

Educational Leadership in Wales Since Devolution

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of educational leadership in Wales since devolution, highlighting key developments, challenges, and reforms. Despite a slow start in adopting leadership as a policy driver, Wales has made significant strides in recent years, recognising leadership's crucial role in pupil outcomes. Political and ministerial leadership styles have varied, influencing major educational reforms such as the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales. The impact of international assessments like PISA, alongside OECD reviews, has underscored the need for effective leadership at all levels. Initiatives like the National Academy for Educational Leadership and the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership reflect Wales' commitment to fostering educational leadership. However, challenges persist, including recruitment and retention issues, workload concerns, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article advocates for a proactive approach to leadership development, emphasising professional learning, support systems, and a cultural shift to elevate the status of educational leaders. By building on past achievements and addressing current challenges, Wales can ensure sustainable educational improvement and a vibrant learning environment for all students.

Keywords: educational leadership, devolution, wales, educational reform, professional development

Introduction

Education in Wales has evolved significantly over the first quarter of the twenty-first century since devolution (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021). However, the development of education leadership as a key policy driver was slow to be adopted in Wales compared with other nations undergoing reform until more recently (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021). Yet we know that leadership is second only to teaching and learning for its impact on pupil outcomes (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020), so why has Wales been so slow to grasp this leadership mantle?

The authors of this article bring a wealth of expertise and experience, each with over three decades in leadership roles within the field of education in Wales. Their extensive careers encompass both secondary and primary education and senior positions in Local Authorities, providing them with a broad and nuanced perspective on educational leadership.

Reflecting on the literature, significant discussion surrounds the development of leadership in Wales since devolution (Egan and Marshall, 2007; Hopkins, 2016; Egan and Keane, 2018; Evans, 2022). As we approach the 25th anniversary of these changes, it appears that educational leadership in Wales is in dire need of revitalisation. A recent study (Aleynikova et al., 2024) commissioned by the National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales (NAEL) highlights the acute challenges in recruiting and retaining senior leaders, exploring factors such as leader shortages, regional recruitment variations, workload concerns, and training needs. Connolly et al. (2018) identified an emerging recruitment crisis, particularly for specific categories of schools, such as Welsh Medium and rural schools. This research aligns with findings from Davies et al. (2018) regarding the recruitment processes in Wales, emphasising the urgent need to address these leadership gaps to enhance recruitment quality and improve leader retention. This research underscores the importance of supporting senior leaders' well-being, ensuring suitable candidates for vacancies, and recognising these leaders' vital role in education. Although much has already been done and will be examined later, this paper argues for a proactive future approach in developing educational leaders to sustain and advance the quality of education in Wales.

In this article, we consider leadership in its broadest sense, from political and ministerial leadership through the tiers of education to

school leadership. We define leadership as the ability and opportunity to influence and lead others.

Political Educational Leadership Since Devolution

Since devolution, Wales has experienced an unprecedented era of political stability. Despite this, the volume of policy changes for leaders to implement has been relentless. Significant challenges have arisen, including underachievement in international comparisons, as well as major transformations like the introduction of the Foundation Phase, Additional Learning Needs provision, and the Curriculum for Wales.

Over the years, the leadership styles of those in charge of the education portfolio in Wales have varied considerably (Jones and Harris, 2020), reflecting diverse visions and strategies for educational reform. Jane Davidson, recognised for her visionary and supportive leadership (CFPP, 2024), emphasised the need to rethink early childhood education. Inspired by Scandinavian models, she introduced the Foundation Phase, which focused on experiential learning for pupils up to seven. In contrast, Leighton Andrews AM, serving as Minister from 2009 to 2011, adopted a more direct approach. His tenure was marked by a sharp focus on literacy and numeracy, leading to the controversial use of standardised tests (All Wales Reading and Numeracy Tests) and categorisation (Welsh Government, 2019) to hold schools accountable.

By 2016, methods previously employed were deemed unsuccessful in achieving the desired uplift in educational standards. A shift occurred with the appointment of Kirsty Williams, a Liberal Democrat AM, as Education Cabinet Secretary by the Labour Government, serving from 2016 to 2021 in a coalition with Labour. This period of significant reform followed on from initiatives begun by her predecessor, Huw Lewis AM, who had initiated significant reforms based on numerous comprehensive reviews of the Welsh education system (OECD, 2013; Donaldson, 2015; Furlong, 2015; Waters et al., 2018)

Kirsty Williams's tenure was particularly notable for its ambitious drive to overhaul the education system, driven by school leaders. Central to her strategy was the collaborative and co-creative development of a new curriculum, heavily influenced by Professor Graham Donaldson's 'Successful Futures' report (Donaldson, 2015), which made sixty-eight recommendations for educational improvements in Wales. The

government embraced all these recommendations, formulating the national action plan 'Education in Wales: Our National Mission – Action Plan 2017–2021' (Welsh Government, 2017). This document highlighted inspirational and collaborative leadership as one of four critical 'enabling objectives' (pp. 28–9) necessary for successfully realising the transformative new curriculum. Subsequent actions from this plan impacted various aspects of the educational system, including establishing a leadership academy, developing professional standards for teaching and leadership, and introducing a new pay and conditions framework. This article will now consider some main factors that have shaped leadership development.

Leadership Judged by Outcomes

Since the devolution, Wales has significantly diverged from English educational policies (Simkins, 2014; Woods et al., 2021). Over the past fourteen years, under a UK Conservative Government, political pressures on Wales to enhance educational standards have been considerable. The results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests are key benchmarks used to assess these standards. Participating since 2006, Wales has consistently scored below the OECD average across all domains and remained the lowest-performing home nation in the PISA assessments (Senedd Research, 2023).

The tests often have mixed reception among academics and education professionals in Wales, as in many other places, opinions vary. Some academics and policymakers support PISA as they believe these tests provide valuable comparative data that can help gauge the effectiveness of the national education system against global standards. However, many more critics, including academics like Caro, Kyridakides, and Leonidas (2019), Metsapera (2024), and Zhao (2020), argue that the PISA assessments are fundamentally flawed. They contend that these tests do not comprehensively measure student development and that policies derived from PISA results rely on imperfect data. It is argued (Baird et al., 2011) that this has had a varied yet significant effect on policy direction worldwide. Despite these criticisms and continuing poor results in the 2022 PISA assessments, the Welsh Government has maintained its commitment to long-term educational reforms. This steadfast approach highlights a belief in the importance of stability and

sustained policy efforts over reactionary measures based on potentially flawed assessments.

The Influence of the OECD on Leadership Across the System

Because of our poor international performance, in 2012 PISA (Welsh Government, 2015), Wales commissioned the OECD to review its education system, orchestrated by the then-Minister Leighton Andrews. The OECD provided several reports between 2014 and today, offering expert advice on policy implementation to enhance education in Wales (OECD, 2014; 2017; 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021). These reports emphasised the critical role of leadership at all levels in implementing reforms, including the new Curriculum for Wales and professional learning reforms.

The OECD links effective leadership with school improvement, emphasising its role in curriculum implementation, learner engagement, and overall school performance. However, there are ongoing calls from current leaders and their Unions for additional resources and support to manage reforms and ensure inclusivity and equity in education. The Schools as Learning Organisations (SLO) Model (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Kools, 2018) is another initiative by the Welsh Government that offers a framework for leaders to develop a self-improving system, although its implementation varies across schools. This framework lists seven dimensions and four themes leaders can use to develop a self-improving system and learning organisation. Although initially adopted by many schools, the reality is that for many, it has become overlooked and not embedded in how schools operate. (Harris et al., 2022)

While the progress made in leadership development is recognised (Harris et al., 2021), challenges such as workload, the pace of reform, and the need for more targeted professional development opportunities are frequently mentioned. Both the OECD and the Welsh Government (2014b) have emphasised the role of school leaders in promoting inclusivity and equity and narrowing the attainment gap. Effective leadership is seen as key to addressing disparities in educational outcomes and ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

The importance of leadership prompted the creation of the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) (Harris and Jones, 2021) in 2018, which operates as an arm's length body under the Companies Act

2006. NAEL supports the Welsh Government's strategic leadership aims, enhancing leader capabilities, articulating educational leadership vision, and serving as a primary contact for educational leadership matters (NAEL, 2022). The NAEL is central to educational reforms outlined in 'Our National Mission: High Standards and Aspirations for All' (Welsh Government, 2023a) and is pivotal in endorsing leadership development programs aligned with national priorities.

NAEL also supports leaders through a two/three-year Associate programme to develop high-calibre system leaders who contribute to national policy and address key educational challenges. Following the programme, alums can join a NAEL Federation of progressive school leaders who are supported in continuing to address leadership issues identified by the profession.

Leadership Standards and Qualification for Wales

With these significant changes in the educational system, expectations for leaders in Wales have also evolved. The introduction of the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Waters, 2017) has been positively received, helping to clarify roles and foster educator growth. These standards replaced an earlier version (Welsh Government, 2009) that, with over 60 criteria, was considered overly complex and unstructured.

Developed in 2018, the new standards were crafted through a broad collaborative effort that included educators, leaders, and other stakeholders across the Welsh education sector. The standards emphasise Pedagogy and include sections on Leadership, Collaboration, Innovation, and Professional Learning. They guide at two levels – teachers and leaders – with a stronger emphasis on leadership for the latter. An extensive consultation process ensured the standards were both practical and reflective of the fundamental challenges within Welsh education. They promote a holistic approach to professional development, stressing lifelong learning and aligning with the Welsh Government's educational reforms and broader ambitions.

The golden ticket for teachers aspiring to move into Headship has been the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). It was introduced in 1999 to elevate leadership standards and ensure quality for upcoming headteachers (Bush, 1998). It became mandatory for headship

appointments in Wales in 2004, reaffirming the requirement in May 2017 and March 2022, underscoring the continued importance of the NPQH. Significant changes to the NPQH were implemented under the Headteachers' Qualifications and Registration (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2011 (UK Government, 2011). The revision transformed the NPQH into a rigorous, practice-based assessment aligned with the then 'Teacher Standards', ensuring candidates met high leadership criteria. A pilot programme in 2011 tested these revisions, which stakeholders welcomed as a substantial improvement, offering a more practical and effective approach to headteacher qualification.

A Master's Degree Level Leadership Pathway

The formation of the regional consortia represented a strategic approach to school and leadership improvement, aiming to leverage regional expertise and resources to meet local needs while aligning with national objectives. The four Consortia deliver a leadership development pathway development programme nationally, from middle leader development through to experienced headteacher development.

However, an ambition of educational reform in Wales has been to elevate the workforce to a master's level profession. In 2013, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were given a chance to enrol free of charge for a Master's in Educational Practice (MEP) degree up until 2018. After an evaluation and rethink, the Welsh Government initiated a second funded master's program targeted this time at teachers in their third to sixth year, culminating in an MA Education (Wales) (Leadership) for those who choose the leadership track. This programme, launched in September 2021, is a cornerstone of Wales's national mission for education (Welsh Government, 2024a), offering a leadership development opportunity tailored to the Welsh educational context. The National MA Education (Wales) (Leadership) is crafted to enhance the skills of current and future educational leaders, supporting their professional growth in alignment with new leadership standards and the evolving Welsh curriculum. While it is premature to evaluate the full impact of this initiative, it underscores the Welsh Government's dedication to improving education quality through leadership development. The programme aims to foster equity, excellence, and well-being principles, preparing leaders to drive school improvements throughout Wales. A national doctoral programme

(EdD) is being launched in September 2025 to promote evidence-based practice's importance and help Wales grow its solid academic culture.

However, despite the MA's significance in educational reform, financial constraints and other governmental priorities challenge its continued full funding. The incentive for practitioners to find partial funding from school or self-fund will almost certainly impact the enrolment numbers (Smith et al., 2024). Also, the recent rejection of a salary increase proposal 'for those teachers with an appropriate Master's level qualification, there should be an uplift of one increment and a tenth salary point' (Waters et al., 2018, p. 64) further reduces the incentive for educators to self-fund their advanced studies.

High-Stakes Accountability

One of the unintended consequences of the recent extensive reform agenda has been to put a strain on the nation's headteachers, who grapple with policy, accountability, and the effects of unpredictable crises. Over the years, it has become apparent that high-stakes accountability often leads to unintended behaviours. For example, SATs led to teaching for the test, and subsequent colour categorisation led to over- and under-subscription in some school. In a national survey carried out by NAEL Associates (NAEL, 2021, p. 7), headteachers reported that the most significant factors impacting their well-being and motivation to continue in the role were 'workload, accountability and the inspection process'. In response to the changing educational landscape in Wales, Estyn, the Welsh education inspection body, has started evolving its approach to inspection and support based on a self-commissioned report entitled 'A Learning Inspectorate' (Donaldson, 2018). This evolution includes the development of a new inspection framework, set to start in September 2024, which emphasises learner experiences and skill development. Notably, Estyn has shifted from summative judgments to providing only narrative feedback in 2022. This starkly contrasts with Ofsted in England, whose methodologies are highly criticised by Unions and professionals alike. While Estyn's reports continue to have an evaluative section on the quality of leadership as an indicator of overall quality, the Chief Inspector reports that Estyn will support leaders to build the capacity to become self-improving and develop a self-evaluative learning culture (Estyn, 2023) in line with WG aspirations.

Pioneer Schools Leading the Curriculum for Wales 2022

Welsh Government knew that to gather the support of all stakeholders, it had to give ownership to practitioners (OECD, 2020). Since the first introduction of a National Curriculum in Wales, leaders have been calling for reform to allow professional teachers to drive a contextual curriculum with the freedom to innovate and experiment, giving the best experiences to learners. A co-construction approach in Wales was designed to involve many stakeholders in leading the curriculum development process rather than having it dictated solely by government bodies or external experts.

Many progressive school leaders volunteered their schools as Pioneer Schools, which played a central and pivotal role in this process. Digital pioneers, New Deal pioneers and Curriculum pioneer schools were all established with differing roles. These schools were selected from across Wales to lead the development and implementation of the new curriculum and the required professional learning. Their roles included curriculum design, testing and refining and leading professional learning to build capacity in the system (Arad, 2018). The co-construction process, mainly through the involvement of Pioneer Schools, has been significant because it embodies a democratic and inclusive approach to curriculum development. By engaging the practitioners directly involved in delivering education, the Welsh Government aimed to ensure that the curriculum was fit for purpose and adaptable to the evolving educational landscape.

This approach has fostered a sense of ownership and commitment among most educators, which is crucial for successfully implementing any new curriculum (Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestly, 2020). However, some school leaders not involved in the Pioneer schools feel excluded. This has raised concerns about the capacity to design and deliver a consistently high-quality curriculum across Wales (Gatley, 2020). Global educational trends emphasise teacher agency, collaborative practices, and curriculum relevance to real-world contexts. Leaders now face the challenge of overseeing the implementation phase, a critical role for instructional leaders.

Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World

On 23 March 2020, the UK went into the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (Institute for Government, 2022). Education settings were

forced to close their doors and move to an online synchronous teaching approach for most. Despite Wales being ahead of many countries with a national learning platform, Hwb, already in existence, home learning would be hit and miss depending on each individual student's home circumstances. For leaders, it was an unprecedented time of chaos, grief and rapid and unpredictable changing circumstances (Harris and Jones, 2020). The summer months brought a little relief, and schools reopened with many infection-preventative measures in place. A second lockdown occurred as the winter months allowed the infection to re-vitalise. However, little did leaders know then that it would be Easter 2021 before all students returned to school following this further firebreak and lockdown.

In May 2023, the World Health Organization officially declared the pandemic over (United Nations, 2023). However, schools are still picking up the pieces of the pandemic impact. Behavioural similarities emerge in schools that occur physically and psychologically in the outcomes of post-disaster recovery in countries that have suffered natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms, fires, floods, or events such as war or terrorism (Meyers and Zunin, 2000). The aftermath of the pandemic and the knock-on consequences are still deeply felt in schools and by their leaders (Harris and Jones, 2022). Schools were the universal service for all children and many families, to a greater or lesser extent, during the pandemic period. Teachers reached out to the home and made themselves available to parents, going above and beyond what could be reasonably expected (Marchant et al., 2021). Leaders set up hubs for essential worker families to enable those parents to continue to work throughout lockdown (Waters-Davies et al., 2022). Leaders are now working on re-invigorated strategies to re-engage students and compensate for lost learning (Welsh Government, 2023b). Attendance statistics (Welsh Government, 2024b) have shown a significant drop from before Covid-19, getting worse as students get older and choose to vote with their feet by not attending. Leaders also report behavioural issues and poor social skills because of prolonged absence of schooling and routine.

The Future of School Leadership

It seems the system has some significant decisions to address for the future (Harris and Jones, 2021). Leaders in secondary schools are very

nervous about how future qualifications will develop (Qualifications Wales, 2024) and how vocational pathways will impact schools and Further Education (FE) colleges going forward. Many students are not engaged with the diet of education they currently receive (Welsh Government, 2024b), and societal norms are breaking down (Andrews, 2024). Lack of respect for the profession by a minority of parents means that leaders face far more complaints and sometimes abusive or aggressive behaviour from other adults and students (NAHT, 2024). This, in turn, leads to low morale and a negative leadership discourse, which in turn prevents good staff from applying for leadership roles and explains why numerous excellent leaders leave the profession early. A future proactive and strategic approach to supporting educational leaders in Wales should encompass enhanced professional learning opportunities, including coaching, mentoring, and accreditation. This approach should also drive cultural change that values and elevates educational leadership both within and beyond the education system, thereby enhancing the status of leaders and educational professionals (Heffernan et al., 2022). Additionally, strategically resourcing the school system and making significant investments in support services for young people and their families will enable school leaders to focus more effectively on engagement and learning.

This is a concern for local authorities, who are the primary legal employers of school staff. It became apparent that other agencies within the system did not support leaders well enough (Harris et al., 2021). Following an independent review of leadership in Wales (Harris et al., 2021), the Education Minister, Jeremy Miles, asked for a systematic review of the structure of education in Wales, particularly the Middle Tier organisations that support schools. In 2023, Professor Dylan Jones (2024) conducted a notable review to evaluate and provide recommendations for the structure and function of the middle tier within the Welsh education system. The middle tier is the organisational layer between individual schools and the national government, typically involving local authorities, regional consortia, and other educational bodies. The primary goal was to assess how the middle tier could best support schools in improving student outcomes. This involved looking at the effectiveness of the existing structures in place, such as NAEL, Estyn and the regional consortia, and determining whether they adequately supported schools and delivered on educational priorities. It also focused on how the middle tier can support educational

improvement through leadership, professional development, and resource allocation.

Professor Jones's approach involved extensive consultation with stakeholders across the education sector, including school leaders, teachers, educational experts, and local government officials. This inclusive process ensured that the review captured a wide range of insights and perspectives on how the middle tier was functioning. While the specific recommendations from the review are detailed and context-specific, they generally advocate for more explicit roles and responsibilities, better coordination among different parts of the middle tier, and enhanced support for schools, particularly in areas like professional development and resource management.

The Welsh Government has considered these findings and recommendations (Jones, 2024) in its ongoing efforts to reform educational governance and improve school support systems in Wales. Jones's review has contributed to the debate on how to best structure educational governance to support school improvement effectively. Phase two of the enquiry is now ongoing.

Money is not the Answer

It would be remiss not to mention the subject of remuneration as a motivation for Headteachers and other leaders in our schools. The authority to determine pay and conditions of service for teachers and educational leaders in Wales and England was vested in the Secretary of State for Education under the Westminster Government until 30 September 2018. The Wales Act 2017 provided for the devolution of this power to the Welsh Ministers, effective from 30 September 2018.

In conjunction with this transfer of authority, the Welsh Ministers instituted the Independent Welsh Pay Review Body (IWPRB). The IWPRB was tasked with advising the Minister for Education on reforms to the pay and conditions of service for teachers and leaders in Wales. The latest review of teachers' pay and conditions in Wales (IWPRB, 2022), has made several key recommendations to improve the teaching profession. These include numerous factors affecting Headteachers' and other school leaders' salaries and working conditions. The recommendations include a review of leadership pay, including a raised minimum starting salary for Headteachers, and a workload assessment.

Headteachers are generally well-paid public servants (Welsh Government, 2023c). Going forward, it would be good to see the recommendation of the IWPRB to increase the starting salary of Headteachers of small schools, thus reducing the differential, as these leaders often have a dual teaching and leadership commitment. Where that is unsustainable, due to recruitment issues or financial pressures, local authorities must make brave decisions regarding collaboration or federation, such as those proposed for Cardiff City (Cardiff City Council, 2024). This approach would lead to more Executive Headteachers of viable federations, with the option to employ an economy of scale in sharing staff laterally, such as a bursar or human resource specialist across a Federation.

Conclusion

The journey of educational leadership in Wales since devolution has been marked by significant developments, challenges, and reforms. From the early stages of devolution to the present day, the focus on leadership has evolved, driven by the recognition of its crucial role in improving educational outcomes. Key milestones such as the establishment of the NPQH, the influence of OECD reviews, the creation of the NAEL, the National Masters Programme, regional collaboration, and the introduction of new leadership standards all reflect a strong commitment to fostering effective leadership in Welsh schools.

However, challenges remain, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed unprecedented demands on school leaders. Addressing workload, recruitment, retention, and professional development will ensure that Welsh educational leadership continues to grow and thrive. The ongoing reforms and initiatives, informed by local, national and international insights, underscore the importance of continued support for school leaders in navigating the complexities of the modern educational landscape.

As Wales moves forward, the lessons learned from the past two and a half decades will be invaluable in shaping the future of educational leadership. Along with technological advances, a strong commitment to equity, excellence, and well-being will be essential in creating an education system that meets all learners' needs and supports educators' professional growth. We are in a changing world and yet to see the full

impact of AI on leadership, where a strategic development plan can now be written using artificial intelligence to a very high standard. The knowledge economy is becoming far less critical than humanistic social skills such as empathy, aesthetics, vision, belonging and judgment (Sahlberg, 2021). By building on the foundations laid since devolution, Wales can aspire to a future where strong humanistic and trusted leadership drives educational sustainability and success and fosters a vibrant and inclusive learning environment for all.

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