

# United we stand

## A soft federation model for small primary schools

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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## Introduction

The boundaries are changing for patterns of school organisation and there are many examples of innovative new models and structures of leadership. In particular, much has recently been written on the challenges and successes of federation and how it meets the needs of pupil learning and leadership recruitment. A DfES/Price Waterhouse Coopers report on leadership, has commented on the perceived benefits of a federated model:

Federation “can be shown to have a number of key benefits which, ultimately, impact positively on pupil performance, for example: greater capacity through more distributed leadership; economies of scale achieved through pooling resources; smoother transitions of pupils between phases; and improved progression opportunities for all members of the school workforce. The benefits of this can be manifested in the primary school sector where groups of schools are able to share resources and access services that would not be viable for individual schools.”

[DfES/ Price WaterhouseCoopers 2007:xi]

The federation model provides an established framework of shared leadership and joint governance where one or more schools share a single headteacher under one governing body, with a formal legal framework in place. Networks and clustering are at the other end of the spectrum, where schools work together informally for mutual benefit, for example in Primary Strategy Learning Networks.

Some schools have however sought out different solutions for different reasons. These are not always as formal as federation or as casual as informal clustering activities. Soft federation falls somewhere in between these two extremes and is the focus of this present study, which sets out to discover the benefits of less formal but still structured partnerships. For instance, the soft federation model could apply where two or more schools want to share key staff including the perceived benefits of a non-teaching headteacher (Day et al 2000), but to keep everything else separate, especially governance, whilst still joining together for mutually beneficial activities when appropriate. This report explores four examples where schools have adopted a similar model of cross-school, soft-federated leadership, and decisions have been made to circumvent current federation styles, by ‘daring to be different’.

## Method

This study explores how some small rural primary schools have developed systems of soft federation, through small-scale case studies, in one geographical area. Four headteachers, a governor and a local authority representative were interviewed. All the schools were small schools of under 100 on roll (with one exception with a roll of 170). They all faced similar leadership challenges and the headteachers each led two or more schools. The aim of the interviews was to establish the journeys the schools and the headteachers had experienced to get them to their current point and then to examine the current leadership model. The interviews focused on key challenges and benefits of the soft federation model, exploring why these schools, their governing bodies and leaders preferred to remain in partnership yet still formally unfederated, and what were the advantages and challenges that they therefore faced.

## Findings

### Why did these schools become soft federations?

The motivations for entering into a soft federation centred on five areas.

#### 1. Fearless Federation

The common theme running across all the schools was the fear of being unable to recruit and retain a leader. Soft federation partnership provided the most effective solution to this need. School governors feared full federation would mean losing their school’s single identity and autonomy. Soft federation was a safe compromise that met the fears of the schools involved.

#### 2. Strategic capacity of headteacher

There could be a direct impact on the ability of the headteacher to lead strategically. One headteacher noted that she was now leading rather than managing and had time to be strategic and visionary.

#### 3. Growing leaders for the future

Teachers are able to take on greater leadership roles, dealing with day-to-day responsibilities, and key delegated tasks. The soft federation model can grow leaders for the future through developing the teacher in charge role.

#### **4. Headteacher recruitment**

Recruitment could become more focused on leadership because of the absence of a regular class commitment, which could attract more experienced leaders.

#### **5. Long term sustainability**

Headteachers could remain as leaders of small schools rather than moving to larger schools or to different posts. It is only a small further step to full federation should the schools so chose.

### **What drove the success of the new leadership model?**

Four factors were identified by the interviewees as being key to the overall effectiveness of the federation.

#### **1. Proven leadership skills**

The headteachers drew upon a wide experience of leadership, being able to access a wealth of skills to deal with day-to-day issues as well as the ability to focus on vision and strategy for the two schools.

#### **2. Capacity within the school**

The school had the capacity to be able to manage the process of sharing a headteacher with another school through having effective systems in place to ensure efficient running of both schools with a shared headteacher. This was most apparent in the use of distributive leadership.

#### **3. Headteacher well being**

There was an acknowledgement that leading a small school without the teaching commitment had kept the headteachers in post for longer. The extra workload compared to that of a formal federation could be considered significant but the headteachers interviewed still found it better for their well-being than being a headteacher with a large teaching commitment.

#### **4. Governor Confidence**

The governors could continue to operate in exactly the same way as they always had, as well as being able to explore the opportunities of working together across the schools at their own pace and at a level of involvement in which they felt secure. They felt that through this model they maintained control of 'their own school' and could still continue to deal with issues relevant to it.

### **What challenges do the schools face?**

Respondents identified a number of key challenges which the school faced in relation to the soft federation.

#### **■ Teacher in charge workload**

The concern was raised that the teacher in charge may face the challenges that were originally faced by the teaching headteacher, namely trying to do both jobs at once.

#### **■ Appointing a Deputy**

The decision whether or not to appoint a deputy headteacher was highly dependent upon both the past circumstances and context of each school as well as perceived needs for the future.

#### **■ Headteacher workload**

Headteachers had to commit to 'double everything' including two lots of governors' meetings as well as the usual Christmas shows, sports days etc.

#### **■ Headteacher experience**

The partnership headteacher role had some very specific contextual challenges, which required prospective candidates to provide evidence of existing, proven effective leadership.

#### **■ Mixed Media**

Concerns were expressed over future appointments if there were to be a partnership between a community school and a voluntary aided school with differently focused priorities.

Leaders in each of these schools played an important role in promoting the overall success of the federation. Heads were particularly key in this respect. Critical within this was developing the 'right pace', whereby the concerns and issues raised by staff, parents and governors were adequately addressed, but the momentum for change was maintained. Within this, leaders needed to balance their desire to realise the overall vision for the school with a degree of patience and a tolerance of uncertainty.

## Conclusions

There are exciting and changing times ahead for schools, not least in pioneering differing models of leadership. As Dalton et al., (2001) have noted:

*“A key feature of the school of the future is the capacity to innovate, to create a culture in which changing is the norm, to create strategies to improve and to translate the vision and moral aspirations of the school into actual practice.”*

[Dalton et al 2001:142]

Several factors were key to the emerging success of the soft federation model employed by these schools. These were:

- ‘Toe dipping’ into greater collaborative working prior to full federation.
- Providing opportunities for school leaders to support other schools within the partnership.
- Developing approaches for increasing the leadership capacity of individual schools.

By ‘daring to be different’, these schools involved in pioneering soft federations stand united in playing their part in translating those visionary aspirations into concrete practice.

## References

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