly developmental. A number of people can benefit from the same course – that’s really important.”

The programmes have led to rapid career advancement. “Quite a few who have been on the SSAT programmes have been promoted, here or elsewhere. Yes, it can lead to some disadvantage for us in the short term, but if you're not developing good teachers, good leaders, and letting them move on, then you're not doing your job.

I went on a course run by another organisation that analysed leadership styles and so on; to me it was mostly navel gazing. The SSAT programme was really practical, visiting lots of other outstanding schools to look at what they were doing. Even if it was not what we wanted to follow, it gave a fresh perspective.”

Melanie is now applying much that she learned on the Executive Headteachers course: “two primary schools have joined us, which made us a 3-16 school. With major changes like this, you have to get out and see, think, talk to others and find out how they managed to take such changes through.

“Now, I've been on the Executive Headteachers' Programme and my senior team are involved in the Leading Outstanding Schools programme (I always try to have something going on in my professional development – it's refreshing.)

“The courses are not just for me, though. I send whoever is the most appropriate senior leader colleague to a course, e.g. on data management, and they get a lot out of it.”

“No other organisation than SSAT, to my knowledge, gives that kind of opportunity. I also regularly attend SSAT national conferences. It's all about keeping abreast of what's going on. They are very, very valuable.”