

A Study of Hard Federations of Small Primary Schools

NCSL

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1. Background

The issue of headteacher recruitment and retention, along with demographic changes, declining pupil rolls and overall viability are important issues facing the future of small primary schools (in particular). It is likely that increasing numbers of schools will need to look for alternative ways to address these problems. One option is to federate, forming a larger unit across several locations, under the leadership of one headteacher and with one governing body.

In response to these issues, and to inform future practice and policy, this study explores the leadership of hard federations of small primary schools in the UK and identifies key implications and conclusions for practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Data in relation to federations is limited due to the uncertainties of the information on which it is based.

Currently, the DfES database contains:

- 137 groups of institutions – of which 76 are not fully confirmed hard or soft federations
- Of the 61 remaining, 15 are hard federations and 23 are soft federations. (majority secondary)
- The remaining 23 are collaboratives.

The main rationale for federation in England, as outlined by DfES and the Audit Commission (2005), identified the following benefits:

- A stronger senior and middle management team
- A stronger teaching team through the appointment of shared staff, including specialist teachers, better training and wider career opportunities
- Better support and development opportunities for school governors
- Economies of scale
- Savings in planning and administration time

A recent study by NCSL investigated the leadership of federations, which have been established for some years in The Netherlands.

There are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England, according to the study. The option to federate could rescue schools otherwise likely to close due to falling rolls, and provide a positive option to schools facing longstanding headteacher recruitment issues, reasons that seem particularly pertinent to small and rural schools.

This study identified a number of advantages associated with the Dutch federation model:

- Principals have more time to lead their schools
- There is economy of scale and averaging of costs (staffing and resources)
- Mobility of staff and resources

- A support and advice network
- Joint planning and wider thinking

Information on UK federations from local authority and other sources remains erratic and unreliable in terms of definition.

However, a growing number of Local Authorities are actively promoting federations and the opportunities they offer to small schools through their websites, e.g. North Yorkshire, and Wiltshire.

The North Yorkshire website states that the local authority is committed to supporting its schools, and is concerned about recruitment and retention issues which are affecting small schools in particular. It is not unusual for schools to have only one or two applicants for a headship, and many schools have to advertise two or three times.

North Yorkshire Local authority feels that greater collaborative working between schools, within confederated or federated arrangements, will offer some schools greater opportunities for development and greater long term strength and stability.

‘Both ways of working have some common features, namely that by sharing a high quality head, schools benefit from sharing that expertise and leadership. The money saved by not employing two heads can be ploughed into additional teaching support. It depends from case to case, but usually this arrangement means that the head has more non-teaching time than the individual previous headship posts had, which means that they are better able to do the job and to provide leadership and support to the other staff. It also means that management points can be built in to provide one or more of the other teachers with some career progression – something currently lacking in many small schools.’

2. Aims of the study

The intention of this study is to explore why and how hard federations are established in the UK and to consider the ways in which they have been both successful and unsuccessful. The study also aimed to provide practical guidance for headteachers and governors who might be considering federating in the future.

The aims of the study posed the following research questions:

- What was the rationale / reason for federating?
- How did headteachers go about setting up the federation?
- What does the leadership structure look like?
- In what ways have the federations been a success?
- In what ways have the federations been less successful and why?
- What messages would you give to other heads / schools / governors thinking of federating?

3. Methodology

The research was undertaken by an NCSL researcher who conducted four face-to-face semi-structured interviews with headteachers of hard federations of small primary schools. The federations were located in Hampshire, Lampeter, Dorset and East Yorkshire.

Coedmor, Lampeter, Wales

The Coedmor federation is based on the edge of Lampeter and is made up of three schools:

- Coedmor, KS1/2 - 53 on roll plus an independent nursery
- Ffarmers, KS 2 - 15 on roll plus a second independent nursery on site (approximately six miles away from Coedmor and one mile away from Llanycrwy)
- Llanycrwys, KS1 - 23 on roll
- The headteacher, Aled Jones Evans has been in post six years

Western Downland CE Aided, Hampshire

The Western Downland CE Aided federation is in Hampshire and is made up of two schools:

- Damerham, Foundation / KS1 - 72 on roll
- Rockbourne, KS2 - 97 on roll
- The schools are approximately 2 miles apart.
- The headteacher, Mark Saxby, has been in post seven years and the federation was established in January 1981.

(This school is now considered amalgamated as it formed with one DfES number and one budget.)

Dunbury, Dorset

The Dunbury School federation is in Dorset and is made up of three bases:

- Winterborne Kingston - Reception and a year 1 / 2 class - 49 on roll
- Winterborne Stickland, Reception and a year 1 / 2 class - 48 on roll
- Winterborne Whitechurch, Years 3, 4 and 5 - 108 on roll
- The sites are approximately 3 miles apart.
- The federation was established in 1992.
- Headteacher Simon France has been in post for two years.

Dunbury is inspected as one school and has one DfES number. The federation was originally made up of four primaries, but Milton Bassett closed shortly after Simon France joined the school.

Middleton and Beswick and Watton, East Yorkshire

The Middleton and Beswick and Watton federation is in East Yorkshire and is made up of two schools.

- Middleton, Foundation / KS1 and 2 - 60 on roll
- Beswick and Watton, Foundation / KS1 and 2 - 35 on roll
- The schools are approximately 5 miles apart.
- The federation was informally established 2005.
- The headteacher, Christine Bennison, has been in post approximately 1 year and 9 months.

The schools are funded as two schools, run as separate schools, have two DfES numbers and have separate Ofsted inspections, even though they have one headteacher and one governing body. They are currently waiting to be given official hard federation status (expected March 1st 2007). They will continue to operate as two separate schools once they receive their official status and have been given assurances from the local authority that they will continue to be funded as two schools. The federation is part of a network of six small rural primary schools called the 'Wagoners' – a network which has been in existence for 14 years. Staff are appointed to one school, but their job descriptions specify that they must be prepared to teach across the federation if necessary and use their specialisms.

A detailed interview schedule was developed for the study, a shortened version of which was sent out to headteachers prior to the interviews being undertaken.

The study was informed by a previous research study undertaken by NCSL into federations in the Netherlands

4. Key findings

This section explores the key findings of the research study:

- The rationale / reason for federating
- Setting up the federation
- The leadership structure
- In what ways have the federations been a success?
- In what ways have the federations been less successful and why?
- Messages for heads and governors

4.1 Why federate?

The key rationale for federating for all the schools was the threat of closure, due to falling numbers and / or recruitment issues.

The suggestion to federate, in three of the schools, came from the local authority, whilst at Berwick and Watton the suggestion came from the governing body. One of the headteachers commented that for the local authority:

'It was a win-win situation – if the federation succeeded, good, if not, then they would simply close the schools anyway '

For the headteachers involved in this study, the key reason for federating was to improve pupil learning and increase the range of learning opportunities they could provide. Additionally, each felt a strong personal commitment to the role of the small school within the community and the threat posed to those communities when the school closes. The head of Beswick and Watton had researched two examples where this had happened and found the consequences had been devastating for the villages concerned. The threat of school closure, alongside that of falling rolls and budgets, plus recruitment issues convinced her that this was the perfect opportunity

to role model an alternative to these scenarios. She determined to keep the school open by federating; increase pupil numbers by bringing people back to the community and subsequently increase the budget. In just over eighteen months she has achieved all of those goals.

4.2 Setting up the federation

Timescales

Typical timescales for establishing the federations varied between two terms and 18 months. The timescale for setting up the federation at Coedmor, including the planning and preparation, can be seen below:

Timeline: -

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| • July 1998 | Initial discussion with LA. |
| • Spring 1998 | Decision made to federate. |
| • Summer 1998 | New name established for the federation. |
| • October 1999 | Headteacher post advertised. |
| • December 1999 | New headteacher appointed. |
| • Spring term 2000 | Headteacher released two days per week to work within the federation, gathering information and data. |
| • May 2000 | New headteacher takes up pos.t |
| • Summer term | Further analysis and small but significant changes made. This term was also used to bring parents on board, mainly through the positive messages taken home by the children themselves. |
| • September 2000 | Key stage units introduced across the sites. |

Planning

It is clear from these case studies that the more time given to preparation and planning before setting up the federation, the more likely the federation will be to succeed and be adopted and accepted by parents. At Coedmor, the headteacher was released for two days a week from his deputy headship to work within and across the federation. This enabled the head to gather and analyse information and agree plans for the future direction of the schools before taking up the post. At Beswick and Watton, similar opportunities were provided when the retiring head agreed to stay on for an extra term.

The establishment of joint governing bodies

Once the suggestion to federate had been made, initial discussions took place between heads and governors and heads, governors and local authorities. The establishment of joint governing bodies was the next step for three of the schools. In the fourth school, Coedmor, there was already an existing joint governing body, as the schools were part of an informal cluster – a common practice in Wales. At Beswick and Watton this process was made easier due to the fact that the schools were part of a network of six schools, which involved collective network governor meetings.

Consultation with parents, pupils and staff

Following the establishment of joint governing bodies came further and frequent consultation with staff, parents and pupils. Consultation with parents varied from school to school and included public meeting, attended by local authority personnel, surveys and open meetings in school.

Two of the schools faced strong parental opposition to the idea of federating, which included marches, petitions and threats to remove their children from the school. The other two schools were more fortunate in that parents were in favour of the federation as an alternative to closure of the school.

Parents concerns in relation to federating included:

- The fear that the larger, more financially stable schools would be subsidising the smaller and less financially stable schools – ‘one school gaining at the expense of another’.
- ‘Hidden agendas’ from the local authority, ultimately to close one or other of the schools anyway.
- Parents possibly having to fund the travelling necessary for children to move between sites.
- The issue of siblings being collected from different sites (staggered start and finish times solved this problem).
- Uniform.
- Parents ‘losing’ their headteachers as a result of having to be in more than one school.
- The school losing its ‘identity’.

All the heads said (not unsurprisingly), that the process of bringing parents on board was crucial to the federation becoming quickly and successfully established. The case studies suggest that clear and frequent communication, good organisation and careful ‘branding’ or marketing were key to this process.

Strategies included regular meetings and or letters to parents detailing the changes that would be taking place, before they happened. For example, class sizes, arrangements for transportation and deployment of staff and the reasons for those changes. Other strategies included creating a new prospectus, competitions to design new logos for the school uniform, establishing friends of the school associations, PR work by parents, publicity in the local press and presence at local events. Presenting the option to federate as a great opportunity for the children and the community and constantly focusing on the positives rather than the negatives also seems to have been an effective way of changing minds. Convincing parents that the sense of tradition would continue – even when the two schools were effectively merging into one – was equally important, as was the reassurance that there would always be a sense of parity between the schools.

In more than one of the schools it was the parents themselves who acted as advocates for the federation and the idea of ‘talking the school up’ by parents, pupils, governors local authority personnel and school staff was seen to be an important factor in the federation’s success and acceptance.

These activities and actions were carefully and deliberately planned by headteachers to have maximum impact and to encourage parents to feel positive towards the federation. At Coedmor, the headteachers strategy for bringing parents on board

involved many of the actions listed above; but it also featured a number of other deliberate strategies to encourage parents and children to come together, including:

- Using the children themselves to take the messages home to parents regarding the new opportunities available to them, such as playing rugby with their own peer groups for the first time, and engaging in after school sports clubs.
- Actively bridging the gaps between parents from different schools by providing frequent opportunities for them to come together. The local swimming pool allowed the school to use the pool free after school but parents had to bring their children and in doing so they met and got to know each other.
- Setting up an after school and breakfast club.
- Ensuring a regular presence at local agricultural shows and events.

4.3 Key players

Headteachers

It is very clear from the case studies that each of the headteachers played a fundamental role in the successful establishment of the federation. All the heads interviewed expressed an overriding moral imperative that federating was the right thing to do, both for the children and for the community. This commitment to the pupils and the community undoubtedly played an important part in motivating the heads and significantly contributing to their vision for the federation.

These heads were certainly not 'hero' or 'heroine' style characters; but each had very similar characteristics. They all had an extremely positive outlook; they looked for creative solutions to issues by regularly thinking 'outside the box'. They carefully, constantly and deliberately analysed their contexts and were comfortable and confident about 'letting go' of their leadership.

Local authority

Local authority support was also seen as crucial to the success of the federation and ranged from attendance at public meetings to the offer of an 'A' team - made up of a solicitor, admissions expert, human resources expert and other key LA personnel. Two of the heads mentioned the importance for them, personally as well as professionally, of knowing that they had the 'backing' of the local authority and appropriate support, should it be needed.

Governors

Governors played a key role supporting the headteacher in the early stages of the federation and in being prepared to work collaboratively – even those governing bodies that had previously been in competition with each other.

Others

At Western Downland the diocese played a supportive role in the federation process by bringing the two schools, which were initially in two separate dioceses, together as a benefice. The diocese also offers additional financial support whenever it can. Two of the heads mentioned the support of staff as being important to them.

4.4 The leadership structure

Key features

The leadership structures of the federations were inevitably all different, but did have a number of similar key features. It was clear that federating had offered a range of leadership opportunities - especially in relation to site leaders - and had enabled the headteachers to distribute leadership within and across their organisations. This, in turn, had a cascade effect by opening up leadership opportunities for middle leaders as well as enabling headteachers to focus much more on the strategic leadership of the schools. In one of the federations three of the deputies have gone on to take up headship elsewhere. All the headteachers interviewed mentioned the fact that, by not being available on each site all the time, staff had had to take on more responsibility and decision making and, as a result, had become more independent leaders. The appointment of key senior staff had meant that, for the first time, they had a senior leadership team. As a result they felt less isolated and had someone else to 'share things with'.

Headteacher role

All the heads spent a large part of their week working across the schools and had specific timetables detailing where they would be and when. These were made available to both staff and parents. Where possible, heads made full use of electronic communications, including networked communication systems across all sites and links via a 'Blackberry' to the bursar and school secretary. At Beswick and Watton the headteacher has one day a week dedicated headship time, which is classroom focused and includes monitoring and lesson observations.

For all four headteachers leading a federation has provided them with challenge, variety and motivation and for three of them this has proved to be an incentive not to leave and look for another headship. The benefits of having more time to think and act strategically, having a senior leadership team, a non-teaching commitment and flexibility of staffing and effective organisational systems are clearly seen as advantages to federating and incentives for staying in post.

Senior staff

The federations had a variety of combinations of senior staff, including base leaders who were either deputy heads/assistant heads or senior members of staff. Headteachers were very clear that these roles had been made possible by federating. At Coedmor, the leadership structure included two of the previous heads who were now deputy heads on protected salaries, plus a third senior member of staff. In an ideal world, despite the fact that the deputies have been very supportive following the federation, from a financial point of view the head would opt for himself and three 'senior' members of staff. In Hampshire the structure was made up of the head and two assistant heads. In Dorset the structure comprised the head, deputy head and three base leaders; whilst at Beswick and Watton the headteacher has appointed a business manager, rather than a deputy or assistant head. The business manager is part of the senior management team, along with the head and two senior teachers, and has, amongst other things, responsibility for in house training, premises staff, bids and the Learning Support assistants team. In the words of the headteacher, the business manager has 'transformed my role'.

Building capacity

Opportunities to share practice, work in a collegiate way and more opportunities for professional development – most significantly leadership opportunities – were seen as important advantages to federating. All of the federations had established ‘leaders’ at each site, which had provided opportunities for leadership posts which otherwise, would not have been available.

Teamwork, and the opportunities to develop teams, including collaborative working and accountability, was a key feature of the federations. The pooling of expertise and knowledge and the flexibility of staffing contributed to the motivation and stability of staffing across all four federations.

Succession planning opportunities

Opportunities to consider succession planning were mentioned by at least three of the heads. The head at Western Downland CE Aided federation believed that the broader, more distributed leadership structure he had put in place provided “brilliant training for headship”, with three of the deputies from the federation going on to headship.

At Beswick and Watton the head there was already thinking creatively about this issue. She suggested that, should the federation take on another school, this would offer the opportunity to either develop a future head or if there was a head already in place, to co-lead the federation and effectively have a successor in place. Equally, if there was a deputy head within the federation who wasn’t sure about headship, this could provide the chance to have a ‘taste’ of headship whilst working alongside an experienced head. It was also suggested that heads could work collaboratively as joint heads over a larger cluster of schools.

4.5 In what ways have the federations been a success?

The ultimate goal for these headteachers was first, improving pupil learning and second, keeping the school open. They have all successfully achieved both goals and more.

Budgets are healthy and there is far more flexibility in terms of resources and staffing, resulting in improved curriculum provision and learning and teaching. Classes are small but it is still possible, in most cases, to maintain single age year groups. For some schools staffing levels have increased.

A comment made by all the heads that were interviewed was that the federations would not succeed without the good will of staff, especially in relation to staff travelling from site to site. Staff were usually allowed additional travelling time, for example, an extra ten to fifteen minutes at lunch time. Heads were appreciative of the way in which staff willingly undertook this element of their role.

Pupil learning and achievement

In all four federations standards have risen and pupil numbers have increased.

All the heads felt that increased staffing levels and the flexibility of staffing had significantly helped to improve learning and teaching by providing more opportunities

for staff to engage in focused and collaborative planning, to be released to observe colleagues and to share subject responsibility and draw on a wider knowledge base.

At Winterbourne, the appointment of two assistant heads in place of a deputy head, who both oversee the quality of the curriculum, has made a big difference to the school and has led to improved consistency of approach in delivering the curriculum. Flexibility of staffing in more than one of the schools has offered the opportunity for specialist teaching. In all the schools it was felt that there were greater opportunities to draw on and utilise subject specialisms. This approach at Beswick and Watton, where the subject specialist for science has had the opportunity to teach across both schools, has resulted in improved science results for the last two years.

All the schools felt they were now able to offer a wider range of learning opportunities for their children, especially in the areas of sport and music, whilst improved resources and more effective use of resources was seen as another positive element of federating.

From an organisational point of view, it was felt that only having to complete one SEF/SIP/headteachers report and managing one budget made life much easier for heads, as did only having one governing body.

A phrase which came up a number of times was that by federating, the schools were able to maintain a 'small school feel, but with big school resources'. As another head put it: "I have managed to keep the rural ethos of the existing schools, but mixed it with the advantages of a large town school and all that can offer"

Finances

Three of the four schools commented that, as a result of federating, they were financially better off. In many ways this appeared to be the result of careful and thorough auditing / financial management by the headteachers. They had all meticulously gone through the budgets and analysed where savings and more effective spending could be employed- for example at Dunbury the head dramatically reduced transport costs. Three of the heads had successfully negotiated funding from their local authority before establishing the federation, whilst Beswick and Watton have agreed a different approach to funding. Interestingly, however, it is an approach which two of the other heads recommended in hindsight. At Beswick and Watton the authority have agreed to fund the federation as two separate schools. On this basis the headteacher has had an excellent start and is confident and happy that, should she have to make financial reductions in the future, she would be able to do so and still maintain the appropriate level of provision.

4.6 In what ways have the federations been less successful?

When asked what some of the disadvantages of federating might be, three of the heads were hard pressed to think of anything. They did eventually come up: with potential jealousy from other heads; initial work life balance due to the speed of changes and developments; and the difficulties of not being able to pop in and observe each others classrooms, due to the schools being on different sites, leading to a lack of consistency.

The fourth head felt that there were a number of funding issues which needed to be addressed including, building maintenance – "buildings are double everything,

utilities / caretaking and so on”, as well as additional costs for two administrative staff and occasional transport costs which prevented the two teams of staff from coming together as often as would be liked.

The duplication of resources was also an issue for this head, as was the lack of shared servers and Broadband, which hindered communication.

Travelling between the schools was also sometimes difficult for two of the heads interviewed. At Coedmor, despite getting to all three sites on a regular basis, the head felt that parents would like to see more of him; and even though there are base ‘leaders’ in the two Hampshire schools, it was felt parents still want to see the ‘head’. All the heads interviewed made sure that they were out and about in the playgrounds or at the school gates on a regular basis.

The head at Coedmor had spent the first two years of his federation headship with a full time teaching commitment and looked back now and wondered ‘how I did it’.

Being able to read three local contexts as opposed to just one was mentioned by one of the heads. The financial implications of running two or three schools whilst, in effect, being funded for one school was an issue for the heads who had not agreed formula funding with their local authority before federating. Interestingly, however, all the heads felt that in terms of staffing they were financially better off – the areas where funding proved to be more of an issue was in relation to maintaining buildings, resources and transport costs.

4.7 Key messages for heads and governors

The overwhelming messages from those interviewed were: -

Management and organisation

- Get the community on side - make them part of it.
- Ensure parity across the sites - even with smaller things such as meetings and events.
- Re-brand the school - give it a new name and a new logo and uniform. These can also be seen as ‘quick wins’.
- Avoid the ‘us and them’ mentality at all costs.
- Do things only once - for example one SEF, one admin basket, one headteachers report, even if the schools maintain their individual identities.
- Be thorough - consider the context of all the schools within the federation and analyse their needs thoroughly.

Financial suggestions

- Make sure you agree the formula funding before you set up the federation OR
- Agree to run the federation for a term and then agree the funding OR
- Suggest the local authority fund you as two or more schools with one headteacher and then work out with the local authority where you can make savings
- Think through the financial implications carefully and consider everything – from photocopiers to transport costs.

Communication

- Think carefully about communication and make sure there is a robust approach and strategy for communicating.

- Consult widely and value others views
- Be prepared to change – listen to staff in particular
- Create a joint ethos and vision

Staffing

- ‘Look after your staff – without them an arrangement like this won’t work.
- Make sure you have key members of staff on each site
- Make time for staff to come together – chit chat is important
- Remember that rivalry and a slight edge of competitiveness can be healthy – alongside collective accountability

Other

- Be strong and stick with it in terms of what you believe is right
- Look for the opportunities in everything you do
- Remember the situation is always fragile
- Be flexible

4.7 Implications and conclusions

Implications

This study would suggest that, for headteachers considering federating, there are clearly more advantages than disadvantages. However, heads will need to consider the potential changes in their role, for example, from being a teaching head to non-teaching head, having a senior leadership team and potentially having many more leaders to ‘manage’ in and across the federation. It could be argued that many of the attributes and characteristics needed to successfully lead any school, especially those with split sites, are the same as those needed to lead a federation. For example, an ability to distribute leadership, good communication skills, budgeting skills, an ability to set the direction of the school and create a collegiate vision and ethos. However, those heads interviewed felt that their situations were unique in many ways and that the bringing together of two separate communities brings with it its own challenges, especially in terms of parents, governing bodies and, in particular, a need to read and analyse multiple and different contexts. The heads felt that the leadership courses currently available did not always support them in addressing the specific issues they faced or their personal and professional development needs. It would seem appropriate then for heads of small schools considering federating to be offered the opportunities to explore in more detail some of the leadership concepts and organisational strategies that they might need, for example, distributed leadership, communication, consultation, facilitation and negotiation skills.

From a local authority perspective, federations offer a positive alternative to school closure, an incentive for retaining heads and an opportunity to improve standards. A number of local authorities have begun discussions around confederations / co – federations and have a number of them in existence already; but few have taken the step of encouraging heads and governors to establish hard federations, which this study would suggest offer a number of advantages. It could be argued that by keeping the schools separate there are financial gains to be made, for example in terms of maintaining buildings. However, the schools are also inspected separately, have separate governing bodies, budgets and potentially less flexibility in terms of staffing and leadership opportunities. The heads in this study were certainly in favour

of hard federations as opposed to soft or chewy federations as they offered a much more simplified way of working.

Despite the excellent resources available on the DfES Innovations Unit web site, there is still a lack of consistency in the wide range of terms and definitions of 'federations' across local authorities. To a certain extent this is inevitable, and right, as different contexts will need different solutions. However, it would seem to be an appropriate time, in view of the increasing numbers of school coming together, for local authorities to begin to evaluate and share with each other the different models which are currently running. They should also ascertain which are the most successful, in terms of pupil achievement and standards, recruitment and retention, financial implications and leadership opportunities. It is clear from this study that there are headteachers running very successful federations and thinking creatively about future variations of federations and succession planning issues, who could be used to help drive these consultations and explorations. Interestingly, only two of the heads in the study had been used by their local authority in this way. The head at Dunbury is currently working with Dorset local authority on federations and potential routes for schools where this is an option as well as presenting at conferences and hosting groups of visiting local authority colleagues interested in this work.

It may also be wise for authorities to take a long-term strategic view of federating and consider possible clusters of schools, which could gradually be brought under the leadership of one headteacher. In East Yorkshire, the opportunity for this to happen already exists as the two federated schools sit within a network of four other schools. It would seem logical, and potentially financially advantageous, for the other schools to consider becoming part of the federation as and when the headship positions become vacant.

Conclusions

It would appear from this study that for small schools facing recruitment and retention issues, the option to federate offers a viable solution with a number of significant benefits.

The most significant benefit for the schools in this study was the improvement in standards. All four schools have seen standards rise since federating. At the same time, they have achieved their aim of keeping the school open and maintaining and developing the schools role within the community. Increased staffing levels, flexibility of staffing and the opportunity to work and plan collaboratively, plus the chance to make better use of subject specialism were all felt to have contributed to improved pupil performance.

It became apparent whilst interviewing the heads that federating had necessitated the need for distributed leadership, which increased leadership capacity and flexibility within and across the federations. The role of site or base leaders offered senior leadership positions, which in turn opened up opportunities for middle leadership within the federations. Equally, the absence of the headteacher on site made it necessary for others, who would not normally have done so, to undertake decision-making and leadership activities. Federations also offered heads the opportunity to consider, and in some instances put in place, succession planning strategies. Teamwork and the opportunities to develop teams was also a key feature of the federations studied.

In terms of retention, three of the four heads interviewed said that the opportunity to strategically lead a federation had provided them with the challenge, variety and motivation they needed to remain in post, despite being approached by their local authority to take up the headship of a larger primary school. Not having a teaching commitment also provided an additional incentive not to look elsewhere. Financially, the federations had healthy budgets with three of them regarding themselves as financially better off than previously.

This is a small scale study and the need for further research in this area remains. A comparative study of co-federations would offer the opportunity to analyse and evaluate the differences between the two models in more detail. Equally, an exploration of the local authority's perspective on federations and co-federations and how they support heads of federations / co-federations would provide a valuable complement to this initial study.

This study has looked at only four schools. But the clear messages it provides strongly suggest that federations are an effective and powerful way of addressing falling rolls, school closure and recruitment and retention issues, whilst simultaneously improving pupil learning and achievement. It should also provide a 'springboard' for more detailed consideration of this crucial area of educational research.