

Soft federations

Small primary schools find recruiting a new headteacher tougher than their larger counterparts and also face the problem of falling rolls. So is soft federation, an alliance with one or more neighbouring schools under a single leader, a good way forward?

Jo Williams, headteacher in a soft federation in Lancashire, has examined the model as an NCSL Research Associate. She led a t2l discussion on preparing for soft federation and its possible pitfalls.

Key points raised were:

- soft federation means more than yoking two schools together under one headteacher
- requires collaboration between all staff and across the schools
- bring benefits beyond those originally intended, such as economies of scale and continuing professional development opportunities

Schools who fear closer integration will blur their individual identities prefer the soft model, said Jo. A key factor in the decision can be the need to head off a recruitment crisis.

"In my research I encountered governor reluctance regarding a full federation. They were concerned that *if there was only one governing body then their original school would lose its unique identity. Their motives for a soft federation tended to be wrapped up in the need to appoint a headteacher.*"

Derek Sutherland became headteacher of two Catholic schools in York which, faced with recruitment problems, chose to collaborate as a soft federation rather than amalgamate. The federation has subsequently thrived.

"One reason for the success is the fact they are the same faith school," he said. *"The vision is similar, both schools have the same beliefs and the sense of belonging is strong. It would be possible to have a mixed community and faith federation but it would be very important to find out what unites rather than separates them."*



In line with Jo's point that groups of schools can share resources and access services in a way single schools find difficult, Linda Brook pointed to her own experience of leading local authority team of peripatetic school business managers (SBMs) in Yorkshire.

"We are currently delivering a DCSF funded SBM service across six of our smallest schools, pairing two schools with one SBM for one day per week. The aim is to create a service which meets the needs of small schools and is sustainable. We are looking at distributed leadership, which is often difficult to implement in small schools, yet two schools working together makes this potentially achievable."

Deryn Harvey, a director of the Innovation Unit, pointed out some of the dangers when federations are not the product of existing partnerships or even between schools with similar needs.

"I often see headteachers being asked to lead two schools, which at the time are not even in a soft federation. *They may as well be at other ends of the earth for all the governing bodies and staff and communities have to do with each other.*"

In these circumstances, fostering a collaborative approach between the schools is crucial to leadership, she added:

"I would not recommend a headteacher going in to run two or indeed more schools unless they are looking at how they might work across the schools in a collaborative way." Not least, you would be run ragged and no use to anyone if you were, in effect, headteacher full-time at two schools."

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