

Can federations help stars to come out?

Exploring the unique contribution
of federations to the development
of school leaders

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Abstract

This research investigates the structure and practice of a small number of federated schools. It concludes that federation has a positive impact on the professional development of staff and the engagement of governors. The benefits of federation were found to be broader than positions in league tables or the collection of awards, though these were found to contribute to success. The research found that federation required effective collaboration and created more opportunities for talent to be identified and nurtured.

Background

This paper summarises the findings from research into the ways in which school federations can support the professional development of new and existing school leaders. More specifically it considers two questions:

- **Do federations offer greater opportunity for staff development to take place?**
- **How do federations contribute to the growth of new leaders?**

The study draws on the findings from a questionnaire survey of federations and a series of interviews undertaken in six federations, chosen to reflect a range of different contexts [including hard and soft federation¹]. A broad strategy of appreciative enquiry was used in this research, which began by focusing on areas of good practice, while also seeking to uncover areas for further development.

This study was undertaken by two primary headteachers who lead a three form school federation in Darlington.

Key findings

This study found that leaders believed federations worked most effectively when they focused on promoting children's achievement and were structured according to this overarching goal. In this way, federation was a means to an end rather than the end in itself. This was supported by a context, which helped all adults within the federation understand their position in the 'bigger picture' and their own purpose within it.

This study indicated that federations support professional development and succession planning in a number of ways:

- **They enable school leaders and governors to look at their unique situation and use it to greatest advantage for staff and pupils.**

Each school in this study had a distinct set of qualities of which school leaders and governors were aware. Federations enhanced the flexibility of the organisation and allowed diversity when planning strategically. A culture had been established which promoted creative thinking. Crucially, a number of schools in each federation had chosen the same priorities for development – they opened the same 'box' at the same time.

- **They create opportunities for leadership roles that would not occur in individual schools.**

Small schools and large schools can seize upon this outcome. The small schools visited were able to offer leadership roles across federations where normally they would not be available. In federations of larger schools, more complex leadership structures allowed earlier opportunities for middle leaders to take on responsibility.

- **Federations were in a position to offer highly successful and effective CPD to all staff.**

We have found that there were many examples of how to organise Continuous Professional Development (CPD) across federations and schools used expertise to enhance peer-to-peer learning. Federations provided greater capacity to adopt different organisational structures. Staff had the opportunity to lead small-scale initiatives and shared the outcome with a greater number of colleagues.

¹ For the purpose of this study a simple comparison – A Soft Federation is a collaborative where there are separate governing bodies for each of the schools involved, but the schools share committees with delegated powers, often a curriculum committee or a strategic committee. A Hard Federation has one shared governing body

■ **Federations supported staff retention.**

Small schools in particular came across difficulties with retaining staff, either for budgetary reasons or the fact that promotional opportunities were non-existent. Federations played their part in promoting the retention of good staff as they provide greater opportunities in the larger organisation.

■ **They created a culture which developed its own succession planning.**

There were varying lines of thought regarding leadership progression. This study found many positive examples of active succession planning. In general, the federation model supported a wider range of succession planning opportunities than was possible in a single school. A key factor was that they offered scope to involve a broader range of people in leadership. This in turn protected the overall quality of leadership and helped to ensure that new leaders could be initiated, while at the same time, the wider work of the school did not suffer.

■ **Federations support greater diversity of leadership structures.**

We have found many different leadership structures within federations. The federations supported creative approaches to leadership by allowing governors and school leaders greater scope in creating structures which are fit for purpose. From our own experiences, the more we worked in a federation, the more we saw possibilities for leadership structures to be created to enhance the working of the schools and how leadership qualities were developed in a number of individuals.

■ **Contracting staff directly with the federations cultivated a different outlook than when they are contracted to the individual schools.**

To some staff, moving to a federation model was a concern and we encountered instances where members of staff had left the school rather than be part of the federation. In other instances, staff had embraced the philosophy and found the vision and challenge exciting. Staff appointed to a federation appeared to have had a clearer understanding from the start of the advantages a federation offered to students and themselves personally.

In these instances, the potential dangers of a 'top down model' could be reduced by involving staff more closely in the development of the federation. Meanwhile, new teachers were more familiar with what federations entailed and had a good understanding of how this different way of working supported the development of staff. Similarly, working in a federation brought a greater appreciation of the range of school structures which existed, and in many instances appeared to have a positive impact on the practice of both teaching and non teaching staff.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are offered:

■ **What's in it for us?**

While recognising the existing strengths of their school, governors and headteachers are encouraged to consider what additional benefits could be achieved by federating.

■ **Create leadership opportunities.**

A particular area to address during such reflections is the extent to which federations can promote leadership development. This study found evidence that federations are able to offer a greater range of leadership opportunities at all levels, both through the provision of formal CPD and offering practical opportunities to lead.

■ **Develop slowly (but don't stop moving).**

There is a danger in any change process of moving too quickly and providing insufficient opportunity for those involved to reflect on, and become comfortable with the implications of this change. However it is essential that forward momentum is maintained, to avoid the change process from stalling. Schools entering into federation should therefore adopt a patient and measured speed of change, focusing on promoting a collaborative rather than competitive educational culture and sharing good practice and professional knowledge.

■ **Adopt an inclusive approach to CPD.**

All members of the federation leadership team have a part to play in promoting CPD. At the same time, the sheer size of many federations means that the development needs of individuals are likely to be varied. Extra efforts are required therefore to ensure that appropriate professional support is offered to address these needs to maximum effect.

■ **Share models of creative CPD across federations.**

Just as federations support the sharing of good practice between schools, there is a strong argument for promoting greater contact between federations to encourage professional dialogue and sharing of positive ways of working.

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