

www.ncsl.org.uk

Research Associate Summary Report

Susan Percy, Headteacher, Estcots Primary School, West Sussex

A journey into the unknown

An investigation into the impact of federation upon
leadership in a sample of primary schools

Autumn 2006

Background

New and emerging models of school leadership are a key consideration for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2005) and NCSL. On the one hand, challenges such as failing schools, falling pupil numbers, recruitment difficulties and a large proportion of headteachers set to retire in the near future are all impacting on the system. On the other, opportunities provided through collaboration such as networks are being explored by schools wishing to maximise on shared expertise.

This report suggests that as times and needs change, other, more creative approaches to providing school leadership may be required. One solution may be federation. This may occur for a variety of reasons and in different contexts.

Terminology

There are numerous terms to describe federation, which may involve the sharing of leadership teams, governing bodies, budgets or pupils. This study uses the following definitions as used by DfES.

- A **collaboration** of schools refers to a non-statutory arrangement where the school retains its own budget and governing body.
- A **soft federation** is non-statutory with each school having its own governing body, but the federation has joint governance/strategic committee without delegated power.

- A **hard governance federation** is statutory with a single governing body. The decision to federate lies with the governors and requires the local authority to write a new instrument of governance. The structure of leadership varies; the number of headteachers is not prescribed, and some federations may choose to have a single headteacher across a group of schools. Schools maintain separate budgets.

The other form, soft governance federation is not located within this study.

Methods

This research project developed, in part as a personal journey, through being closely involved in a two-year temporary collaboration between two primary schools in West Sussex. It has drawn chiefly on interviews with headteachers and their leadership teams in the contexts set out in the following table.

Case	Type of federation	No. of schools	No. of headteachers	No. of deputies	No. of governing bodies	Other features	Leader interviewed
A	Soft federation. Two two-form primaries on separate sites	2	2	2	2	Strategic leadership group to manage federation	Headteacher Chair of governors
B	Temporary two-year collaboration. One two-form primary, one four-class primary on separate sites	2	2	1	1	Established leadership team with leadership at all levels	Deputy head Headteacher Two chairs of governors
C	Hard governance federation. Two three-form entry schools on a shared site, one infant and one junior	2	2	2	2	Each headteacher responsible for their own school. Deputies are appointed to work across both schools	Deputy head Headteacher
D	Partnership school.* First and middle school on same site	2	1	2	2	Amalgamation of schools is planned; schools are at very different stages of development. (Note: one governing body is the new governing body for the amalgamated school)	Headteacher

* The partnership scheme has existed in Norfolk since 2000. Under this, one headteacher leads and manages two or more schools.

Key findings

Leadership

- The headteachers had a clear vision of how federation could be used to develop educational opportunities across the schools. Federation has, in each setting, enabled an ethos and vision to be shared by a greater number of staff.
- Headteachers reported having developed an enhanced range of skills by working within an extended context, in particular developing a strategy appropriate for both schools. While not all heads continued in this capacity, those that did perceived there to be development benefits for themselves as professionals. In one case, the demands of the role (in particular the differences between the schools and the duplication of some aspects) were considered unsustainable, leading to resignation from the additional school post.
- Evaluating the impact of federation in terms of pupil outcomes was a consideration for all and something that was monitored by the leadership teams and governing bodies which needed to develop systems to monitor effectiveness and share this with all stakeholders.
- In the schools studied, federations appeared to support shared leadership, with the deputy in particular playing a more strategic role due to their increased time out of class. For some, this gave them the opportunity to develop some of the skills of headship.
- Senior and middle leaders benefited from the step up as a consequence of the deputy's enhanced role. In some cases, there was the opportunity to lead across schools, either with a colleague from the other school or working in a more independent, cross-school role.

- Revised leadership structures increased capacity and provided forums that could consider school needs and match the schools' resources to meet requirements.
- Governors interviewed appreciated the potential benefits that could emerge through the opportunity to work closely and strategically with another school. However, some were concerned about the loss of their school's individual identity and perceived that there might be a negative consequence affecting its pupils' education, eg through staff expertise being potentially more thinly spread.

Management, staffing, and school development

- Bringing two schools together was reported to accelerate school improvement as it provided a lever for change and increased opportunities for staff to work together and learn from each other.
- In all cases, some staff were shared between the schools, eg site manager or technician. This sometimes enabled salary savings to be made.

Learning together

- The federated schools offered real opportunities for staff to work together and learn from each other. There were benefits of working closely with a larger group of professionals, eg sharing best practice and engaging in school-based research. However, this was not always appropriate, eg if the federated schools were at very different stages of development.
- In some cases, federation increased the opportunities for pupils to interact with a wider group and learn from each other. Where one school fed another, there was some evidence of improved transition.

Implications

Although this was a small-scale study, the following implications might be drawn from its conclusions.

For schools, one could propose that they consider:

1. the extent, informed by self-evaluation, to which joint or dual strategy is appropriate to the schools in the short-, medium- and long-term
2. distributed leadership structures that improve the schools' capacity to work in new ways
3. other staffing arrangements that might better suit a federated model, eg technician support
4. revised governing body arrangements and practices that secure links, enable shared approaches and reduce workload caused by repetition for the headteacher
5. opportunities, appropriate to the schools' respective needs, which bring staff members together to:
 - a. develop a shared vision for the federation and what it will provide its pupils
 - b. promote shared learning to move improvement agendas together and maximise the use of staff expertise
6. establishing a means both to evaluate the impact of federation in terms of pupil outcomes (employing the five outcomes of Every Child Matters as a perspective) and of communicating these to stakeholders

For the system, one could propose that consideration needs to be given to:

1. the potential impact of duplication of expected requirements upon headteachers leading federations
2. the provision of training opportunities that better acknowledge varying contexts, and that support leaders at different levels in leading and managing in these contexts

References

DfES, 2005, Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More Choice for Parents and Pupils, Norwich, The Stationery Office

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to all those who gave their time in contributing to this study and to Professor Charles Desforges for acting as an e-tutor for its course.

Research associate reports available in Autumn 2006

■ **Reaching out, reaching in**

Joy Beaney, *Assistant Headteacher, Torfield School, East Sussex*

■ **Improvement through evaluation**

Ann Marie Dimeck, *Headteacher, Holy Rosary Catholic Primary School, Merseyside*

■ **Opening doors, opening minds**

Peter Gordon, *Headteacher, Hazel Court School, East Sussex*

■ **Should I stay or should I go?**

Chris Ingate, *Headteacher, Birchwood High School, Hertfordshire*

■ **Learning from the Middle**

Christine Jones, *Research Associate*

■ **Mutual support, mutual challenge**

Helen Schmitz, *Headteacher, Cromer Road Primary School, London*

■ **Raising the bar**

Peter Wright, *Head of Department, Wrotham School, Kent*

Research Associate Programme

For printed copies of this publication, please visit **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications** and complete an order form. You can also download it for free from this address.

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:

www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

£2, when charged for

National College for School Leadership

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.