

Developing opportunities for growing leaders across other schools

Strategic planning and engaging governors

Background

The aim of the case study was to find out how a federation can provide a framework for leadership development in ways currently not available to individual schools. This project aims to capture and build upon the learning of the two recently established federations (in 2007), with a specific focus on how growing leadership potential can drive school improvement processes across a cluster of schools.

Blackpool Church of England Primary School has 320 pupils. It amalgamated with Chudleigh Knighton Church of England Primary School in September 2006, after the governing body of Chudleigh Knighton had attempted to recruit a new headteacher in 2005–06. Despite being geographically close to each other, the two schools were in different parishes and learning councils so they had limited knowledge of each other. Pupil roll numbers in Chudleigh Knighton were dropping to 70 from the previous high of 100.

Who was involved?

- current headteachers
- teachers
- governors
- parents

Explanation of activity

In May 2005, the headteacher, Paul Jones, and the chair of governors, Bob Alford, met to discuss the issue of a federation and what it might mean to the school. They informed the local authority that they would be prepared to be a pilot federation school, having discussed the matter at governing body level. In March 2006, the local school improvement inspector contacted Paul Jones to ask if he was still interested in the idea of a federation. Subsequently, Paul met with the governors of Chudleigh Knighton. He outlined the proposal for an executive headteacher of the two schools working within a hard federation, with the smaller school retaining a headteacher of teaching and learning. Although this mirrored the organisational plan for Blackpool, he was aware of the need to not be too specific about preferred solutions, given the potential for hostility to the idea of a federation.

The two schools officially agreed to consult, following the DCFS guidelines on the federation process. Bob Alford, the Blackpool chair of governors, worked with the chair of Chudleigh Knighton governors to enable opportunities for open discussion. The governors of the smaller school appeared positive, while there was some stakeholder concern about what was in it for Blackpool. Paul Jones was keen to allow parents to discuss the issues and felt that a key element was the need to be open and not to be seen as having an agenda. Six formal parent meetings were held, as well as meetings across the two parish councils. Some parents feared the proposals were really a pretext to close their school, a situation made worse when it emerged the smaller school would have to cut the number of classes from four to three. Other parents feared the federation might affect the high standards of their school, which received commendations from Ofsted in February 2006. This validation was seen as a positive factor in persuading Blackpool parents to accept the proposal – that they could trust their school leadership.

Paul Jones was keen to move the debate on during the summer term, so that the structure was in place for September 2006. He wanted to ensure there were explicit job descriptions for the executive headteacher and the new headteacher of teaching and learning at Chudleigh Knighton. There was some concern over the new staffing structure, which saw two Blackpool teachers move to the new school, with one becoming the new headteacher. Paul Jones was quick to point out that the two staff members were looking for future advancement and, as such, that their strengths would still be available across the federation.

At the end of the consultation period, both governing bodies met to formally decide what to do. After discussing a number of issues, particularly the structure of the new governing body, a decision was made to go forward with the federation.

Outcomes and impact

The federation was launched in September 2006. The special educational needs co-ordinator is shared across both schools and subject leadership is also spread across both schools, with a leader and shadow appointed. Chudleigh Knighton has received a number of local authority visits: four monitoring visits and an evaluation visit. HMI also visited and said that the issue of leadership had been resolved within 45 days and that standards were seen as good with outstanding teaching in place. Paul Jones puts this down to the new system, which allows the new headteacher of Chudleigh Knighton to focus solely on teaching and learning issues.

Developments since July 2007

Chudleigh Knighton was inspected by Ofsted in June 2007 and was graded as good overall and outstanding for leadership and management. "Following the formation of the federation, leaders and managers have developed an excellent understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Radical and successful action has been taken to improve pupils' achievement, teaching and the school's environment."

The school has hosted a number of visits by interested governors and school leaders, while the headteacher has continued to promote the federation approach through Leadership Network events and invitations to address local authority and NAHT groups. The case study was shared at a leadership conference in January that promoted different models of leadership.

The governor group, Devon Association of Governor Services, has arranged two area events to discuss succession planning.

A federation network, chaired by Paul Jones and Bob Alford, has been formed. The network, which comprises 26 headteachers and chairs of governors, and covers five evolving federations, is planning to hold open weeks and visit the Wigmore Federation in order to learn more about federations.

The storyboard from the school has been shared across the south west and has created significant interest from delegates. The federation has been recognised by Ofsted and is being used to run workshops for governors and interested headteacher groups, as well as other activities both within and outside the local authority area.

Observations and key learning points

Observations from the experience

- School improvement officers can play a key role in alerting governing bodies about the possible advantages of considering new structures at the start of the appointment process.
- Clarity on systems and structures is seen as particularly important to avoid misunderstandings about who is doing what.
- Focus on the federation journey being a better deal for all children – a moral purpose.
- Headteachers need to have a good knowledge base of federation case studies and research.
- Headteachers need to devote plenty of listening and talk time to enable stakeholders to talk through emotional issues.
- Executive headteachers need to let go to empower headteachers of teaching and learning to grow into their roles.
- Local authority human resources teams need to have more knowledge and provide support on what is possible.
- Accept that the process will require a significant investment of time and emotional energy from the school.
- Governing bodies need to discuss options on succession planning regularly.
- Using governor services to produce a case studies pack and holding local conferences to share practice will assist.
- Clerks of governors need to have additional knowledge support and need extra funded capacity to facilitate the consultation process.

What went well

- The headteacher was trusted by parents, being seen as a successful headteacher.
- The impact of the structure on teaching and learning.
- The chair of governors, Bob Alford, had previously been involved in a bank federation scheme. He believed in the concept and was seen as proactive.
- The impact of new leadership framework.
- Dealing with the emotions of displaced governors.

Other issues

- A federation had been brokered sooner.
- Local authority support to the schools is vital: ie, advice in setting new salary level ranges to take account of the role of the new post, rather than just how many pupils are involved in the new school.
- The chair of governors felt there was a need to appoint a headteacher of teaching and learning at the same time as appointing the new executive headteacher of Blackpool.

The role of the executive headteacher

The executive headteacher's role is to:

- develop and implement the high-level strategy for the federation
- take accountability for performance across the federation, eg, complete the self-evaluation forms
- manage the budget for the federation of schools
- manage human resources at a high level, ie, appointments, capability, professional development, deployment
- manage the schools' premises
- manage the schools' extended schooling provision
- be responsible for statutory reporting to the local education authority and DCFS, eg, performance targets, financial returns, attendance returns

The role of the headteacher of teaching and learning

The headteachers of the individual schools would be responsible within their own schools for:

- the quality of teaching and learning
- curriculum provision
- the day-to-day personal and pastoral development of the children
- day-to-day staff issues
- the school ethos
- liaison with parents
- day-to-day management