

Wembury Primary co-headship

Models of leadership

Background

Wembury Primary School is a single-form entry, 196-pupil school just outside Plymouth, in Devon local authority. The school was led by an experienced headteacher, David Fieldsend, who retired in August 2007. In 2002, the school appointed a new deputy headteacher, Sharon Lance, who was soon to show aspirations for further leadership opportunities, responding positively to a suggestion in her second year in role to explore the opportunities of a co-headship. This resulted in a 60:40 headship split with Sharon returning to her deputy role for the three days when David was leading the school.

This case study explores the experiences and reflections of the two headteachers and the chair of governors, who has been in post for the duration of the co-headship. It also considers lessons learnt to help others interested in exploring this opportunity.

Who was involved?

- current headteacher
- deputy headteacher
- staff
- governors
- parents
- local authority personnel unit

Explanation of activity

Following the appointment of the new deputy headteacher and her successful induction, David came across an NCSL publication on co-headship, which prompted him to explore the issue. He had a growing desire to adjust his work-life balance as he entered the final three years of headship and felt it was the right time to explore the opportunities for a co-headship. He believed the new structure would stimulate him to build the skills of the co-head, who would need to achieve NPQH.

The idea was that Sharon would build her skills during the first two years and that, in the third and final year, she would look for her own headteacher post. This also required the consultation and agreement of governors, staff and parents. First, David explored the idea with his deputy "who jumped at the idea", and then went on to explore how to go about making it happen. Budgetary implications were considered and the eventual solution was to fund the headship post for all five days and the deputy post for three days. This saving helped enable a school restructure to a desired single-form entry, establishing seven classes for morning sessions. This was to become a key point for staff and parents as it made curricular mapping and pupil progression through the school much simpler.

Contractual discussions with the local authority personnel unit were to present a number of hurdles, the first of which was employment law regulations and, in particular, an employee's right to claim a position once they had been in post for over a year. The initial solution was to establish a fixed one-year contract, with the local authority providing termly reports on the effectiveness of having two headteachers to the governing body, which were paid for by the school. However, the school was keen to try and set up a more formal agreement, lasting the whole three years. David's aim was to retire in August 2007 and he hoped that the recruitment process for the new headteacher would enable less turbulent succession planning – that is, the need for acting headteachers.

Having raised the initial idea with his chair of governors, the governing body then spent some time discussing the matter and establishing the roles and responsibilities of the new leadership structure. Following a successful first year of the structure, the local authority monitoring reports being supportive and with pupil numbers rising, contributing to a healthier school budget, David was keen to formalise the situation. Given the employment law issue, David agreed to write a letter of resignation two years in advance. Sharon also agreed to write a letter that indicated that she would return to her substantive deputy headship post but at her current leadership point scale, should the situation require it.

The chair of governors, Martyn Spencer, said the governing body was fully involved with the discussions and that the decision to proceed with the co-headship was unanimous. Parents had been surveyed and the proposed structure explained to them, with widespread agreement being secured. He also explained that, over the three years, a new member of staff, James Elford, currently working on NPQH, had joined the senior leadership team and was adding to the leadership capacity of the school.

Outcomes and impact

Outcome of the headship interviews

In the last year, the governing body began the appointment process for the new headteacher from a dozen applicants, with four candidates being shortlisted for interview. Although Sharon had applied and was a strong candidate, she was not successful. However, within weeks, she secured a headship in Plymouth.

Impact on individuals

Sharon spoke enthusiastically about how the co-headship had given her real leadership opportunities to apply skills developed through NPQH and had prepared her for taking on her own headship. Over the last year of the co-headship, she had been able to take the lead in developing the school's successful bid for a new school building. Indeed, Sharon was the lead head on finance and building matters.

She acknowledged her disappointment at not securing the headship of Wembury, having put her heart and soul into the school during the last year. Having worked so hard to build her leadership skills and with the prospect of a return to being a deputy headteacher, she resolved to apply for headships, securing the first she applied for.

David said the experience had been very valuable. He felt that not only had he helped develop Sharon's skills, but that James Elford, a senior leadership team member with teaching and learning responsibilities, had also benefited from the building leadership capacity building style adopted by the school. His plan had been to build Sharon's skills in the first year, and then to allow her to grow.

In retrospect, he wished he had provided more career advice in the last year before the official appointment process formally began, broadening her horizons beyond Wembury. He said they had spoken initially about a plan for him to return to full-time headship once Sharon had achieved her headship, should that be necessary. From his own point of view, he felt the co-headship had given his final three years more focus, in that he enjoyed the mentoring role he played in developing two future leaders. Indeed, with his departure and that of Sharon, the role of James as an acting deputy headteacher will help ensure continuity of leadership.

David acknowledged that the co-headship gave him a much better work–life balance and he returned to work each Monday more invigorated. He felt that while his pension rights had, to some extent, been affected, he had been able to prepare himself for retirement, having proactively developed his outside interests over the last three years.

Update – June 2008

Ten months on, not only is Sharon Lance a headteacher but James Elford has been successful in securing a small school headship, which he has started – a good testament to the model enabling the development of tomorrow’s leaders today.

Observations and key learning points

Looking at lessons to be learnt from the experience, Sharon highlighted the following issues:

- A requirement for career advice from beyond the school. Local authorities need to be proactive in securing and advising aspiring leaders for future use across the system.
- The value of having a clear plan of managing the co-headship. In the first year, she valued the direction from David; the need for a clear induction, especially as the local authority was monitoring the impact of the co-headship.
- Having two days out of the classroom (on Thursdays and Fridays) was the minimum required to make the experience worthwhile. Mondays were quite frenetic, as she sought to work in her reception class and hand over to David. At times, she felt torn between class responsibility and starting the week properly with her class, and wanting to see through actions started the previous week.
- The value of having joint planning time with David, to ensure that they developed successful strategies for dealing with situations – particularly staffing issues.

David Fieldsend highlighted the following issues:

- A need for local authorities to have a proactive approach to succession planning to help enable school leaders to build effective strategies.
- A need for personnel services to develop and provide good support for school leaders and governors wishing to pursue this opportunity.
- The need for headteachers to actually let go of the power of leadership, to build the confidence and skills of leadership in colleagues by letting them make mistakes and resolving them.
- The need to plan time to discuss approaches to managing staff, using the strengths of the two leaders proactively.
- That co-headship is also a useful tool for school leaders wanting to work beyond the school; as a school improvement partner or Leadership Network leader for instance.
- Staff had been won over by the attraction of the new school structure; a quick win-win.

- The role of the school administrator is very important. As at Wembury, he or she needs to be highly skilled and be able to communicate effectively with both headteachers.
- All three interviewees were concerned about the contractual discussions and other obstacles that they came across in finding a solution that enabled the co-headship to work.