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This report 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

A study of hard federations of small primary schools

SCHOOL LEADERS | Report

Contents

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 Department for Education and Skills' (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 are secondary)
- the remaining 23 are collaboratives.

The main rationale for federation in England, as outlined by the DfES and the Audit Commission (2005[1]), 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 the National College for School Leadership (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)
- there is mobility of staff and resources
- there is a support and advice network
- there is 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, for example, North Yorkshire and Wiltshire.

The North Yorkshire website (http://www.northyorks.gov.uk/m241_0.pdf) 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.

1 DfES and Audit Commission 2005 , Tackling Falling Primary School Rolls: Toolkit

'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 was 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 following research questions were posed:

- 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 Lampeter, Hampshire, Dorset and East Yorkshire. Detailed case studies are presented in Section 5.

Coedmor, Lampeter, Wales

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

- Coedmor, Key Stages 1/2: 53 pupils on roll plus an independent nursery.
- Ffarmers, Key Stage 2: 15 pupils on roll plus a second independent nursery on site (approximately six miles away from Coedmor and one mile away from Llanycrwys).
- Llanycrwys, Key Stage 1: 23 pupils on roll.

The headteacher, Aled Jones Evans, has been in post for six years.

Western Downland Church of England-aided, Hampshire

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

- Damerham, foundation/Key Stage 1: 72 pupils on roll.
- Rockbourne, Key Stage 2: 97 pupils on roll.

The schools are approximately two miles apart.

The headteacher, Mark Saxby, has been in post for seven years; 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 pupils on roll.
- Winterborne Stickland, reception and a Year 1/2 class: 48 pupils on roll.
- Winterborne Whitechurch, Years 3, 4 and 5: 108 pupils on roll.

The sites are approximately three 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/Key Stages 1 and 2: 60 pupils on roll.
- Beswick and Watton, foundation/Key Stages 1 and 2: 35 pupils on roll.

The schools are approximately five miles apart.

The federation was informally established in 2005. The headteacher, Christine Bennison, has been in post for approximately one year and nine months.

The schools are funded as two schools, they are run as separate schools, have two DfES numbers and 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 1 March 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 to 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
- key players
- leadership structure
- in what ways the federations have been a success
- in what ways the federations have been less successful and why
- messages for heads and governors

4.1. Rationale/reason for federating

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

In three of the schools the suggestion to federate came from the local authority, while 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 to 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 was threatened with closure. 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; to increase pupil numbers by bringing people back to the community; and subsequently to increase the budget. In just over 18 months she has achieved all of these 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 local authority
- *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 post
- *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 would 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 meetings, 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, public relations (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 headteacher's 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. For example, 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 (HR) expert and other key local authority 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. 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 had 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 (SLT), 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 had 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, while at Beswick and Watton the headteacher 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, among 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 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 was not sure about headship, this could provide the chance to have a 'taste' of headship while 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 goodwill of staff, especially in relation to staff travelling from site to site. Staff were usually allowed additional travelling time, for example, an extra 10–15 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 Dunbury, 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 past 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, while 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 self-evaluation form (SEF)/school improvement plan (SIP)/headteacher's 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, while Beswick and Watton 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 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 the following: 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 other's 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 the head would have 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 were base 'leaders' in the two Hampshire schools, it was felt parents still wanted 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 while, 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 were in relation to maintaining buildings, resources and transport costs.

4.7. Key messages for heads and governors

The overwhelming messages from those interviewed were as follows.

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 headteacher's 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 will not 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.

4.8. 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 an SLT 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 website, 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 schools 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 role of the schools 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 while 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, while simultaneously improving pupil learning and achievement. It should also provide a 'springboard' for more detailed consideration of this crucial area of educational research.

5. Case studies

5.1 Case study: Coedmor federation

Context

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

- Coedmor, Key Stages 1/2: 88 pupils on roll plus an independent nursery
- Ffarmers, Key Stage 2: 15 pupils on roll plus a second independent nursery on site (approximately six miles away from Coedmor and one mile away from Llanycrwys)
- Llanycrwys, Key Stage 1: 14 pupils on roll

The headteacher, Aled Jones Evans, has been in post for six years.

Rationale/reason for federating

The key reason for federating was the threatened closure of Ffarmers and Llanycrwys, due to falling numbers.

The local authority had looked to federate the schools in 1998 but due to strong parental opposition the decision was not taken. In 1999 the local authority made the decision to go ahead and federate the three schools irrespective of parental opposition. As Ffarmers and Llanycrwys were only one mile apart, competition for the few pupils that existed was strong. Unsurprisingly, the strongest opposition to the federation came from these two schools.

Setting up the federation

Timeline:

- *July 1998*
  Initial discussion with local authority
- *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 post
- *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

There was already an existing joint governing body as the schools were part of an informal cluster. (It is common practice for schools in Wales to have joint governing bodies.)

Two of the existing headteachers applied for the position of headteacher of the federation but were unsuccessful. They both stayed on as deputies and have protected salaries. One is based at Coedmor with the headteacher, while the second is based at Llanycrwys. Both have proved to be extremely supportive of the new head, which has made a big difference to the success of the federation. Once the appointment had been made it was more or less left up to the headteacher to decide how the federation would be set up. An initial meeting was held with staff and governors in order to get them on side – especially the staff. During the spring term the headteacher was released from his deputy headship to work within the federation, collecting information, analysing data and considering future options. The issues considered by the headteacher during this time included:

- best value for money
- budget and staffing
- staff expertise across the schools
- nursery provision and predicted numbers
- special educational needs (SEN) provision
- resources

- recent inspections
- location, in terms of distribution of pupils, was a key driver, Lampeter being nearer for parents to drop off
- transportation costs – singing, educational visits, sport, extra-curricular activities previously ran at separate times
- use made of the buildings during out of school hours – use made by local community
- long-term strategy and statement of purpose

Many of the parents threatened to take their children away from the schools. Meetings were arranged with parents, at which governors and local authority representatives were present. The first meeting did not go particularly well.

Parental issues/fears which needed to be addressed

- Parents at the larger of the two schools were afraid they would be subsidising the other two smaller schools and their children would suffer.
- Parents thought the local authority had a 'hidden agenda' to close one of the schools.
- Children would have to move for lessons (this was not the case, as they only moved for sport/music/educational visits).
- Parents were concerned they would have to fund the travelling necessary for children to move between the sites.
- Issue of siblings in different schools – resolved by staggered start and finish times.
- Uniform and logo (solved by children).

A further meeting with parents followed at which the following information was shared:

- Details were given of the forthcoming changes – Key Stage units across the sites.
- Details of class sizes.
- Advantages from a resource point of view.
- An explanation of how staff would be deployed and use made of their expertise – Key Stage 2 teachers would teach their own subjects and travel from one school to another during lunch times.
- Arrangements for transportation – sports/concerts to be rotated around the schools. Coedmor has large grounds so sports day happens here. One of the schools has a church close by so thanksgiving/harvest takes place there and the third school has a small hall used for the local Eisteddfod.
- Details of after-school activities.
- Maintenance of the buildings and how money and maintenance would be fairly distributed across the three sites.

Over the summer term the headteacher worked hard to bring parents on board. He deliberately planned how he would deliver positive messages about the federation to parents, predominantly through the children. He looked for opportunities to bring parents together and enable them to see the benefits of the federation. He adopted a specific focus on sport, which he knew was valued highly by parents. Children were constantly taking positive messages home, for example saying how 'great' it was they had been able to play rugby with children of their own age. Other examples of the activities and events used by the headteacher to bring parents on board included:

- hosting a school sports day for all three schools
- engineering opportunities to bring parents together, which in turn enabled them to get to know each other. An example of this was the after-school swimming club in Lampeter. The school negotiated free use of the pool, but parents had to bring their children and stay with them. They therefore met and got to know each other
- sports club one evening a night – again same process of socialising
- Key Stage 2 residential visit
- a questionnaire to pupils to decide colours for new uniform

- a competition to design the new school logo
- a school prospectus was developed, with businesses brought in to sponsor it
- the new school was publicised and marketed
- there was a joint summer fayre/Parents' and Teachers' Association (PTA)
- an after-school care club
- a breakfast club

Interestingly, within the first year three of the boys were chosen to represent the county at rugby that the headteacher felt could not have happened prior to the federation.

Key players

The headteacher himself was clearly the driving force behind the federation, with active support from the local authority and board of governors. The head had a very clear moral purpose to make a difference, improve pupil learning and maintain the role of the small school within the community. He was very much a creative solutions person, as well as an analyser, planner and evaluator. He held an overriding belief that this was the right thing to do and relished the challenges and opportunities it offered. He had the full support of the governors and staff in all three schools.

Leadership structure

The SLT at Coedmor comprises the headteacher, two deputy heads and one senior teacher. The headteacher and one of the deputies is based at Coedmor, while the second deputy is based at Llanycrwys and a senior member of staff is based at Ffarmers.

In 2003 the headteacher carried out a staff survey to gain views about his leadership of the federation. It appeared he was not delegating 'enough' and since then has actively distributed leadership far more. Interestingly, the head pointed out that teachers within the federation tend to have more responsibility anyway, due to working across all three sites and having to make decisions in the head's absence.

In what ways has the federation been a success?

Academic standards have improved in all three of the core subjects. The rural ethos of the existing schools has been maintained but, according to the headteacher, "it has been mixed with the advantages of a large town school and all that can offer".

The classes had remained small and were not mixed age groups. The opportunity to make use of specialist teaching had made a significant difference to learning and teaching in the school. Resources had greatly improved and opportunities for additional learning experiences, especially in areas of music and sport, had multiplied.

Teamwork across the schools has improved and staff are more motivated by being able to focus on their subjects. Opportunities for staff to focus on their subject specialism, to work collaboratively and 'pool expertise' have contributed to staff motivation and staff stability across the federation.

In what ways has the federation been less successful?

Initially the headteacher was teaching full time, which was extremely difficult, especially as, in other counties within Wales, all federal schools have non-teaching headships.

Parents in the two smaller units would like to see more of the head, but this is not always possible. Travelling between the sites is sometimes difficult. Financially the federation suffers due to the fact that the National Assembly only provides one grant, for example for buildings, because they are classed as one school, but they have three buildings to maintain. The same issue arises when new initiatives like whiteboards are introduced.

Distance is crucial – only having one mile between the two smaller schools makes it work. Any further and the headteacher felt that the separation of Key Stage units would not work as well. Ofsted only raised one issue regarding the federation and that was a lack of consistency in religious education (RE). Staff were not able to see each other's assemblies and the opportunities to observe each other's teaching of RE had been limited due to being on three sites.

This has been effectively addressed by collaborative planning and increased lesson observations of RE.

Messages for heads and governors thinking of federating

- Be thorough – consider the context of all the schools and analyse thoroughly.
- Be strong and stick with it.
- Be flexible – especially at the start, for example with timetabling.
- Be prepared to change – listen to staff. You depend on them enormously.
- Look after your staff – without them an arrangement like this would not work.

5.2 Case study: Western Downland CE-aided federation

Context

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

- Damerham, foundation/Key Stage 1: 72 pupils on roll
- Rockbourne, Key Stage2: 97 pupils on roll

The schools are approximately two miles apart.

The headteacher, Mark Saxby, has been in post for seven years and the federation was established in January 1981.

The interview for this case study involved both the current headteacher and the second headteacher appointed to the federation. Following the interview it came to light that this school is now technically considered 'amalgamated' with one DfES number and one budget.

Rationale/reason for federating

Hampshire local authority was closing a number of small schools due to falling numbers, and was proposing to bus children from Damerham and Rockbourne to nearby Fordingbridge. Parents who had previously competed came together from both schools to form a protest group. Twenty years previously another local school, Martin School, had been closed under similar circumstances. The effects on the village of Martin were still strongly felt. Parents believed they had lost the 'heart' of the village and did not want the same thing to happen to Damerham or Rockbourne.

Since the Education Act 2003, Western Downland has changed from being a federated school to an amalgamated school. This is because at its inception, in 1981, the two schools closed and re-opened as one school with one budget and DfES number. The school is federated in spirit.

Setting up the federation

A public meeting was called, attended by the South West Hampshire area education officer, who suggested federation as an option to closure and gave it full backing. The authority felt it was a win-win situation for them. If it succeeded, 'good', if not, then they would simply close the schools anyway.

The fact that parents were in favour of federating as an alternative to closing the village schools made a big difference to the successful establishment of the federation. The initial headteacher stayed for three years and was followed by a second head, who remained in post for 17 years. The initial headteacher fought hard for non-teaching time and for appropriate formula funding.

The initial head also worked very hard to bring people on board, setting up the friends of the school association and encouraging parents to become involved in PR work. The federation was given a new name, logo and uniform.

The second headteacher fostered and developed relationships with the community and, as a result, increased pupil numbers, increased the budget and reorganised staffing. The federation was presented as a great opportunity for the community and for pupils and the focus was strongly placed on the positives rather than any negatives. Everyone was encouraged to 'talk up' the federation, including governors, staff and parents. The headteacher worked hard to maintain a sense of parity, while making sure the two sites were always thought of as 'one school'.

The diocese also supported the federation by bringing all four local parishes, of which the two schools were part, together as one benefice, enabling ease of funding and organisation.

Initially the school had 'changeover' days when the junior children came together and the infants came together. Concerns were raised by parents about children moving from very small class sizes in Year 6 to large classes at secondary school. As the school expanded options were discussed with parents. The introduction of the national curriculum led to more consultation with parents and the final decision to create an infant and junior site.

Key players

The first two headteachers were clearly the driving force behind the federation, with support from parents, the local community and the local authority. Support also came from the joint governing body and the diocese. The local rector played a big part in boosting pupil numbers by visiting each family in the parish and inviting them to look around the school.

Leadership structure

The headteacher has an SLT, which comprises the headteacher and two assistant heads. The assistant heads, who replaced the deputy head position, are the key members of staff on each site. Their responsibilities include being the key point of contact as well as the day-to-day running of the site and the overview of the quality of the curriculum. The head believes the assistant head role has more responsibility than that of a conventional deputy, in that they are responsible for their site for 50% of the time. However, the new Pay and Conditions indicates that they will have to be made up to deputy headteacher; this is because they must be able to deputise in the absence of the headteacher.

The headteacher is responsible for the quality of learning and teaching. This arrangement enables the headteacher to focus far more on the strategic leadership of the school. The headteacher does not have a set pattern within the week, other than that he is at Damerham (Key Stage 1) at the start of the day and at Rockbourne at the end of the day. He often goes from school to school twice a day and both assistant heads are released on Fridays to meet the headteacher and discuss key issues, for example, strategy and curriculum matters.

All other teachers are Year leaders and have responsibility for the entire curriculum for their own Year group. The school does not have subject coordinators but rather subject specialists.

Working parties are pulled together in response to areas of priority. This broader, more distributed structure has 'empowered' the staff, especially the two assistant heads. In the words of the headteacher this has provided "brilliant training for headship", with three of the deputies from the federation going on to headship.

It was also very clear that the level of challenge and motivation the federation creates for the headteacher is the main reason he remains in post, despite being approached by the local authority to take up the headship of a larger primary.

In what ways has the federation been a success?

When asked this question the headteacher said that the federation had achieved "all the benefits of a small school but with a non-teaching headteacher and single age groups".

These benefits are reflected in the schools' results and in the emotional well-being of the children. Resources have improved as has the quality of focused and collaborative planning and the quality of curriculum provision is now overseen by the two assistant headteachers, which has improved consistency.

Being a non-teaching head enables the headteacher to engage in strategic leadership with much more time to stand back and develop a vision for the school.

The federation has offered more opportunities for staff to work collaboratively, although interestingly, a competitive element has developed between the Key Stages and the results they achieve. Staff see this as a form of collective accountability and "not wanting to let the school down". Ofsted have corroborated this by highlighting a sense of cohesiveness across the federation. The headteacher said that the goodwill of staff had played a key part in the success of the federation, especially their willingness to travel from site to site and not expect travel expenses and their flexibility to teach across sites where needed.

In what ways has the federation been less successful?

The headteacher pointed out that there were few disadvantages to federating and that most of them were not insurmountable. Tensions between staff could not always be dealt with as effectively as possible due to the headteacher not being there to mediate. Transport costs occasionally prohibited the infant and junior children coming together as often as the headteacher would have liked. Other funding issues included the need to fund two administrative staff and the two assistant headteachers.

The most problematic area for the head appeared to be maintaining buildings, "buildings are double everything – utilities/caretaking hours – everything".

Although the diocese provides some funding for buildings maintenance, the school is still required to provide a percentage of the costs from its own budget. The lack of a shared server and broadband also makes life "more complicated" and hinders communication.

The headteacher also mentioned the travel costs incurred by staff and himself while travelling between sites. Despite the fact that staff could claim for travel costs, they do not and the headteacher has to use his car on a daily basis to transport resources.

Messages for heads and governors thinking of federating

- Make 'absolutely sure' you get the formula funding agreed before setting up the federation – *or* – agree to run the federation for a term and then agree the funding – *or* – ask the local authority to fund the federation as two schools with one headteacher – then agree with the local authority where you can make savings.
- Consider the pros and cons between federation and amalgamation. Federation provides the financial security that comes with two budgets. Amalgamation provides refined budget management and accountability to one governing body and one Ofsted inspection.
- Think the financial implications through carefully and consider everything including photocopiers/doubling up of resources etc.
- Focus on the positive qualities that the federation brings.
- Promote the school and make it unique.
- Get the community on side and make them part of it.
- Make sure you have key members of staff on each site.
- Ensure parity across the sites – even with smaller things like meetings and events.
- Remember the situation is always fragile – demographics/falling rolls.
- Re-brand the school – give it a new name/logo/uniform.
- Create a joint ethos/vision.
- Avoid the 'us and them' mentality.
- Make time for staff to come together – 'chit-chat' is important.
- Rivalry and a slight edge of competitiveness can be healthy – alongside collective accountability.
- Keep communication open – make sure colleagues know what you are doing.
- Value the staff because without their goodwill the good things will not be achieved.
- Consult widely and value others' views.
- 'Give a bit more'.

5.3 Case study: Dunbury federation

Context

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

- Winterborne Kingston, reception and a Year 1/2 class: 49 pupils on roll
- Winterborne Stickland, reception and a Year 1/2 class: 48 pupils on roll
- Winterborne Whitechurch, Years 3, 4 and 5:108 pupils on roll

The sites are approximately three miles apart.

The federation was established in 1992. It was originally made up of four primaries, but Milton Bassett closed shortly after Simon France joined the school as headteacher. He has been in post for two years. Dunbury is inspected as one school and has one DfES number.

Rationale/reasons for federating

The key reasons for federating were recruitment issues plus a significant risk of closure for one of the four schools. There was strong parental opposition to federating, in the form of marches and petitions. The school, which was most at risk of closing, did ultimately close – a decision which is still having negative repercussions within the federation today. The school was reorganised into three bases, enabling single age groups rather than mixed age groups.

Setting up the federation

The decision to federate came from the local authority. A joint governing body was created and the post of headteacher was taken on by one of the existing four headteachers. The other three heads did not want the headship. Numerous parents meetings took place. The head held open meetings, with one-to-one questions only, as it was felt that open forums would have been too vociferous.

All staff had to re-apply for their posts. Staff were appointed to the federation rather than to an individual school.

Parents were brought on board fairly quickly as a result of good organisation and communication. A marketing campaign included new branding for the federation, including school uniform and school logo and as much positive press coverage as possible. The schools were organised and managed as one school rather than separate schools, from the beginning. Regular linking up of children each week and staff mobility across the sites reinforced this way of working and thinking. A key phrase “the roads are our corridors”, which was used by the headteacher at the time, also helped to strengthen this view.

Parents were concerned that the schools would lose their identity, but quickly realised they would not. The caring, pastoral, village ethos was maintained in all the schools.

Key players

The headteacher was clearly the driving force behind the federation, a view that was confirmed by staff who were present when the federation was established, and by the current headteacher. There was also strong support from governors and the local authority. The local authority made an agreement, before the schools federated, that the school would not lose out financially.

Leadership structure

The current headteacher inherited four base leaders. He spent the first term of his headship gathering information and analysing the contexts of the four sites. He decided to run each event as it had been run before to see how everything worked.

At the end of his first year he decided that the base leaders were not working. The headteacher was the only one who had the whole school overview.

Each of the base leaders also had a different leadership style and would handle issues in very different ways. This led to a lack of consistency of approach and the headteacher engaging in numerous low order leadership tasks. He began to take on the mantle of the hero head within the school, leaving little time for strategic leadership.

The structure was changed to three base leaders plus a deputy head. The introduction of teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs) proved a timely opportunity for this reorganisation to take place. This enabled the head to be more strategic in approach and also

lessened his isolation, as he now had someone to liaise with and share things. The base leaders are 2.2 TLR and are responsible for the day-to-day running and organisation of the bases. The senior management team comprises the headteacher, deputy head and the three base leaders.

The federation is now actively developing its middle leaders with a view to building leadership capacity and creating succession-planning strategies.

The headteacher makes full use of electronic communications and has strengthened inter-communications by installing networking in each base.

In what ways has the federation been a success?

Pupil numbers are rising, standards have improved and staffing levels have increased. The federation has recently taken seven pupils from a local private school. The budget is reasonably healthy and the federation has been able to pay off its deficit budget due in part to reduced transport costs and the original agreement made with the local authority.

The federation has been able to successfully maintain the 'small school–big school' resources feel. Class sizes are small but single age groups and resources include additional sport and music activities, as well as numerous after-school clubs. The federation is also able to make more flexible and effective use of the individual sites.

Interestingly, information technology (IT) links and video conferencing facilities are not used as much as expected. Emails and broad area network facilities, however, are used constantly as an effective means of communication across the three sites.

The federation has provided more leadership opportunities for staff, especially for base leaders and middle leaders. Base leaders particularly enjoy their role and view it as having the leadership opportunities and responsibilities without the accompanying pressures.

The headteacher also felt that his confidence had increased considerably since taking over the federation and having a non-teaching headship was seen as a huge advantage of federating.

In what ways has been the federation been less successful?

The pressure of time for the headteacher remains an issue, in particular being able to get around all three sites on a regular and equal basis. This head felt that any more than three sites would be very difficult. Parents still want to see the 'head', even though there are base leaders in each unit. The head makes sure he is on the playground and at the school gates regularly. Weekly open assemblies are held in each base unit and the whole school comes together once a term.

The ability to read and analyse three separate contexts as opposed to just one is sometimes problematic and there is still a tension between the idea of being 'one big school' and 'three small schools'. Transport can still be an issue sometimes and jealousy from other heads in the area was also mentioned by the headteacher.

Messages for heads and governors thinking of federating

- Go for it!
- Be strong and stick to your guns in terms of what you believe is right – keep on track.
- Listen to staff.
- Consider how you are going to make this popular in the short term.
- Be brave and ask for money and appropriate funding from your local authority.
- Go for quick wins – for example, whole-school uniform/corporate image/identity.

5.4 Case study: Middleton and Beswick and Watton federation

Context

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

- Middleton, foundation/Key Stages 1 and 2: 60 pupils on roll
- Beswick and Watton, foundation/Key Stages 1 and 2: 35 pupils on roll

The schools are approximately five miles apart.

The federation was informally established in 2005. The headteacher, Christine Bennison, has been in post for approximately one year and nine months. The schools are funded as two schools, run separately, they have two DfES numbers and 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 1 March 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.

Rationale/reason for federating

There were several reasons including the retirement of the headteacher of Beswick and Watton school, which had been under threat of closure for 26 years, and the length of time the headteacher had been in post. This triggered the governing body's awareness of recruitment issues. The school had also experienced falling rolls in recent years.

The governors knew the headteacher of Middleton school as she had previously led the two schools for a term when the head of Watton and Beswick had been absent due to ill health. This had proved successful for the school, but had come at a personal cost to the head. It did, however, help her to appreciate how good and strong the staff at Middleton were and equally gave her a taste of what the federation might be like. And more importantly, what would need to be different next time. The governors of Middleton school were very open to the suggestion of federating as a means of addressing budgetary issues that were affecting the school.

The key drivers for the headteacher herself were firstly, improved pupil learning and secondly, the impact that not doing it might have on the community. She researched and looked at two examples of where schools had been closed and found that the consequences had been devastating for the villages concerned.

The head also considered the local authority perspective and realised that falling numbers would add to the already low funding within the authority. Equally, she was aware of recruitment issues and felt that this opportunity would offer her the chance to role model an alternative to these issues, as well as increasing pupil numbers by bringing people back into the community.

Setting up the federation

The head researched and talked to other heads that had already co-federated and federated and thought through her vision for the school. Most importantly she asked the question, "why do I want to do it?".

Once the decision was made to federate the head made some time to think. "I took myself off for the day, to my favourite hill, to think it through." Previous experience of managing both schools highlighted the need to avoid fire fighting and instead, establish organisational and management structures and systems. Having key staff in place was also a priority alongside a careful and detailed analysis of both school budgets. Undertaking these activities enabled the head to see that the schools would be financially better off by federating. The federation would offer opportunities to put structures and systems in place to support workforce remodelling, the sharing of good practice and more effective and flexible use of staff and staff expertise.

The headteacher at Beswick and Watton agreed to stay on an extra term, which enabled the head to use that time to "pull everything together". This included further analysis of budgets, staffing structures and organisational systems and structures. Parents were consulted via a survey and open sessions were held for both sets of parents.

There were no objections from parents and the only queries were concerning transport, children moving from site to site and the worry that Middleton parents were going to 'lose' their headteacher. The fact that the schools had been working collaboratively as part of the Wagoners network for 14 years, including networked governors' meetings, undoubtedly helped this process and alleviated many of the parents' anxieties. The speed of messages from the headteacher, informing parents of developments and changes before they happened, also contributed to the successful and relatively quick establishment of the federation.

During the spring term, the headteacher considered the staffing structures across both schools and took advantage of the retirement of the existing administrative officer by appointing a business manager. When questioned about the business manager, the head made it very clear that this was a role she would "not get rid of at any cost". She would, however, be prepared to share it across the network if necessary. Administrative assistants were placed in both schools to support the business manager.

The senior management team was established and funding levels were agreed with the local authority. Initially the schools were going for confederation rather than hard federation and the local authority agreed they would be funded as two schools; this is still the case. The approach was very much "fund us as two schools and then let's see how we can pare it down at a later stage, if necessary".

The local authority also offered the school the use of an 'A team' to support them through the process of federating. The team comprised 12 local authority personnel, including a solicitor, personnel officer, a member of the governing body association, an admissions officer and the director. The 'A team' attended the initial governors meeting. Unfortunately it proved too much for the governors, who decided they would go it alone.

Key players

The headteacher herself was clearly the driving force behind the federation, once the decision to federate had been made, with support from the local authority and governors. In particular, the support of the director of education was felt to have made a big difference to the successful establishment of the federation.

The head had a very clear moral purpose to improve pupil learning and to ensure the schools stayed open, and as a result the community continued to thrive. The schools are now the key focal point in both villages and the communities are growing in numbers. The headteacher now chairs the steering group of the parish plan and everything now happens through the school.

Leadership structure

The headteacher has an SLT, which comprises the headteacher, the senior members of staff (who act as points of contact when the head is off-site) and the business manager. The headteacher did not feel the need to appoint either a deputy head or assistant head and was happy with members of staff on both sites who acted as points of reference in her absence.

The head posts up her colour-coded timetable, which varies each week and which responds to and reflects the federations' priorities. She does, however, make sure she is based at Beswick and Watton on Monday mornings for assembly and at Middleton on Monday afternoons. She also has one day a week dedicated headship time in each school and uses this time for formal and informal monitoring of learning and teaching, research and reflection time.

The head was quite clear that she now had far more time to think and lead strategically and that this was mainly due to the appointment of the business manager. The head was also clear that leading the federation provides her with challenge and motivation and has proved an incentive not to leave the school and look for another post. The federation has also brought additional leadership benefits, for example for

middle leaders who now have less to coordinate and can therefore progress their roles more effectively. The fact that there are also more staff provides opportunities to work in larger teams, to develop improved subject knowledge. The federation has provided 'real' leadership opportunities for middle leaders and in-house and localised training.

The new leadership structure and the leadership opportunities presented through federating have enabled the head to think creatively about the issue of succession planning. 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 was not sure about headship, this could provide the chance to have a 'taste' of headship while working alongside an experienced head. It was also suggested that heads could work collaboratively as joint heads over a larger cluster of schools.

In what ways has the federation been a success?

Pupil numbers are rising and young families are returning to the village of Beswick because they know the school is secure again and has just received a good Ofsted report. Indeed, Middleton school has had a maximum intake of reception pupils for the past two years and will do so again in the coming academic year. Beswick and Watton have admitted 10 pupils this year as opposed to the usual two or three. Budgets in both schools are healthy.

In the 18 months since the schools have been federated standards have risen and there has been more flexibility of staffing and use of subject specialisms. A good example of this is in science, where the subject specialist has been teaching across the schools while simultaneously improving staff knowledge and using resources more effectively.

Improved opportunities have seen booster classes running across both schools alongside book clubs and the use of music specialists. The head feels that continuity and consistency has been maintained by keeping Key Stages 1 and 2 children in both schools rather than by establishing separate Key Stages on each site. This also enables older pupils to take on the responsibility for younger pupils.

Staff were very positive about the federation. For many of them this was a way of keeping their jobs. The federation had also lessened isolation for staff and offered more opportunities for professional development and for leadership. The headteacher had recently taken the staff to a local spa hotel for the day to say thank you for their goodwill, commitment and hard work.

Staff have also become more independent and adopted leadership opportunities, as a result of the headteacher not always being on site. As a result of this, staff have had to 'think for themselves' and make decisions by themselves. The appointment of a business manager has had a major impact on the federation and in particular on the role of the headteacher. The business manager, who is a member of the senior management team, has freed up the headteacher from much of the previous work she was undertaking and allowed her to concentrate on the learning and teaching and strategic development of the school. She has also developed specific structures and systems to improve the effectiveness of administration and paperwork and has taken on the extended schooling issues, the breakfast club and the funding bids. She also takes on environmental issues, manages the team of Learning Support Assistants and premises manager and helps to run the craft club.

In what ways has the federation been less successful?

When setting up the federation the head regretted not creating a federation 'committee' or group, made up of a core group of governors, which would monitor and take forward any decisions that needed to be made on behalf of the governing body. Consequently, each time something needed progressing a full governing body had to come together which often prevented them from getting things done quickly and effectively.

Communication in the early stages could have been more effective by having robust strategies in place. The initial speed of change and developments within the federation meant that sometimes people were left behind.

It is still relatively difficult to get the staff to think of themselves as a united team across both schools as only a percentage of them work across the two schools.

Joint staff meetings take place on a regular basis; but when meetings are cancelled this makes a big difference to staff resulting in them feeling as if they do not know what is happening. Despite these issues there is still more collaboration than competition.

Parents' associations have also proved problematic as a result of them being organised separately. The groups recently trialled a joint fashion show event that unfortunately did not work. The parents from Beswick brought in designer fashions which the parents of Middleton school could not afford which resulted in them personally not attending the event, despite selling a great number of tickets. There was a further issue about how they would spend the money. Currently the groups are still separate but are looking to collaborate in the future.

The need to wait before making key decisions proved frustrating at times. For example, when the caretaker at Middleton retired and the caretaker at Beswick was ready to leave, the headteacher had to wait until both caretakers had retired before she could appoint a premises manager, which meant the school managing without a caretaker for a term.

Initial work–life balance was a problem for two of the heads due to the speed of changes and developments.

Messages for heads and governors thinking of federating

- Do things only once – for example dual SEF/one admin basket/one headteacher's report.
- Look for the opportunities in everything you do.
- Revisit everything regularly.
- Be creative – "look up and don't just use your own school. See others within your community as well".

Publications and resources also available from NCSL:

NCSL programmes for school leaders at all levels.
www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes

Publications and resources available to download and order.
www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

The Leadership Network brings together the experience and ideas of school leaders across the country to create a powerful focus for change and development in school leadership.
www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork

The Leadership Library is a free unique resource bringing together some of the best leadership and management thinking from around the world.
www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershiplibrary

The Learning Gateway is a single access point to all NCSL's online learning tools and resources. It provides access to talk2learn, a vibrant online community of over 120,000 members.
www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway

The Tomorrow's leaders today campaign is about finding, developing and keeping great headteachers.
www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrows leaderstoday

ECM Leadership Direct is an online Resource exploring the implications for Every Child Matters for schools and school leaders.
www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect

To download this publication or to order a copy free of charge, please visit www.ncsl.org/publications.

National College for School Leadership
Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0845 609 0009
F: 0115 872 2001
E: enquiries@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

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