

Keep your head

Governor perspectives on co-headship as part of succession planning

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Background

Co-headship is a relatively new phenomenon in school leadership. At the time of writing, NCSL estimated that there were only around 30 schools across the country with either two full time or two job share heads. Although small in number, these schools have created significant interest. This is partly because, paradoxically, co-headship may help address the shortfall of school leaders anticipated in the next few years.

One of the key challenges facing schools at the moment is to retain more good heads to full retirement age and attract potential leaders to headship more quickly by making the role more appealing. Co-headship offers the possibility of addressing both of these issues by;

- encouraging headteachers who are close to retirement to 'stay the course' and share their expertise and experience.
- offering improved work/life balance to potential heads with young families.
- retaining heads who may need to commit time to studying or caring for family members.
- encouraging potential heads into a headship role earlier than the average 20 years; therefore growing new leaders.

This paper summarises the perspectives of senior governors in eight schools which have pioneered the use of co-headship. Interviews with these governors were undertaken during 2006 – 7.

Main findings

Whilst interviewing the governors, it quickly became apparent that co-headship was not a panacea for the issues surrounding school leadership in the 21st century. Five of the school governors rated co-headship as a success in their context, two considered it to be unsuccessful and one school never proceeded beyond a period of acting co-headship.

Collectively, respondents identified ten lessons which influenced the degree to which co-headship could be viewed as a success.

Lesson 1 – Gain commitment and 'buy in'

- Key stakeholders, particularly the staff and Local Authority, should be committed to the idea of co-headship.

There was a strong link between stakeholder 'buy in' to the co-headship (or lack of it) and success (or lack of it). It seems that commitment to the idea of co-headship from all the key stakeholders, particularly the staff and Local Authority (LA), is crucial to ensuring that co-headship operates effectively and successfully.

Lesson 2 – Seek moral support

- Seek support and advice from a trusted external body.

Governors felt that finding a source of support from an external body, eg National Association of Governors and Managers or the Local Authority (LA), was important in this relatively 'uncharted' area of school leadership. The unsuccessful co-headships in this study were poorly supported and advised by their Local Authorities.

Lesson 3 – Guidance would help

- Guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families surrounding appointment and contractual issues would ensure governors felt confident when opting for a co-headship model.

Governors interviewed felt that one of their challenges was a lack of regulation, advice and guidance surrounding co-headship. Half of the schools involved in this study suggested that some form of guidance would have been extremely useful to help them through the process of recruiting, appointing and working with a co-head partnership.

Lesson 4 – Keep an open mind

- Have an open mind, an honest debate and try to find a way to resolve issues and perceived problems.

Two of the schools where co-headship was a successful model started the process with negative expectations. They felt it was important that governors kept an open mind; co-headship can be a success even if governors have initial concerns about the prospect.

Lesson 5 – Don't be railroaded into a decision

- Have the courage of your convictions: If the governing body has significant misgivings about the partnership or feels unable to commit to this leadership model then an appointment should not be made.

Governors had no choice about the co-headship partners in both unsuccessful arrangements and for two of the schools where co-headship had not endured, the governors felt the lesson that they had learned was to trust their initial instincts about the candidates.

Lesson 6 – Co-headship requires particular skills

- A previous successful relationship is not necessarily an indicator of a successful co-headship.
- Competent headteachers don't always make good co-heads, the skills required are different.

In the schools where co-headship was not successful, governors felt it was important that others understood that co-headship could go wrong. It does not offer a viable leadership solution for every school.

Lesson 7 – Communication skills are crucial

- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Governors placed high importance on the ability of the co-heads to communicate effectively not only with each other but also with all the stakeholder groups.

Governors also felt that they had a significant role to play in communicating with the stakeholder groups prior to the commencement of a co-headship. This gave governors the opportunity to allay any fears or misunderstanding about a co-headship arrangement. When questioned about the lessons learned, good communication was cited as being fundamental to success.

Lesson 8 - Ensure there is time for liaison

- In order to achieve effective communication a clear investment of liaison time is required.

Contracted, liaison time in school was also a common factor in successful co-headships. Governors considered that a mutual commitment to liaison time was important so that the two headteachers would have the opportunity to complete an effective handover.

Lesson 9 - Two heads can be better than one

- Co-headship can bring benefits particularly in terms of work/life balance and strategic thinking.

Governors in the successful co-headship schools felt that opting for this model allowed their school to access new ideas and experience.

Lesson 10 - Consider the contractual issues

- A temporary contract or trial period should not be used to mask uncertainty about whether co-headship is viable leadership model for a school. Governors must be confident that both heads are capable to lead alone.

Consider the contractual position of the co-heads and possible future scenarios with care.

Conclusions

Co-headship has proven to be a viable leadership model for a small number of pioneering schools. The evidence from this report indicates that co-headship is a model which can be used to progress potential leaders more quickly to a headship role and to make the role of headteacher more appealing. However, it was not an effective or sustainable model for all of the schools.

For schools considering co-headship, paying attention to the ten lessons identified in this report should increase their chances of maximising the potential of this approach.

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